

Try A Little

Tenderness

Imagine for a moment that you and your spouse-to-be are in the midst of an argument. You don't feel your point of view is being understood. Voices get louder; heart rates increase; muscles tense up. Your levels of anger and anxiety become stronger, and you feel you are losing the battle. *What do you do?* Most likely, you become more defensive and aggressive or you shut down completely.

In the heat of battle, the instinctual "fight or flight" response kicks in and as a matter of self-protection, we respond by either attacking or withdrawing. The more aggressive become demanding and coercive or clingy and jealous. This kind of smothering behavior can frighten your partner and push him or her away. On the other hand, withdrawers become quiet and sullen or simply walk away, and it appears to the other partner as if he or she doesn't care. In an argument, both stances lead to feelings of disconnection, frustration and despair. This type of conflict and lack of resolution undermines the safe haven that must exist to sustain a long-lasting, intimate relationship.

What do I recommend you do instead? Put down your sword and try a little tenderness. Interestingly, research has shown that one of the most effective ways to change this pattern is to go against initial instinct and *become vulnerable*. The shift to vulnerability requires first that a person move from a critical and defensive stance to one that is open and unguarded. You have to put yourself in a position where your enemy *could* strike but usually won't because there is no one to fight against. In essence, the resistance is broken. Second, express how you feel and what you want rather than trying to *prove* that the other person is wrong and your point of view is the "right" one.

For some, the thought of being vulnerable in the heat of battle seems completely counterproductive, and they resort back to what they know—attack or withdraw. Even when this new paradigm is explained to couples in therapy, there is often a regression back to old habits until practice of this new way of thinking and behaving is exercised over and over again. The good news is that emotional rewiring can occur with the appropriate interventions. You can learn to think and respond differently *while* you are experiencing

your anger or anxiety. Unfortunately, not everybody has been blessed with positive relationship role models, but those willing to do the work can change the course of their marriage for the future.

When this type of strategy is applied during an argument, there is a shift in the dynamic of the relationship: The tension softens, and there is a willingness to listen and problem solve. When I am working with couples in my private practice and this occurs, I can feel a palpable change in the room.

To work on creating vulnerability, I recommend that you incorporate a few specific elements into your mindset:

- 1) View your marriage as a partnership where the goal is to have the best relationship, not just having things your way. Even when you are "battling," remember that you are on the same team when all is said and done.
- 2) Express how you feel and state what you need in a calm, non-threatening way.
- 3) Remember that there is no "right" or "wrong," only differences in opinions and expectations.
- 4) Rather than jumping on the low road and fanning the fire, take a time-out when emotions escalate.

Intimacy with others is something we all crave and need. Our romantic relationships give us the opportunity for the deepest levels of intimacy. This can bring the greatest joy and the greatest pain, because real intimacy requires vulnerability. Your spouse likely knows your weaknesses better than anyone else and can use this information to push buttons like no one else. To let someone know our true self, we have to share our fears along with our desires. When your loved one gives you the gift of insight into his or her soul, take your job seriously as the keeper of that information; don't abuse this power. Choosing tenderness over a battle gives you more power than you realize to create lasting intimacy.

For additional information on this topic, you may want to read "Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships" by Brent Atkinson, Ph.D. (Norton).

DEBORAH ANDERSON PhD