



The Art of Avoiding War



When we see eye-to-eye with the love of our life, our relationship seems easy. But what about those days when you look across the room at your partner and see a stranger you don't recognize? We have all had those moments when we have thought, "How could I have married someone who thinks so differently than I do?"

The success of a relationship often comes down to how well two unique people resolve their day-to-day differences. How we manage conflict is based on our learning histories. Think back to your family of origin. How did people in your family express their anger and frustration? Were you allowed to openly discuss your upsets or did you learn to clam up and hold it in, only to blow up later about something more trivial? Was there resolution or were things swept under the rug? Now take a look at your own style today. Have you learned a healthy way to express your feelings/needs or have you adopted a less effective style? If your ability to resolve conflict needs some fine tuning, be heartened to know that you can improve your skills if you're willing to put some effort into how you think about and handle conflict when it arises.

So how does one become successful at resolving differences?

Respect and tolerate your differences. This is probably the most important principle to adopt. Everyone wants to be validated for his/her perspective and preferences. There are no right or wrong opinions, just your own.

Another important principle comes from *Choice Theory* which says that **the needs of a relationship must come before the needs of the two individuals.** Knowing that each of you has committed to make the relationship a priority will help you to keep your perspective when you hit an impasse or don't get it your way.

This may seem like an obvious point, but **you need to let your partner**

know what you are thinking and what you need. Don't assume they can mind-read and don't expect them to, either. Your partner's ability to read your mind has no correlation with how well he/she knows or loves you.

Try to discuss your upsets in a timely manner. Don't let your frustrations build up until you finally explode, usually about something trivial. Dealing with life's difficulties as they come along is the most effective strategy.

Save your discussions for when you are calm and collected. When you are angry or anxious, it is difficult to be logical and to problem-solve. If necessary, take a "time-out" to get back into control before you resume negotiations.

Don't play the tit-for-tat game. When your partner is bringing up an issue that he/she is upset about, use that time to problem-solve that issue without bringing up other things that you are bothered about. Schedule another time to discuss your issues.

When you cannot simply agree, you will have to come up with another resolution. This may include some form of compromise, letting one person have it all his/her way, finding a new solution, or agree to disagree. **If a solution cannot be reached immediately, agree to come back to the drawing board at a later time.**

A kind gesture goes a long way. A loving word, a hug, a joke, or some other thoughtful act can help break the tension and let your partner know that you still care, even though you're angry or disappointed.

Remember that conflict is inevitable, but how you choose to solve the problem is up to you. If you keep your relationship as the priority and put these strategies into practice, you will find that the stranger across from you is once again the person you couldn't help falling in love with.

DEBORAH ANDERSON PhD