



Getting Past Problems to Solutions in Marriage

In most marriages there are times when the relationship does not seem to be working. Most married people consider divorce at some time in their marriage. Some people do not consider divorce but suffer needlessly.

It is natural for marriages to get stuck. Within a couple of years of being together most couples discover some issues and differences that don't get resolved. To make matters worse, most of us develop automatic ways of reacting to the behaviors we do not like in our partner; those automatic reactions often irritate our partner and make things worse. There are several things that can help.

Interrupt your automatic reactions with understanding. Rather than get angry or argumentative when your partner does something that irritates you, consider whether your partner is doing something that makes a lot of sense to him or her. Sometimes we don't understand why our partner does certain things. You can ask yourself, "What does this behavior mean to my partner?" Understanding is better than anger.

One of the challenges in marriage is that men and women deal with frustration differently. Women more than men want to talk about their feelings. Such talk can make men feel anxious; when men are upset, many choose to walk away rather than fight which leaves women feeling deserted. This difference between men and women can cause a lot of misunderstanding. If both approach discussions with gentleness and patience, there can be better results.

Get help. There are many kinds of help. John Gottman has written excellent books on marriage. (See the list at the end of this unit.) It may be helpful to talk to a wise neighbor or friend, a minister, or a counselor. No one will have magic answers but may be able to give you helpful advice and emotional support. There are also additional helpful units on marriage in this series.

Some kinds of help are more helpful than other kinds. For example, it may feel good to have someone take my side against my partner; but it could worsen my attitude and willingness to work at the relationship. Some helpers may blame me and leave me feeling discouraged and hopeless. The best helpers are those who support us while challenging us to better understand our partners.

One of the surprises that comes from research on marriage is that many people who are unhappy in their marriages but stay together report being very happy in the same marriage after some months or years. It is often a good idea to avoid acting rashly when there are relationship problems. **Be patient.** Give growth and healing time to work.

Don't inflame the frustrations by dwelling on problems. List the good things in your relationship. See if you can ignore some of the bad. Cultivate more of the good by noticing and encouraging it. Make time for those activities that strengthen your relationship.

There are times to get out. You should not ignore or tolerate abuse. If your partner is abusive you should call the police or go to a shelter. If you are in danger in the relationship, you should get out.

For most people, differences can be managed. The differences can even lead to a richer, happier, healthier relationship.

Applications:

Think about your parents' relationship. Did they work well together? How did they work through differences? What did they do poorly that you can do differently?

Think of people you know who appear to have strong marriages. Ask them what challenges they have had and what they have learned that helps them deal with the challenges.

What are the strengths in your marriage? How can you make them a more central part of your relationship?

For the sake of understanding in marriage:

For women: If there are things your partner does that irritate you, you might ask one of your brothers or cousins what those things might mean to your partner. The object is not to gang up on your partner but to better understand what that behavior means to him.

For men: If there are things your partner does that irritate you, you might ask one of your sisters or cousins what those things might mean to your partner. The object is not to gang up on your partner but to better understand what that behavior means to her.

There is an old saying that if you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all. There are both advantages and limits to this idea. There are many accurate criticisms we could offer our partner that simply will not improve the relationship. Can you think of such things in your relationship?

The limitation to the idea is that there are times when we need to make requests so that our partner knows what is important to us. It is wise to make requests in positive, inviting ways. Are there things you can invite your partner to do for you that will make your relationship better?

When we are irritated and angry, we usually do not have good relationship discussions. Are there certain stressful times that you should avoid discussions? Right after work? When the children are demanding? Late night?

Excellent books on marriage include:

"Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last" by John Gottman

"The 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work" by John Gottman

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