

Moving Beyond Deadlock: Breaking Out of Old Marital Conflicts

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples often have great expectations when they come into marriage counseling. Unfortunately, they usually want and expect the opposite of what they need for their marriage to survive and thrive. Spouses characteristically come to initial sessions eager to tell the therapist the exact nature of their spouse's wrongs and enlist the therapist's aid in "fixing" the errant spouse. Each partner is looking for an ally in making the other person change. Usually, by the time they get to the counselor's office, they have identified the other spouse as "the problem." Through ineffective problem-solving and arguing, they each believe that the partner accepts and adapts their solution as the only way to solve the problem.

Each partner is convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no other way to conceptualize the problem or the issue. The other partner who is firm in maintaining their different perception of the problem is viewed as a liar, crazy, or just plain obstinate. Each partner becomes disabled by their own perception. They typically find themselves less able to put themselves in their partner's shoes and need help understanding another's perspective. Each spouse usually justifies their position while vilifying their partner's position. If the partner feels differently about the same event, someone has to be right while the other is wrong. The more they argue and try to problem-solve, the more hopelessly entangled they become in their fixed positions. Each subsequent attempt to break the deadlock locks them into place even more firmly. As each partner tries to win the other partner over to their perception and solution, they become increasingly frustrated. Instead of taking a different tack, they vigorously continue the same arguments and tactics. Couples may even be aware that emphasis does not produce more clarity or understanding but instead leads to hurt feelings and resentment. They feel compelled to continue in the same vein.

This circular pattern is self-perpetuating. The good news is that it only takes one party to break out of it. Driving a wedge into this pattern can occur in the same way that it only takes one to de-escalate an argument by taking a "time-out." One party can change these circular patterns by shifting their focus away from their spouse's actions and justifications for their own reactions.

The shift to observing oneself in the interaction and identifying the part one plays in the events can change everything. When one partner can stop trying to be heard or understood and instead listen enough to "hear" and understand the other, the couple can break the deadlock. The act of one partner stopping and acknowledging the other's perception or feelings can let a lot of the tension out of the discussion and create an environment of dialogue rather than parallel monologues.

A crucial process in marriage therapy is where coercive and blaming spouses move from identifying each other as the problem into accepting full responsibility for one's feelings, decisions, and behavior (regardless of what the other spouse is doing). Relationships cannot heal when partners blame each other and continue to pursue the other's change as the only solution. The problem rarely resides in just one party. Each partner brings their own history to the marriage and the situation with unique personal filters and old unresolved issues that color current interactions and interfere with healthy functioning.

For relationships to heal, individuals must be able to examine their perceptions and their habitual patterns of dealing with uncomfortable feelings and begin to understand that the things they believe are most likely not "universal truths" and that ways that they have dealt with feelings are at least part of the problem. When each partner can take responsibility for their own decisions, feelings, and behavior, they can benefit from communication coaching, can restore positive feelings in the relationship, and can begin to solve longstanding relationship problems. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2010 on MentalHelp.Net. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



If you have been trying to break out of deadlocked arguments, you could use practical communication tools to foster positive interactions and constructively resolve disagreements. In the Brief Lesson titled '*Communication Skills 101: Using I Messages for Positive Interactions*,' you'll discover the power of 'I' statements in expressing feelings and needs assertively yet respectfully. In '*Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson*,' you'll learn a basic problem-solving model that can move you as a couple from entrenchment to collaborative and productive problem-solving. This method ensures that both parties feel heard and understood. Try something different to enhance your relational dynamics and cultivate healthier communication habits.

Communication Skills 101:
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Interactions

\$2.95

Fair Fight Tactics:
A Brief Lesson

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