

And it is work. It is estimated that approximately one-half of all marriages in this country end in divorce, and another one-fourth of couples remain unhappily together because they assess their misery as less difficult to bear than the process and effects of divorce. The fortunate minority figures out how to navigate through the difficulties and challenges and stay emotionally connected and happily together.

Why do so many marriages fail? In my practice as a couples counselor and individual therapist, I observe two major causes of divorce: unresolved resentment and lack of cultivation of the relationship. These two factors combine in a downward spiral pattern to bring about distrust, detachment, and, ultimately, the demise of the marriage. This destructive process is rooted in a mutual inability or unwillingness to resolve conflict effectively. Some couples avoid conflict because they fear it will create disconnection or chaos. Others engage in it, but resort to tactics so harmful that they invalidate each other with verbal attacks and character assassination. A spouse whose complaints are met with invalidating responses (e.g., “You shouldn’t feel that way” or “You’re too sensitive”) eventually concludes that he or she has no voice in the marriage. Because these grievances are ineffectively processed, they turn into resentments. The resentful spouse will begin to

distance himself or herself from the other. Then one or both stop doing positive things—“cultivation”—for the relationship.

The distancing increases, and the partners start to feel emotionally unsafe with each other. Eventually, disconnection occurs, followed by a loss of faith in the marriage. Often the partners will deal with the pain of the disconnection by focusing away from the marriage and seeking comfort and distraction in excessive involvement in work, hobbies, children, addictions, or an affair (infidelity—the ultimate expression of loss of faith in the marriage). Eventually, the marriage succumbs to the combination of neglect and abuse, and it dissolves.

When the course of disconnection leads to infidelity, a marriage can never be the same after it is discovered. Some are unable to recover and end in divorce. Other marriages suffer permanent damage and struggle on dysfunctionally and miserably under the burden of unresolved resentment, guilt, alienation, and distrust. And some partners are able to do the extremely difficult work of healing the wound and building a new relationship of trust, emotional connection, and intimacy.

Not all infidelity is of a sexual nature. Much harm is created by emotional infidelity. A close relationship with a member of the opposite sex where emotional connection is greater than, or

Making Marriage Work

By Thomas C. FitzPatrick

Fast Facts:

- Approximately one-half of all marriages in this country end in divorce.
- The major causes of marital failure are unresolved anger and lack of cultivation of the relationship.
- A relationship is a living and changing organism; if you are not working to make it grow, you are allowing it to deteriorate.

Trying to defeat feelings with logic is to invalidate your partner's feelings and cause him or her to feel resentful about his or her inability to be heard by you. Discard logic, self-defense, and the struggle to avoid defeat. When your partner speaks, focus on listening intently rather than on preparing a rebuttal.

a substitute for, the connection with a spouse is one type. Confiding private marital details or problems to someone of the opposite sex is another. In general, an interaction with someone of the opposite sex that you know would hurt or anger your spouse can be emotional infidelity.

This is an unwelcome concept for many, but it is one that bears consideration for a person who finds himself or herself in a growing attachment to someone else in the midst of increasing disconnection in his or her marriage. The recipe for prevention or early detection of a problem of this nature is for spouses to discuss and define what would constitute emotional infidelity and what their expectations of each other are. The antidote for the downward spiral of disconnection and dissolution is twofold: effective conflict management and consistent cultivation.

Anger is a much-maligned emotion. When used effectively, it can bring closeness. When misused or allowed to fester, it creates resentment. In fact, it is sometimes said, there can be no closeness without conflict, no intimacy without anger.

The first step, then, in developing good conflict skills is to adopt a new paradigm toward disagreement. Be willing to view a potential conflict as an opportunity to increase intimacy. Making this work also requires a shift in conflict agenda. Make it your primary purpose to strive for understanding and acceptance of your partner's feelings. This agenda is contrary to the fighting style that most couples habitually use—denying and defending—to avoid appearing wrong or feeling blamed and shamed. Each person's agenda becomes to discredit what is being said and to invalidate the partner.

The strategy of striving for emotional understanding and acceptance is designed to bring about mutual validation, which can clear the air of resentment and create feelings of emotional safety. And emotional safety is intimacy, the thing we most seek in a relationship.

Unfortunately, attorneys tend to be significantly challenged in pursuit of this goal. All our training and experience (and probably some of the traits that led us to the law) have conditioned us to fight to win by overpowering the other side with words. The attorney's most valued tools are reason and logic, both of which tend to be liabilities in marital strife. Trying to defeat feelings with logic is to invalidate your partner's feelings and cause him



or her to feel resentful about his or her inability to be heard by you. Discard logic, self-defense, and the struggle to avoid defeat. When your partner speaks, focus on listening intently rather than on preparing a rebuttal.

When a couple is learning to communicate, it is helpful for the speaker to use a format known as “clearing” and for the listener to use “reflective listening.” Rather than ambushing his or her spouse with accusation, interrogation, or outrage, the person with a grievance should express the need to talk and allow the other to set a time for it within the next few hours. At the appointed time, the aggrieved spouse begins by expressing his or her purpose (which should always be stated as, “To clear the air so we can get closer”). He or she then states the facts of the situation (“You were rude to my parents at dinner”), the feelings (“I’m angry and embarrassed”), and his or her personal interpretation of the behavior (“It makes me think you have no respect for me”). The listener repeats or paraphrases what he or she has heard, and this continues until the speaker feels fully understood and accepted regarding his or her feelings. When this occurs, the aggrieved spouse feels validated and gains trust of his or her partner and of the process. This process can be difficult to accept and to use because it feels awkward and stilted and formal. But if used with patience and trust, it can significantly reduce resentment and improve emotional connection.

While destructive conflict batters a marriage, lack of cultivation starves it. A relationship is a living and changing organism; if you are not working to make it grow, you are allowing it to deteriorate. It is common for couples, especially those whose relationship is weakening, to commit to a weekly or monthly “date night.” Most commonly, date night gives way to the priorities of the day (soccer practice, helping with homework, the need to work late, etc). Or, if the date is kept, it is often unsatisfying or awkward because detachment or resentment has developed since the last scheduled connection.

Rather than “date nights,” couples need lots of “mate moments,” ideally at least five each day. A “mate moment” can be something as simple as a touch, a fond or meaningful look, a phone call with no purpose, a kiss, or a hug. It requires nothing more than a little awareness, a little time, and, if the relationship is strained, a little courage.

For most attorneys, the dawning of each new day signals another challenge to accomplish too many complex feats in too few hours. The agenda becomes one of putting out fires and trying to prevent new ones. Very seldom is an attorney heard to complain that he or she has too much time. Generally, most things that occur in the course of a day are additional sources of stress. For a very busy and overcommitted attorney, a mandatory date night can feel like one more stressor. But punctuating the day with several “mate moments” can bring stress relief and a sense of well-being.

It has been said that expectations are resentments waiting to happen. Nowhere is this truer than in marriage. The major difference between a friendship, a romance, and a marriage is the level of expectations.

At their wedding, a couple creates a contract, of which the only expressed promise is to “love.” The multitude of other expected performances are only implied. In fact, it’s arguable that often times at the altar there is no “meeting of the minds.” And therein lies the root of many long-term marital problems. The seeds of divorce are the unspoken expectations and unrevealed selves we bring to the altar.

Fortunately, that doesn’t have to be the death knell for the marriage. There is a remedy. Recognizing this problem and admitting it to each other is the first step. Committing to improve conflict management and actively cultivate the relationship and to follow through on this commitment is key to recovery. An additional element of the remedy is for each party to adopt a specific agenda in the marriage. The agendas I prescribe are gender-specific and, for most people, unfamiliar, initially uncomfortable, and even counter-intuitive. My belief in them is based on my observation of many couples who have adopted and employed them and have made significant turnarounds in their relationships.

The man’s agenda, simply put, should be to make his wife feel loved. In most cases, a man’s mission during courtship is to get the woman to open up to him. He does this by exhibiting intelligence, humor, charm, accomplishment, integrity, and a desire to delight her. If he does these things well, she begins to trust him and open her heart to show her appreciation. However, when the disconnection process sets in, the man tends to neglect the agenda and then discards it. The woman’s faith in him abates, and her heart begins to close.

Repair of a disabled marriage requires that the man re-embrace his agenda. He can start each day asking himself, “How can I make her feel loved?” Then he must search for the answer himself by observing her and listening carefully to her to discover what she is feeling and what she needs from him to make her life easier and sweeter.



The woman’s agenda is to radiate her appreciation. This is not accomplished with casual compliments. What a man wants is to see the radiance in a woman’s eyes as she looks into his eyes and touches him and speaks words that make him know he is successful as her husband. When a man experiences this, he wants more of it and he redoubles his efforts in pursuit of it. As his partner continues to respond, the relationship spirals up instead of down.

When I offer this remedy to individuals, a common response is, “I’m too resentful and I don’t feel love for him (her) anymore.” My answer to that is, “Feelings follow actions. You can’t wait until you feel loving before you do loving things. If you want to feel love, you have to create it by being loving.”

Finally, a note about the impact of children on a marriage is in order. When I ask a couple to identify the point at which the disconnection process began, the most common answer is, “After the birth of our first child.” In support of this, a study by the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle showed that two-thirds of couples experience a serious decline in their relationship after their first baby arrives.

If this problem is not identified and addressed, as the disconnection sets in, one or both partners may focus away from the marriage by putting all his or her emotional energy into the child (and successive children). The result can be a child-centered home in which chronic parental disconnection (and often animosity) has many subtle, but serious negative impacts on the children. One of the worst is the insecurity, pressure, and guilt a child experiences when he feels he is more important to his parents than they are to each other, and he is the only thing holding them together.

The solution to (or prevention of) this problem lies in the couple recognizing it (or, better yet, anticipating it) and committing themselves to do the work to keep the marriage thriving while loving and raising their children, for the benefit of their children and themselves.

In summary, the major causes of marital failure are unresolved anger and lack of cultivation. The most effective remedies are consistent, enthusiastic, and courageous nurturing (including the “agenda” referenced above) and emotion-focused conflict designed to create closeness through understanding and acceptance. Once children arrive, it is crucial to not allow the marriage to slip into a position of secondary importance.

And a final reminder for attorneys: leave your professional skills at the office, especially logic, reason, and the need to defeat and prevail. Arrive home with a mission—to keep your marriage alive and well by enhancing the emotional connection. ■

Thomas C. FitzPatrick is a therapist in private practice at the Center for Creative Living in Royal Oak. He holds an MA in counseling from Wayne State University and a JD from the University of Detroit School of Law and is a member of the State Bar of Michigan. He concentrates in men’s issues, couples counseling, recovery, and career transitions. Many of his clients are members of the legal community.