

Dealing with problems - Relationship repair

Summary of Figuring out Families Podcast with marriage counsellor Derek Boylen

In relationships we have issues that come up. It's part of life. There is nothing wrong with a good argument from time to time whether it's between a couple or with our children. Arguments can be really healthy and help to grow relationships.

It is inevitable that at certain times people have differences of opinion, which may create conflict. Sometimes we have different expectations, goals or values and that is going to lead to a disagreement of some sort.

Often many couples go into a relationship believing it will be smooth sailing and don't know what a healthy, strong relationship demands. Our understanding about a lifelong loving relationship has been formed by Disney and is about 'happily ever after'.

If one person in the relationship believes in peace at any price and is afraid so they never raise difficult issues usually results in one person's having an amazing time but the other person is struggling. The main concern is that there is no growth.

When there is an argument in the home, typically only one of three things can happen.

One person is right and one is wrong and the person who is wrong does some growing. They realise that there was another way of looking at this situation and they grow as a person.

But most of the time, it is not really like that. It's just that we have a different a view and you have a tough conversation about that and expect that it is normal. In most areas of life, growth comes in a discomfort zone. Whenever we learn something new it's in the uncomfortable bit that we're are growing.

It is in the discomfort zone that growth occurs in a relationship. but lot of people just have a fear about conflict in anything and avoid it at every opportunity.



There is nothing wrong with having a difference of opinion and you are not always right. And you're not always wrong. It is not a matter of right or wrong.

A good approach to conflict is to compromise but the **best approach** is to work out a way of collaborating and working together to overcome the issue or the problem being faced.

There are many things that couples can do to overcome conflict and there's so much research in this area. Generally there are two broad categories in resolving conflict.

One is having the right attitude and the other is having the right skills.

An example of what I mean by having the right attitude is giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. Typically, in relationships when one person asks for help of another person it can look like criticism.

An example is if I get home after work and my wife has just spent the whole day cleaning and I park myself on the couch and kick off my shoes and socks. Then she comes in and says, "I can't believe you left your socks right in the middle of the floor". It feels like criticism and the natural reaction is a sort of a defence.

But it's a request for help. What she is saying is 'come on, I've been cleaning all day I need your help to keep it clean'. So it can help a lot if we give the other person the benefit of the doubt and see what they're trying to say, as opposed to just hearing it as criticism.

Having ways of working through arguments can help too.

One of the skills that is most important is developing healthy boundaries or *fair fighting rules*. Often couples will say "if we love each other we shouldn't have to have rules and boundaries in our relationship".

As a counsellor I disagree with this idea. I think if you really love someone, if you really care for someone

you're going to have as many rules and boundaries as you need to protect your love for them.

It is in the way that you talk to one another. The reason some people avoid conflict is because they're afraid of it going badly so having boundaries that protect us from going into that space can really help.

For example, I used to swear when I got angry. My wife Karen won't tolerate swearing. In an argument I would start to swear and Karen would "say conversation over" and just walk away. I realised that swearing was not helping, and that I needed a boundary there.

Some obvious examples are: no yelling and swearing, no violence no hitting, pushing, shoving, but there are also things like: not blaming a conversation about who started what just leaves one person feeling guilty and the other person defensive, and it doesn't get a solution.

Another example is to protect the bedroom as a place for connection and the closeness. Argue in the kitchen, the living room or backyard, but the bedroom is saved for closeness and connection.

One of the most important things that couples can develop are those boundaries that protect their love.

Even in a great relationship, there are going to be times when things just blow out. Sometimes couples can't get to the heart of the problem so counselling can be really powerful.

Counselling can make the difference it is a strength to know when to ask for help. No one is expected to be an expert in every area of their life and when you are struggling in these different areas, asking for help can make a huge difference.

Counsellors bring a range of different factors. Firstly, a good counsellor is less interested in taking sides in the relationship. I'm not interested in being on his side or her side. I explain that I am on the side of the marriage.

Often the thing that is suffering the most is the relationship with one another. A counsellor can help to protect and nurture to get a bit further in the conversation.

Counsellors are also trained to be able to ask questions in a way that allows for a greater openness to explore and to discover and get to the deeper hopes and dreams that are also a part of the situation.

There are also the things that are just hard to talk about. Every family knows that within their family there are issues that are sensitive, and a bit difficult to know how to raise this conversation.

Every couple is unique and working at strengthening the relationship repair is really important. There are always going to be blowouts where things become unstuck and a good, sincere apology is a good first place to start in repairing that.

In summary

Conflict is inevitable in all families and it's normal and it can be healthy. It helps us to grow in our understanding of one another. It's about having the right attitude to the way we approach arguments and giving the other person the benefit of the doubt and having in place some to some key boundaries that enable us to protect our relationship and to keep it safe as we have those difficult conversations and knowing that things are sometimes still going to blow out.

Being open to giving a sincere apology and to working at repairing the relationship, knowing that, all right, we need to do some things here as well, to help regain the connection and the closest and the trust that we really love for in our family and our family relationships.

Finally, we don't have to do it alone. Invest in the relationship, seek advice when things seem overwhelming and invest in your relationship like you do for other things in life.

Figuring out Families Podcast

Derek Boylen, an experienced marriage and relationship counsellor and a lecturer in relationships at the University of Notre Dame. We have put together this most valuable podcast series which we are calling the Focus Sessions. The series focusses on many aspects of family relationships and can help in strengthening your family. We hope you'll find the series beneficial and get some insights on issues you may face in your family.

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