

Pastor's Corner – 8-11-2018  
Making Marriage Work – The Two Kinds of Marital Conflict

All the best romances end with the couple riding off into the sunset to live “happily ever after.” This “happily ever after” is, of course, utter nonsense. The only people who believe in this kind of thing are folks who haven't been in a long term relationship. The rest of us know that all relationships have conflict. Even if a couple is very much in love there will inevitably be an argument or two from time to time. The goal in a happy marriage isn't to eliminate all conflict, but rather to learn how to cope with the ones that do pop up in a productive and edifying manner.

Research into this area has found that *all* marital conflicts, whether they are everyday annoyances or all out wars, fall into two categories: perpetual and solvable. It's helpful to be able to identify one from the other because the strategy for dealing with each type is different.

Perpetual problems are ones that will never go away. They are like a bum knee or bad eyesight: unpleasant realities that you simply learn to live with. This may not seem like good news, that some conflicts will last a lifetime, but in reality, when we recognize that all marriages have these kinds of conflict, it may let us off the hook a bit when we feel like we don't measure up because we aren't experiencing the “happily ever after.” In fact, according to research, as much as 69% of all marital conflict falls into this perpetual category. In other words, it's pretty common so we better learn how to deal with it.

It makes sense that every couple faces challenges, after all, everyone comes into their relationship with some kind of baggage. That stuff doesn't just go away when you get married. As one researcher notes, “when choosing a long-term partner... you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the next ten, twenty or fifty years.”

One danger that comes when you don't have an effective way to manage perpetual problems is gridlock. Gridlock is when the perpetual conflict not only resurfaces again and again, but it takes on deeper meaning, each side becomes entrenched, and the attacks become personal.

Some signs of gridlock are:

- The conflict makes you feel rejected by your partner.
- You keep talking about it but make no headway.
- You become entrenched in your positions and are unwilling to budge.
- When you discuss the subject, you end up feeling more frustrated and hurt.
- Your conversations about the problem are devoid of humor, amusement, or affection.
- You become even more unbudgeable over time, which leads you to vilify each other during these conversations.
- Eventually you disengage from each other emotionally.

Gridlock is a very real thing in many relationships and it's essential to long term happiness to figure out a way past it.

The second category of marital conflict is solvable problems. The difference between the two is often hard to identify but in general, solvable conflicts tend to be more situational. In my own marriage we have a perpetual conflict that occasionally manifests as a solvable conflict. It has to do with Amy's and my own individual tolerance for clutter. Now I can deal with a fair amount of clutter in my house. Look at my desk and you can see I'm not a neat freak. But Amy's tolerance is far greater. Over the years we have learned to work around this. Rather than fight over it, I just do what needs to be done to keep the house under my “mess threshold.”

However, there are times when I'll fly off the handle, start tearing through the house in a cleaning frenzy, and inevitably say something unkind to my wife. This usually will only happen if several

areas of the house have gone beyond my threshold, if someone is coming to visit and I want the house to look clean, or if I'm busy cleaning away by myself and I feel like a little assistance would be appropriate.

These instances are all solvable problems because they are rooted in specific instances. These conflicts only arise when specific conditions are at play. This means we can come up with a strategy to address those situations. We can mitigate the conflict by talking it through, compromising, and developing a workable solution.

But here's the thing, Amy will always have a higher tolerance for clutter than I will. That's never going to change, no matter how much I nag, criticize, or yell. There is no strategy we can devise that will change this dynamic. That means we just have to learn to live with it. We have, and for the most part, we're good natured about it.

That's really the goal with perpetual problems: to develop a way to live with it. You know it's never going away so you make peace with it and move on. Then, when solvable problems pop up, you work together to find the solution.

Over the next couple of weeks we'll look more closely at perpetual and solvable conflicts and examine ways to prevent either one from taking over your marriage. Until then, if you have conflicts in your marriage, don't worry, everyone does. But try to be nice to each other in the process. Nobody ever changes when they are being vilified, criticized, or beat over the head. Show love and you'll probably receive love in return.

Happy Sabbath  
Pastor Tyler