

NSLAP WELLNESS TIP: Marital conflict - dispelling the myths

The following is an article excerpt from Homewood Human Solutions™, your health and wellness provider.

Myth 1: Unhappy couples are unhappy because they lack communication skills

Research has shown that unhappy couples have the same communication skills as happy couples. The difference is that happy couples tend to use what they know about effective communication to enrich their relationship. Unhappy couples either don't use their communication skills during hard times or they use them to harm each other.

This is often cited as the reason why marital therapy does not always have lasting results. Over the past few decades marital therapists have tended to focus on teaching couples communication and problem-solving skills. This appears to work well in the short-run, but, unfortunately, not in the long-run. Couples eventually return to old patterns.

Myth 2: Healthy marriages are impossible unless couples learn how to solve their problems

Research has shown that many of the issues that couples disagree about are unsolvable. They are ever-present in the relationship as long as the two partners stay together. These issues are unsolvable because they are rooted in personality differences and needs that arise in connection with each partner's life experience and identity.

Happy couples have these unsolvable issues as much as unhappy couples. The difference is that happy, stable couples focus on maintaining an open dialogue about these issues; they try to understand and accept each other's differences and work towards compromise. Unhappy couples, however, focus on trying to change each other. Their interactions over these unsolvable conflicts tend to repeatedly spiral out-of-control, due to stubborn mutual resistance, lack of compromise and rejection of each other's perspective.

What this means is that you need to shift your goal from trying to find a once-and-for-all solution to these unsolvable problems, to being able to engage in ongoing, open-minded dialogue with your partner about the problem each time the problem comes up. You have to learn to accept and appreciate each other, and find ways to compromise. Of course, some problems are solvable.

Myth 3: Conflict signals an unhealthy relationship

A certain amount of conflict-- a state of opposition or lack of agreement over interests, ideas, perceptions, etc.-- is normal in most relationships. In fact, there is a wide range of conflict styles that characterize happy, stable relationships. On one end of the spectrum, some couples avoid conflict. On the other end of the spectrum, some couples openly state their opinions and needs, and are not afraid of a good debate. In the middle are couples who don't avoid conflict, but who choose their battles carefully.

It is not the presence or absence of conflict that poisons a marriage. It is how partners deal with their conflicts, specifically, the level of hostility and negativity they direct toward each other during conflict. Happy couples deal with their conflicts with a consistent ratio of five to one positive to negative behaviours. Among couples headed toward divorce, this ratio is less than one-to-one.

Examples of positive behaviours:

- expressing love
- saying thank-you

- apologizing
- softening your voice
- physical affection
- a kind gesture
- words of affirmation and encouragement
- compromise
- listening
- validating
- speaking non-threateningly

Examples of negative interactions:

- criticisms
- put-downs
- withdrawal of affection
- hostility
- defensiveness

Myth 4: Expressing anger is destructive to a relationship

Marital problems resulting from anger are more often a result of repressed anger than expressed anger. Expressed anger is not inherently harmful to a marriage as long as the anger is not expressed in a hostile manner.

When you are alarmed or annoyed by an important issue occurring in the marriage, much more harm comes from continually trying to ignore your feelings and adapt to the situation than from talking about it. Emotions that are dismissed rather than dealt with do not disappear.

Expressing anger is not synonymous with attacking your spouse's dignity. You have a right to express your emotions, but not a right to demean your partner. There is an enormous difference between saying, "It makes me really angry when you act bossy or tell me what to do," and saying, "There you go again, always having to be in charge. Why do you always have to get your big nose in everybody's business!?"

*For additional information, support, resources and counseling on health and wellness, visit the NSLAP website at www.nslap.ca. Please note that **NSLAP** is your "company" name when you register. When you call the NSLAP number at **1-866-299-1299**, (Français: 1-866-398-9505; TTY: 1-888-384-1152) Your call will be answered any time, day or night, 365 days per year.*