



Stopping the Cycle of Conflict: Shifting Instead of Drifting

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Long before taking a class in conflict resolution, most married couples know one thing for sure about conflict: it is inevitable in a marriage. What seems to trip up most couples is the level of intensity and the amount of pain that flows from unresolved conflict. Obviously, we cannot begin to cover the broad expanse known as “conflict resolution” in this short piece, but we would like to give our readers a simple diagnostic tool to raise your awareness of possible destructive communication patterns. By “shifting” into a more attuned self-awareness of these destructive patterns, you will be better able to stop the relational “drifting” patterns that lead many couples to feel permanently isolated and trapped on a never-ending treadmill of frustration. The first step is to identify the destructive patterns and then to shift into proactively changing them. Simply stated: “Shift—Don’t Drift.” More on that below.

For starters, it is a good idea to define the term “conflict.” How would you define it? Conflict can be simply be defined as “a disagreement which causes one or both parties to perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.” These perceived threats (both real and imagined) can encompass a wide range of emotions, including such things as fear, anger, hurt, extreme frustration, loneliness, disappointment, abandonment, hopelessness and injustice.

Because conflict is normally viewed as a negative happening in life, most couples either fail to be proactive in resolving conflicts (by avoidance) or they jump into “attack dog” mode in an effort to push away a perceived threat to their emotional peace and safety (by implementing intimidation tactics against their partner). In addition to these two extremes, there are several other reactions (somewhere in the middle) that couples commonly experience in the arena of conflict. All of these negative communication patterns begin to erode away the “oneness” of a couple and sadly lead to drifting apart.

So, where do you start in stopping a cycle of repeated conflicts that never seem to get resolved to the mutual satisfaction of both partners? We recommend a simple self-assessment tool which will help you determine whether any of five specific negative patterns are showing up in your relationship. These five patterns are the things that cause couples to “DRIFT” apart through a series of poorly-handled disagreements:

Drifting Out To Sea—The Five Danger Currents

- **D**-iscounting (your partner's views, opinions, beliefs, character, etc.)
- **R**-etreating (from opportunities to confront issues directly and constructively)
- **I**-solating (from those who can support and encourage your relationship)
- **F**-anning (the flames of conflict by escalating the level of intensity)
- **T**-wisting the Facts (by believing the worst of your partner's motives and intentions with insufficient evidence.)

Here are a few brief suggestions for short-circuiting each of the **Five Drifting Patterns**:

Instead of **Discounting**:

- Make a conscious choice to validate your partner's point of view on difficult topics. Remember that validation does not necessarily equate to agreement; it just says: "I hear you."
- When you catch yourself about to make a discounting statement to your partner, take a deep breath, and think before you speak.
- When you blow it and make discounting statements, call for a "Replay" or "Rewind."
- Try to put yourself into your partner's shoes and understand how and why they may be feeling the way they are.
- When bringing a complaint, speak the truth in a loving manner instead of attacking. By "prefacing" your complaint with a positive reason for bringing it up, you can significantly reduce defensiveness ("I am bringing this up because I want our relationship to be the best that it can be").

Instead of **Retreating**:

- Be intentional in agreeing to tackle a hot topic at a specific time. Make a date and stick to it no matter how much you want to run.
- Use wisdom in picking the time for discussion—free of distractions, avoiding times when you are extremely tired, stressed, etc.
- Limit the focus of the discussion in order to create a "safe zone" for both partners.
- If your partner tends to retreat, work on stating your position with respect and gentleness. Humility can dramatically change the tone and temperature of a discussion.

Instead of **Isolating**:

- After repeated, failed attempts at moving your conversation in a positive direction, reject the temptation to give up; instead, be aggressive in seeking help from trusted friends, ministers, or counselors who can pray for and encourage you as a couple. Mentor couples who will "hear you out" and make wise recommendations are worth their weight in gold.
- If you don't find the help you need on the first try, try again. Seek a second opinion or approach as diligently as you would if you had cancer.
- Run, don't walk, from third parties who tell you that there is no hope for your relationship (unless, of course, you are in danger of physical harm).

Instead of **Fanning the Flames**:

- Shift from wanting to hurt your partner to hearing your partner.
- Soften your tone of voice and lay down your weapons of warfare.
- Take a break from the conversation if and when it starts getting heated. Try exercise, taking a shower, reading, listening to calming music, going for a walk, praying, etc.
- Use the powerful words: "I'm sorry," and ask to start the conversation over.
- Acknowledge your partner's perspective by calmly and accurately playing back what you hear them saying.

Instead of **Twisting the Truth**:

- Look within yourself and refuse to keep on thinking the worst of your partner.
- Convince yourself to look for positive evidence attributable to your partner.
- Adopt the "presumption of innocence" instead of guilt. Stop reading your partner's mind.
- Admit that even if your negative interpretation has some merit, it is probably blown way out of proportion.