

Since the 11th of September I was impacted together with the rest of the world on many levels. It is tragic to see how inadequately people deal with feeling attacked, threatened or manage their anger. One aspect of what is happening in the larger world mirrors how inequality and differences which escalate easily into violent and destructive behaviors. The lack of skills to cope with differences in constructive forms-the lack of intercultural dialogue and the mediation abilities of world leaders is partly difficult to comprehend. The same issues of co-living in our greater world relations are similar in our intimate lives. Dealing with differences is a challenge and involves being motivated to compromise, being able to give as well as take, to assume one's own weaknesses, and the responsibility for one's own contribution to conflicts, to be willing to listen to the other and enter into dialogue and negotiation. Anger which ends in violence only generates more violence and withdrawing or isolating oneself generates isolation and a breakdown of communication. We live together with each other on this earth and without learning to communicate more effectively and deal better with our differences we end up living in a pretty lonely or being eaten up by pain and anger.

In my 15 years of experience working with couples in counseling, I came to understand a few very basic facts about maintaining long-term intimate relationships.

Loving: or the capacity to give and receive in a nourishing way is basic to satisfying relationships, but fighting is also fundamental.

Dealing with differences in binational or bicultural relationships is especially challenging because more things are not self-understood. In binational marriages there are just more differences to manage. Some examples include: what and when and how to eat, where to live and go on vacations, how and when to entertain, managing time, future planning, in laws and money, child rearing and education, bilingualism, etc. It is also normally the case that one partner is speaking a second language, is more dependent and this generates a specific set of additional problems. Also many cultural differences become mutual “cultural discrimination” where both spouses attack each other's national or culture of origin. Differences exist in all couples and differences can make marriages more interesting, richer and definitely less

boring. The question is how to deal with them? This article will focus on helping to make your marriage work better, by reflecting on fighting styles and strategies.

The king of marriage research in the last twenty years is John Gottman at the UW in Seattle, Washington. Why Marriages Succeed or Fail by John Gottman (Simon and Schuster, 1994) is an excellent book on the subject. Fighting styles like expressing love are learned in ones family of origin. They are directly connected with communication styles, spoken and unspoken family rules and norms of behavior which are present in all families. These learned behaviors are modified along the way with experience and differ based on gender, social class, temperament and culture. The difference in western cultures between male and female communication is striking. John Grey writes on the theme in his Mars and Venus books and a good recommendation is Deborah Tannen's You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (Ballentine Books, 1990). It is worth it to understand that men and women say things in different ways-it's almost a language of it's own.

Many people take it for granted that good fighting like good parenting are instinctive .The reality is that neither are and we are mostly unskilled because the society has not given this kind of intelligence the priority it deserves. An excellent book on the theme is, Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman (Bantam Books, 1995). Goleman and Gottman come to similar conclusions : Deficiencies in communication and capacity to deal with difference contribute to conflict, violence and in marriages -divorce.

According to both authors, the worst and major predictor of marital meltdown are hostility ,insults, name calling, putdowns ,sarcasm, contempt, and stonewalling. Criticism, on the other hand, which is concretely related to a specific behavior can be helpful if it does not involve attacking someone's personality or character. Physical violence is naturally destructive. Airing complaints and expressing disagreement tends to make the marriage stronger on the long run, as opposed to suppressing them . If your complaints go unheeded and are added to previous grievances the tendency is to get into criticism and blaming. Attitudes and behaviors which do not contribute to healthy communication are: defensiveness, denying responsibility, making excuses, cross-complaining, nagging and whining –the last two especially irritate men. The essence of defensiveness is a natural response for warding off a perceived attack. Stonewalling is the ultimate form of protecting oneself-distance and refusal to talk about problems (most characteristic in men). Men are known to “need to withdraw into their cave”, but in counseling work with couples we teach – that the

“withdrawer” is then responsible to after their “time out” to come back and initiate a constructive discussion and the withdrawal time should be negotiated.

The Psychological research says that men are more easily “flooded” by emotional encounters and have fewer or less efficient coping mechanisms. Calming down is an important part of de-escalating conflicts and a major contributor to constructive fighting. Men also tend to be more often physically violent-this is a special problem onto itself and their are specific anger control exercises which can be learned. Women, on the other hand need to talk a lot more about their feelings and feel consoled.

Gottmans conclusion is that the essence of a good marriage is the proportion of positive to negative feelings. If the negative feelings override and affect the positive ones generating a lack of valorization and respect, the marriage is put in danger.. So it is important to build with resources on common ground and invest in the things which you can enjoy doing together. Notice the positive things which are often taken for granted-and remember the things that attracted you to each other initially. Sharing positive moments, affections and emotions are important in maintaining intimacy and keeping the good parts of the relationship alive. Make sure you get a babysitter and get out at least once a week as a couple and to something fun together. And capitalize on spontaneous desires to show affection and say something positive about your partner. Try to take some things less personally and look at certain stress situations as part of phases which occur in all life times-and pass- like the stress of having small children and aging parents or illness, job loss or adaptation problems. The most help is to find a half an hour a each day to talk about how you feel- over a glass of wine or tea . Walking can also be very good for this type of talking. I know that finding the time is much easier said than done. See it as a marriage-saving investment.

Really listening is the key and that is tough as the conversations get more heated .Communication exercises are extremely helpful-even if artificial at first- but to use them requires, motivation, training and practice. Active listening-which means Listening without reacting or commenting - mirroring back to the partner the content and emotional character of their message helps both parties to really listen and feel heard. This generates a state of empathy and something Goleman calls emotional tuning. Communication styles and fighting styles are learned at home so it is helpful to reflect on the question :how were conflicts resolved in your family of origin between your parents, parents and siblings between siblings? This variety of deeper reflection is easier to do in a safe environment with a third person who is a professional marriage counselor.

For men the advice is not to side step conflict or to short circuit the discussion by offering practical solutions too early. Typically it is more important for the wife to feel that her husband hears her complaint (he does not need to agree with her) but she needs to feel heard and respected. For wives the advice would be to not attack their husbands –to complain about what they did, but not to criticize them as a person or express contempt. Both partners want to feel validated in their positions even if they don't agree. Saying things like “Yes I see” or “Go on”, “stop interrupting me” or “that is off the subject” are mechanisms or counteracting defensiveness and de-escalating. Don't forget time outs, they are helpful as long as they are agreed upon and not felt as having someone turn their back on you and walk off. Having strategies for de-escalating tension for example, soothing your partner by saying something positive and building up capital in the form of positive feelings or getting some distance by seeing the humor in the situation. Don't forget the healing power of a hug or loving physical contact. Good fights or healthy disagreements allow a marriage to flourish and overcome the negatives which if left to grow can destroy a marriage. Gottman comes to the conclusion that what differentiates marriages that make it and the ones that don't is whether partners feel their relationship is more positive than negative. Good luck and fight well.