

# Issues Between Couples

## FACING, FORGIVING & FORGETTING

### The Problem

Many couples have one or more issues that hang over them like a dark cloud. They may involve money, sex, division of labour in the home, leisure time, parenting, and life plans. While avoiding these issues may provide short term comfort, the resulting long term tension can become unbearable.

The resultant uncomfortable silences may be seen as the price of evading anticipated anger if the issues were to be raised. But silences create their own stress. When important decisions are postponed, careers, goals, and families can be put on hold.

The following suggests ways couples can face their issues, discuss them, arrive at decisions, and move on while being honest and respectful. Emotions, such as anger or pain may be unavoidable, yet issues can still be faced in an atmosphere of safety and trust. When couples squarely face important issues, there are inherent challenges - *Is the truth worth risking some pain? Is this relationship worth working on?*

### Tips For Facing Issues

#### Set Aside A Time & Place To Talk

Too often people rely on wishful thinking to make problems magically disappear. Or they wait for the right moment before approaching one another. There are no perfect moments. Seize the time. It can be a simple suggestion such as - *Let's sit down tonight, after the kids are asleep, to discuss the household budget.* It is helpful to have uninterrupted time, at least an hour, when discussing important issues. Disconnect the phone or switch on the answering machine. Choose a setting that helps you stay focused. Kitchen tables are better than bedrooms.

Once you have chosen a time and a place, mutually promise that neither of you will leave the discussion early unless you have agreed to a time out. This is important as sometimes tempers flare and a meeting can dissolve with a sudden exit. Remember that discussing a problem does not mean you have to resolve it. For example, in dealing with monthly expenses several meetings may be needed before there is a satisfactory plan.

#### Stay On Topic

It is easy for issues to become linked. For example, a spouse may ignore household responsibilities if they feel sexually rejected, while their partner may be withholding affection because of past resentments. An innocent discussion of who will make dinner can then escalate into a review of years of pent up resentments.

Once you have decided to face an issue then feel free to interrupt if your partner is straying from the topic. You may want to offer to discuss the new topic after the present one. *I know you are upset about how much time I am spending away, and we can talk about it later, but now we have to resolve how we are going to discipline the kids.*

#### Ask Your Partner To Summarize What You Said

While this may feel contrived and awkward, it really helps in making sure your partner understood what you said. Too often discussions end with a false notion of agreement when in fact neither person accurately listened to what was said.



## Hang In There Through The Anger & Pain

Sometimes there is no painless way to address certain topics. It takes courage to be direct with your opinions. And it takes willingness to understand in order to sit through bad news. Some issues may never be resolved but couples can at least hear each other out and attempt to understand what each other said.

## Be Respectful

There may be times when you genuinely feel your partner is an idiot. That does not mean you have to say it. Though it may feel good initially, venting anger does not necessarily help. In fact it makes things worse if your venting includes name calling, sarcasm, demeaning remarks, and put downs. Your partner deserves to be listened to even if you think their statements are wrong.

If the discussion becomes verbally abusive or disrespectful, simply stop. Call a time out and acknowledge what is happening. Consider taking a walk and returning after you have cooled down. Remember that the key task in a time out is to cool down, not to prepare your next line of defense. Later, when you resume your discussion, focus on one particular issue.

## Acknowledge Your Partner

Facing the issues is probably as hard for your partner as it is for you. Often one partner appears more powerful or confident than the other, but that does not mean they have not experienced pain, fatigue, and stress in confronting the issues. The tearful partner is not necessarily sadder or more hurt than the one whose eyes are dry.

Acknowledging your partner can be as simple as saying, *I know this has been hard for you* or *you have been doing a good job*. Everyone wants to be acknowledged and appreciated and it helps to keep up your spirits when you have been successful.

## Ask What Support Your Partner Wants From You & Be Clear About What Support You Want Too

Couples often assume the other knows what is wanted. Do not count on it. Partners can get so distracted with their own needs that they tune out the needs of their spouse. Sometimes all that is wanted is the spouse's approval. For example, a person may not take a course, apply for a new job, or pursue an interest such as music because they feel the disapproval of their partner. The time and money may be there but the partner has not explicitly expressed their support. Asking for the support you want does not mean you are going to get it. That is the risk.

## Moving On - Forgiving & Forgetting

Forgiveness is fundamental to moving on. Many refuse to forgive their partner as they reason that to do so absolves their partner of responsibility for hurtful behaviours and not living up to expectations. Moreover, their partner may not appear sufficiently remorseful or repentant. Sometimes even remorse is not enough, as it cannot fix the past and they may not be able to get over the harm that was done.

As pain and bitterness reside within us, we are hurting ourselves if we do not let it go. Forgiveness means we are free to choose a less painful response to our partner's behaviour and will not continue to blame them for our unhappiness. Forgetting implies that we will not revisit the issue in subsequent discussions. In this context **forgetting is synonymous with letting go**.

Remember, as soon as one issue is faced another one is bound to come up. Couples can become stronger, more confident, and more loving as they reengage with one another to resolve the issues in their lives that keep them challenged and engaged in living.



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