



Franconia Family Therapy Center

The Art of Defusing Domestic Time Bombs

If men are to stop battering women, and if 911 calls to the police are the only defense against the O. J. Simpsons, some education in nonviolent conflict resolution needs to happen -- before the beatings begin, which is prevention, and different from intervention, after which is arrests and jailings. Ideally, the education should begin in kindergarten and every grade after, reinforced at home and honored by the clergy in their sermons.

As found in the teachings of such educators and authors as Neil Katz, "Resolving Conflict Successfully"; Dudley Weeks, "The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution"; and William Kreidler, "Creative Conflict Resolution," the following are among the proven teachable and learnable skills.

- 1. Define what the conflict is about.** Conflict means only that we need to change how we are doing things, the old way has failed. Sociologists report that in 75 percent of husband-wife fights, the combatants are battling over different issues. The husband may be enraged over what his wife said or did 10 minutes ago, and the wife is out of control over what her husband said or did 10 weeks ago. They cannot settle the conflict because they don't know what it's about.
- 2. It is not you against me, it is you and me against the problem.** The problem is the problem. Most people -- and nations -- go into battle convinced I am right, you are wrong; I am good, you are rotten; I will win, you will lose. Even if one side does win, the first reaction of the loser is, I want a rematch: I will come back with meaner weapons and harder fists to the face. Then you will learn, then you will be good and then we will have peace forever. By focusing on the problem, and not the person with the problem, a climate of cooperation, not competition, is enhanced.
- 3. List the relationship's many shared concerns, as against the one unshared separation, which is the conflict.** If the couple can focus on its strengths -- sharing the same house, same friends, same neighborhood, same income, same whatever -- then they are, in Dudley Week's phrase, *conflict partners, not enemies*. If they battle negatively over what separates them the separation will likely widen. If similarities are maximized, differences can be minimized.
- 4. Work on active listening, not passive hearing.** Conflicts escalate when partners try to talk more than listen, and then only listen as a timeout for verbal rearming. Physically, we are made to listen more than speak: we have two ears and one mouth. Skilled mediators wisely reverse conventional thinking, from "When I talk, people listen" to "When I listen, people talk."
- 5. When people have fought, do not ask them what happened.** They will answer with their version of the fight, almost always self-justifying. The better question is, "What did you do?" This elicits facts, not opinions. Misperceptions are clarified, not prolonged.
- 6. Be forgiving.** One of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most stirring essays was on forgiveness -- not as a theological virtue only, but also as a practical one. It frees us to leave behind the garbage of the last fight. Forgiveness looks forward, vengeance behind. Humans are made to be forgiving creatures and forward-looking, which explains eyes being in the front, not back. Reconciliation is impossible without forgiveness. Many couples are willing to bury the hatchet, but they will mark exactly where they buried it -- in case it's needed for the next battle.

7. **Concentrate on self-reform, not other-reform.** Those who show a willingness to work on their own flaws and failures become less accusatory, which decreases defensiveness on the other side. At the same time, it increases an atmosphere of compromise, which is at the core of genuine love.

8. **Agree to resolve the conflict in a set location, not on the battleground itself.** This is why armies sign peace treaties far from war zones. If a couple has a living room, dining room and bedroom, three places where fights commonly start, they may need a peace room where the fights can be turned into truces.

9. **Work on these conflict resolution skills well before a crisis begins,** while the fire is a lick of flame, not a blaze when it may be too late.

Do these rules always work? No. Sometimes the partners are so emotionally wounded, or have been scarred before the relationship began, that separation or therapy is needed. But they are far more effective than insults, fists or guns. Strategies of peace can be mastered like the strategies of violence, and with far fewer -- if any -- casualties.

Source: Colman McCarthy
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