



Family Times

Resolving Conflict in Marriage

Mark D. Ogletree, M.A., Ph.D.,
LPC

4829 Cedar Crest Dr.

McKinney, Texas 75070

214.868.6238

Doctree10@comcast.net

Specializing in Marriage and
Family Therapy, Parenting So-
lutions, Depression, Anger, and
Anxiety Issues, Sexual Addic-
tions

As a Matter of Fact:

- About 55% to 60% of divorces occur in low-conflict marriages, marriages that the authors of the 20-year study call “good enough marriages” that might be salvaged. Divorces in these low-conflict marriages are very damaging to children, says sociologist Paul Amato of Penn State University, because the surprised children have not been aware of the discord.

Many years ago, J. Golden Kimball quipped: “I have often wondered what would happen if a perfect man married a perfect woman. I’ll bet he would shoot her inside of a week if she didn’t poison him first” (J. Golden Kimball, in Claude Richards, *J. Golden Kimball: The Story of a Unique Personality*, [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], p. 99-100). For those who have been married for a week, or for fifty years, we understand that there may be some truth to Elder Kimball’s statement.

Indeed, none of us our perfect. And, since the fall of Adam, every couple has struggled in their marriage to some degree. In 2 Nephi 2:11, we learn that their must needs be an opposition in all things—and that would include our marriages and families. Therefore, it is not a matter of “if” there is conflict, but a matter of how to manage and deal with conflict when it comes our way. Thus, conflict is inevitable. In fact, the *inability to resolve conflict is the leading cause of divorce today*.

To quote marriage and family scholar, Diane Sollee, “In the beginning, we avoid conflict because we are so much in love and we believe that “being in love” is about agreeing. We’re afraid that if we disagree - or

fight - we’ll ruin our marriage. Later, we avoid conflict because when we try to deal with our differences things get so out of hand and our fights so destructive and upsetting that we simply shut down. After a few bad blow-ups, we become determined to avoid conflict at any cost.”

Moreover, one of the great myths in marriage is that disagreements, quarrels, and contention only occur in *bad* marriages. This simply is not true. Disagreements, quarrels, and contention are present in *all* marriages. Couples who *divorce* do not have any more problems than those who choose to stay married. However, the difference is simple: Those who choose to stay married place a higher value on commitment and have learned to work through their problems.

I’m not saying that there aren’t some cases where divorce is justifiable. There are legitimate reasons or grounds for divorce. An estimated 30 percent of the divorces in the U.S. involve marital relationships with a high degree of conflict. (Amato and Booth, p. 220) . What I am suggesting, however, is that many divorces are unnecessary. In my private practice, I see too many couples who do not know how to solve simple marriage problems. Granted, some prob-

lems are complex and profession advice is necessary. But, once again, many couples have not learned to solve basic marriage problems. Consequently, many couples end up divorcing who really never should have in the first place. In a recent sur-



vey, 66 percent of those who are presently divorced answered “yes” to the question “Do you wish you and your ex-spouse had tried harder to work through you’re differences?” A study in Australia revealed that 1/3 of those divorced regretted their decision five years later, and 40% reported that their divorce could have been avoided (In Brent Barlow, Marriage at the Crossroads, *Marriage and Families*, Jan. 2003, 23).

In their recent book, *The Case For Marriage*, Waite and Gallagher, ask and then answer this question: How many unhappy couples turn their marriages around? The truth is shocking: 86 percent of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages are happier, according to an analysis of the *National Survey*

Resolving Conflict in Marriage (Cont.)



President Lee Warned of Marital Apathy

of Families And Households. Most say, they've become very happy indeed. In fact, nearly three-fifths of those who said their marriage was unhappy in the late 80's and who stay married, rated this same marriage as either 'very happy' or 'quite happy' when re-interviewed in the early 1990's.

What we don't want couples to do is give up so quickly. For most couples, there is hope and happiness if you can just hang in there.

Sometimes couples will come into my office and tell me that they have "fallen" out of love. Well, it isn't that they have fallen out of love, but they have quit doing the very things that helped them fall into love in the first place. They are no longer talking late into the night like they did when they were engaged; they no longer date each other; they no longer do nice things for each other; and they certainly are not writing love notes or poetry. In essence, they no longer water the lawn. And, as you know, here in Texas, if you don't water the lawn for a week or two, your going to get some dead grass real quick.

President Harold B. Lee observed: "Someone has said that the opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is apathy.

And I say to you brethren, the most dangerous thing that can happen between you and your wife or between me and my wife is apathy— not hate, but for them to feel that we are not interested in their affairs, that we are not expressing our love and showing our affection in countless ways. Women, to be happy, have to be loved and so do men" (Harold B. Lee, *Regional Representatives Seminar*, 12 December 1970; as cited in *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 241).

That's right— couples are not falling out of love as much as they have taken each other for granted. Several years ago my wife and I did an experiment with our children. We told them that for family home evening, we were going to get our lawn in order. As you guessed, our children were thrilled to death. Especially when I told them that the first thing we were going to do was pick the weeds. However, we got through that, and then begin to throw some dirt on the lawn to fill in some of the low spots. Our children then took turns spreading the fertilizer. We then placed manure all over the place. I think this was their favorite part. Then the sprinklers were turned on and the lawn was soaked. We then told our children that we were not going to even touch the lawn on the other side of our driveway. However,

after several waterings, we invited them to come out and compare both sides of the yard. We told them that in a matter of a week, the part of the lawn they had tended to would be green and lush. We also let them know that the unattended side of the lawn would still look brown, mealy, and unhealthy.

The experiment worked perfectly. Within two weeks, the front yard looked spectacular, while the other side of the lawn looked terrible. My wife and I then used this object lesson to teach our children how to build relationships. We identified metaphors for pulling weeds, filling in dirt, spreading fertilizer, and slinging manure. We then made the transition into marriage, and let our children know that successful marriages are built on the same principles— weeding, fertilizing, and watering often.

Sure, marriage can be quite discouraging at times— all marriages have some weeds and dead spots. But like the analogy of the lawn, give it a little more attention, make a little more effort, and the good experiences can eventually crowd out the bad ones. Focus your effort and attention on the lawn rather than on the weeds. Then, your marriage will thrive, and you will have peace and success. This I know.

"...the most dangerous thing that can happen between you and your wife or between me and my wife is apathy"

— President Harold B. Lee

Help with Pornography Addictions

Addictions to pornography are becoming epidemic in our society today. Like most societal trends, there is a "trickle-down" effect in the Church as well. Too many priesthood bearers are battling this addiction. In the last April Conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks declared: "Pornography is also addictive. It impairs decision-making capacities and it "hooks" its users, drawing them back obsessively for more and more. A man who had been addicted to

pornography and to hard drugs wrote me this comparison: "In my eyes cocaine doesn't hold a candle to this. I have done both. . . . Quitting even the hardest drugs was nothing compared to [trying to quit pornography]" (letter of Mar. 20, 2005).

Men battling this addiction do not have to fight it alone. There are resources here in the Dallas Area for help. For starters, there are two sexual addictions groups that meet on Thursday nights at 7:00. One group meets at LDS

Family Services in Carrollton [972.242.2182], and the other meets in Allen. Call 214.868.6238 for more information. We find that those who attend the group each week, and involve themselves in individual counseling are often able to conquer their addiction. Next newsletter, we will list LDS therapists who can help, and several books on the topic.



Marriage and Mental Health in Dallas