

The **Four** **Conflict Styles** in Your **Marriage**

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Part 1 - Escalation!

When Emotions Erupt in Your Marriage

The research is out on ‘escalation’ in marriage – you know the raised voices, hot tempers, and the ugly exchange of words. Research reveals the following facts about escalation:

1. It is one of the four **best predictors of divorce**. We call it a ‘**pipeline of poison**’ for a marriage.
2. We **deeply regret** what we say at the height of our anger. (This is contrary to the notion that the truth comes out when someone is upset.)
3. There is **nothing redeemable** about escalation. You won’t find a hidden value in it – it is completely destructive. (This is in contrast to something like, ‘criticism’ – where the person doing the criticizing usually has a ‘request’ but is expressing it in an unhealthy way.)



Time-out / Practical rules for Couples to stop escalating conflicts in their marriage

1. **Either person may call a time-out.**
2. **Whoever calls the time-out establishes its length.** I suggest you use short time-outs, five or ten minutes.
3. **The person who calls the time-out is also the time keeper.** They watch the clock and they re-initiate contact when the time is up.
4. **When the time-out is completed:**
 - Either of you may re-establish another time-out and follow the above guidelines
 - You may continue on with your topic using the Speaker-Listener technique (Go to TurningPointCounseling.org / Click on [View our Newsletter Archive](#) / Click on 'Marriage' and Click on "Is Anyone Listening? – In Your Marriage"
 - You may drop the topic for 24 hours or save it for your next counseling session if you're in marriage counseling.

PLEASE NOTE:

1. You have NOT called a time-out if you have not said 'I want a time-out now' (or some other agreed upon phrase).
2. You have NOT called a time-out if you have not specified the amount of time you will break for and re-initiate contact after the time period is over.

What happens if my spouse doesn't honor my time-out?

Remember that escalation takes two. Regardless of your spouse's behavior you can choose to not participate.

Establish with your partner ahead of time what will happen if a time-out is not honored. I suggest the following:

- A. **Go to a separate room** when a time-out is not acknowledged. (Sometimes this doesn't end it. Your partner may follow you into that room and continue with their verbal barrage. If so...)
- B. **Leave the house** (or current location). Go to a local restaurant. Order a bowl of soup or cup of tea and in 20 minutes call home.

If you hear an apology for not honoring the time-out and a promise to honor it, then get home. If you hear a gush of escalation DO NOT engage your partner. Say over the top of the barrage of words 'Good-bye I'm hanging up. Good-bye I'm hanging up.' Then hang up and wait another 20 minutes. Finally I know some people who have a bag packed in their car. Staying away for a night sends a strong message – 'I will not escalate with you'! It's also an indication that prayer and professional counseling are necessary.

Scriptures for Escalation

Not surprisingly the Bible identified the problem of escalation thousands of years ago. Here are some timeless truths –

Proverbs 14:29

A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.

James 1:19-20

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Proverbs 15:1

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Ecclesiastes 7:9

Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.

Dedicating yourself to prayer and using the following practical guidelines, can help you get escalation out of your marriage!

Part 2 – Withdrawal in Marriage

Thawing Out Your Marriage Cold War!

Researchers tell us that we can predict if a couple will divorce or remain married with better than 90% accuracy. They have identified four styles of conflict that best predict that divorce will occur. Fortunately, these four types of conflict can be eliminated from your marriage. Currently we are discussing the second conflict style with is called – WITHDRAWAL.

Some time ago I was interviewed on a radio station. I was speaking on the topic of passionate love in marriage. Lots of calls were coming in and of course the subject of withdrawal came up.



Why do we pull away in marriage... put up

‘the wall,’ turn the temperature down to sub-zero? The cold war can last for days or decades if we let it.

As I was explaining the many ways that we miss out on intimacy in marriage, even the radio station manager said to me on a break “Now I know why my wife has told me for years she feels like we're just roommates.” (I hear that from couples every day of my life as a marriage counselor)!

Research tells us that regardless of its origin, withdrawal in marriage by either husband or wife is lethal. It destroys the oneness God intended for us to enjoy with our mate... it is the crack, the fracture point that can widen to the Grand Canyon of eventual divorce.

We find that men pull away more than women. It was previously thought that men withdraw more in marriage because they don't care as much about marriage and family relationships. The research showed that that thinking is dead wrong. Men overall do care as much as women do, but men don't have the capacity to handle conflict like women. Said another way – *on a sea of conflict women float and men sink.* (1)

Not long after I had first shared these ideas with my wife Deborah, we were on a drive and we began to get into a tiff. I started pulling away from our dispute, so she asked me *Kevin are you withdrawing because you can't handle the conflict or...?*

OK she got me on that one!

So often we men have LFT, “low frustration tolerance”. It's not an excuse, it's something to be mindful of and work on.

So what is the remedy for withdrawal?

It's a regular time of checking in and communicating. The natural “soil erosion” of marriage is to take each other for granted and to let our marriage “investments” slide.

Do you remember when you were first dating your mate? You had to peel the phone off your ear because you had been talking for FOUR hours! That was a huge investment in your relationship. As time passes the pressures of life close in – the pressures of career, parenting, finances and so forth. It's important to carve out time, that is “make time” for your marriage. Many have argued, “That's not natural. If you have to plan it or work at it it's not genuine.” My response is always, “Believe me, you don't want natural.” Anything really great takes intentional effort, precise focus, prayer and lots of elbow grease. From time to time I will hear someone say to my wife, *You have a really good marriage.* She always says, *We work hard at it.*

Part 3 - Invalidation in Marriage

To Close or Open Your Spouse's Spirit



With 90% accuracy researchers can now predict whether your marriage will survive or end in divorce. There are four conflict styles that best predict divorce (we call them the *Four Pipelines of Poison*). Shut off the pipelines and your marriage will survive and thrive. Let them flow and your marriage will erode to ruin. We have now come to the third style of conflict which is called – INVALIDATION.

Recently my wife and I had some really terrific discount coupons for a local restaurant. We drove over for a nice dinner and I presented the coupons at the cash register as we were ordering our meal. The woman at the counter pointed to the fine print on the coupons and scolded me saying that they were INVALID...they were offered on a time limited basis and had expired. I glanced behind me at the line of impatient people wanting to get their food. I was holding them up and looking pretty foolish to boot. My really cool coupons were *worthless* and I was feeling the same. INVALIDATION in your marriage leaves you with similar feelings.

Invalidation is what slams your marriage down onto the wrestling mat.

It includes a wide variety of behaviors including, digs, put downs, public humiliation, contempt, bitterness, name calling, the war of words and revenge. It can take on subtler forms such as sarcasm and “joking” about your mate. If you don’t feel safe, if you don’t feel special or valued there is a good chance that your marriage is suffering from INVALIDATION. This is the conflict style that wives seem to be the most sensitive to and have the greatest need to eliminate.

As marriage counselors we most often hear wives asking for “emotional safety” and to know that they are “number one” – i.e. their husbands’ priority. Often times we see husbands scratch their heads about such things, and ask – “what in the world is emotional safety? Or - What shelf is it on at Wal-Mart?”

Emotional Safety and Validation occur when you are able to tell your spouse what you are feeling or thinking without being criticized, put down or told to “just stop” feeling that way. You feel “safe” because you know you won’t be verbally attacked or judged for your feelings or beliefs. We find that this safety OPENS THE SPIRIT of our mate. (In contrast invalidation puts up the walls of defense in our partner.)

There are two kinds of validation, CONFSSIONAL and SITUATIONAL.

Confessional validation says, I CAN SEE HOW YOU’D FEEL... hurt, embarrassed, misunderstood, etc. –(whatever the feeling is that your mate is expressing.) ...BECAUSE I DID OR DID NOT... (What your behavior was). For example I’ve had many husbands announce some private matter about their wife or make them the brunt of a “joke” in public. It’s one of those “open mouth, insert other foot” kind of experiences.

Validation, in the aftermath of this situation, may sound something like this, *"Dear wife I can see how you would feel very hurt, embarrassed, and angry at me after announcing to your friends at the party last night how much you weigh and telling them that this was your all-time record high"*.

In some cases these types of hurts go way back in history. In these situations I recommend using the *Amends List*. This is a guide that will help you recount and heal many hurts in your marriage. It is one of the fastest and most direct ways of turning a troubled marriage around. I recall one husband who had a full six pages of wrongs he could remember that he committed against his wife. One of the things on his list was a public criticism of her recent cosmetic surgery, ouch, that one really hurt. His wife broke into tears as he read his confession. She said, *"I didn't even know you remembered or recognized all those things that hurt me"*.

When we get locked up with defensiveness we lose the ability to understand and empathize with our spouse's point of view. This leaves us lonely, isolated, and sometimes with the feeling like we're going crazy. No one is greater at defensiveness and blame than an addict. But when he or she finally admits they have a problem there is such a relief. Often times the spouse will say I was beginning to think it was all me, that was the whole problem. The writer of the book of James in the New Testament said it so well, *"confess your faults one to another and pray for one another and you will be healed"* James 5:16. Confession is the thing that often starts spiritual revivals and it's the thing that so often revives a marriage.

Situational validation - This type of validation says, "I can see how you'd feel... depressed, discouraged, alone"-- e.g. whatever your spouse is saying they are feeling... because "your favorite uncle just died" -- e.g. whatever situation that has occurred in your spouse's life that they are emotionally responding to.

This type of validation can often be blocked by two things:

1) "Shoulding" - you know what this sounds like, *"you shouldn't feel that way"* or of course the more extreme version *"just stop feeling that way!"*

2) "Fixing" -- this is the attempt at classic problem-solving. Although it may be well intended, trying to fix problems without acknowledging feelings can be disastrous. We men seem to be big fixers. We get paid the big bucks at work to fix problems all day long only to finally come home to our wives where we are often greeted with a host of more problems. We think, "At work I get paid for this but for you dear I'll help you for free." Of course she doesn't want "free", she wants a hug and some validation that her world and her life today has been a struggle.

I had a wise old supervisor one-time who told me a story about when he was a little boy. He was traveling by boat to Catalina Island just off the Southern California coast. A terrible storm kicked up and the passengers on board began to fear for their lives. He told me that it was then that his mother held him. He said "I wasn't really any safer, but I sure felt better".

Most of life's storms we can't stop but we sure can do a good job of holding each other. That's the beauty of validation.

Part 4 – Negative Interpretation in Marriage

Seeing Things Worse Than They Really Are

Researchers now claim that they can predict if a couple's marriage will end in divorce with about 90% accuracy. They have identified four conflict styles that best predict divorce. We have done articles on the first three of these styles and now come to the fourth and final one - Negative Interpretation (and its big brother, Mind Reading). We have come to call these conflict styles the Four Pipelines of Poison. As a marriage counselor of more than 25 years I have witnessed couples who have successfully eliminated these types of conflicts from their marriage. The results are always dramatic and wonderful! But, if these conflicts are allowed to fester with your mate they can erode the wonderful gift your marriage was intended to be. So, let me tell you a story about Negative Interpretation...



I counseled a teen one time who told me her step-father would constantly say to her over and over again, "You're a teenager, you're out of control." The teen told me, "I come home after school, do my homework and don't go out at night – I'm not sure where I'm out of control." She said that she felt that no matter what she did, her step-father would never be happy with her and that she was feeling hopeless about their relationship.

Negative interpretation is when one partner (or family member) believes that the intentions of another are more negative than they really are. This belief diagnosis, labels, or pigeon holes a loved one.

It can say...

- "He/She doesn't care about me."
- "I can never depend on them - I'm going to have to do everything myself."
- "That's a woman for you." (Or - that's a man for you.)
- "He's hopeless. (Or - she's hopeless.)"
- "I can't believe anything they say - it's all one big act."

Many times these internal judgments are hard to detect. They tend to center on a belief that one's spouse is inherently bad, selfish or has a negative intent towards them or other family members. (These types of judgments are sometimes easier to see in other arenas like racial prejudice or discrimination against youth or the elderly.)

If the internal judgments made against a spouse are strong and deep enough it may somehow justify ongoing anger, resentment and aggression through criticism or disrespect.

I don't think that I have ever met a married person who at one time or another hasn't gotten at least somewhat self-righteous towards their mate. At times most of us believe we are "above" our spouse's level. This is a type of Negative Interpretation.

I am cut to the quick when I remember the words of the Apostle Paul who declared that *I am guilty of the things I judge others for...* and that includes my mate.

...for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Romans 2:1

Help for Negative Interpretation -

1. Recognize that your mate is a child of God, on loan to you for only a season - called life. (Your spouse is God's child before they are your husband or wife.)
2. Know that God will one day ask you, "How did you treat my child?" (i.e. you are accountable to God for your actions towards your mate.)
3. If you struggle with judging your mate remember that your judgments cost you time and mental resources. Focus on resolving your own problems and accomplishing your life mission. (If you don't know what your life mission is - it's time to identify it! If your life focus is on someone else's problems you are losing out on life!)
4. Also know that God loved you when you were unlovely. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8.* God has called you to now pass his love onto your imperfect mate.
5. Watch out for "Hollywood" expectations in your marriage. These are the expectations that are way too high where your mate is to anticipate your needs, know what you want without you asking and the like. God is your Source not your mate - even *your* spouse can not and will not make you a whole person. You married a human being who will at best understand you some of the time. When you lower expectations that are too high you will find yourself not being as disappointed by your mate.

6. If your spouse has a negative interpretation of you, confront them. Ask your mate to put their feeling out on the table (as painful as this might be). Ask yourself if his or her judgments are valid, realistic or reasonable. If they are, there may be some changes you need to make. If they are not - you may need to get some help for your marriage. A professional Christian counselor can help a spouse who is harboring Negative Interpretation and judgments.

8. See "A Lasting Promise" by Scott Stanley Ph.D. to read more from these researchers.

Now we will be discussing one of the kingpins of conflict in marriage...

CRITICISM!

Have you ever wondered how to communicate with your loved one without criticizing? - OR what to do with that spouse of yours who just keeps criticizing?

Criticism in Your Marriage

You can now predict whether your marriage will succeed or end in divorce with over 90% accuracy. We have just completed a series of four articles highlighting what researchers declare to be the four best predictors of divorce (and how to avoid them). These predictors consist of four styles of conflict found in marriage. If you will eliminate these four conflict styles your marriage will have far greater odds of surviving and thriving.



Many studies on the topic of *criticism in marriage* have also been conducted and some researchers consider *criticism* to be a major contributor to divorce as well (see Dr. John Gottman's book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*). Gottman says criticism involves "attacking someone's personality or character - rather than a specific behavior - usually with blame." (I sometimes call this type of criticism - *character assassination*.)

After 25 years of providing marriage counseling, I can tell you that criticism is one of the deadliest things we face in our marriages. I simply don't allow it in the counseling room and I show couples how to avoid using criticism. Never-the-less, for those of us who are married, it seems to be an easy thing to move from complaining about what our spouse is or is not *doing* to criticizing who they *are*. It may sound like this...

"You only care about your friends. You really don't care about us anymore."

"You keep leaving messes for me to clean up. You are like one of the kids. I can't trust you anymore."

And then there is what Gottman calls "kitchen sinking" - this is a rapid fire list of criticisms that is sure to blow the circuits of any mate. It goes something like this...

"You don't listen to me - ever! And heck, you give the dog more attention than me. I don't believe it - you can love the dog, but you won't love me. And you never do a darn thing around the house. I can't be with someone who is so stuck on themselves."

So how do you respond to that? Have you ever had 14 basketballs thrown at you, at the same time? That's what it feels like to be the target of this type of attack.

First, let's get an understanding of the good and the bad of criticism. Then we will look at the natural knee-jerk reaction to criticism.

We talked in a previous article about *escalation* in marriage. You may recall this is when - he yells - she yells - over and over - hotter and more intense until there is a giant eruption of ugliness. We have noted that this *pipeline of poison* has nothing redeemable about it - nothing good will come from it, because we deeply regret what we say at the height of our anger.

Criticism is a different story. ***There is something of value buried deep inside of each criticism - it is a request - a deep desire and longing for something we want from our mate.*** By using criticism this request is being expressed in the most dysfunctional of ways. It is the guarantee that we will ***NOT*** get what we want.

Because criticism is so often a deep and personal offense, the natural response is to defend ourselves or to attack our spouse. It's common to see couples go into "attack/defend mode" over and over again, shuffling through their criticisms like a deck of cards to the point of exhaustion and complete hopelessness. Trying to get a spouse to think differently about you through verbal debate is almost always a fruitless endeavor. Attacking back and attempting to prove that your mate is "worse" is a prescription for more pain.

Criticism is usually where "rabbit trails" begin. If the conversation between you and your mate gets a little uncomfortable, one of you can usually change the topic very quickly by launching a criticism. Outraged by such a notion, the person receiving the criticism will attempt to defend themselves and there you go ... the topic is flipped to debating the critical comment!

Here are some simple but profound guidelines for dealing with criticism...

1. ***Declare a truce on criticizing each other*** - Start by declaring a 24 hour period with no criticizing. Imagine a full day without criticism! You will find out just how hooked on criticizing you are with this simple exercise.
2. ***Change all Criticisms into Requests*** - when you are tempted to criticize, ask yourself - "What do I want? I'm very unhappy with my spouse right now. I know what I don't want but what is the flip side of this? What is it that I really want right now?" If you can't figure out what you do want then you need to stop trying to communicate until you do know.

If you are being criticized - don't defend yourself or attack back. Practice self control and say, "You seem really upset with me - what is it that you want from me?"

3. ***Change Requests that are vague to Requests that are Observable and Measurable.*** - I remember one wife who asked her husband to be "more thoughtful" so he bought her a subscription to *Field and Stream* magazine. Of course he didn't know what she meant by the words "more thoughtful" and so it was meaningless communication.

A criticism that says "You are such a slob" can be changed to a request that says... "Would you please pick up after yourself?" This vague request can be made observable and measurable by asking... "Would you pick up all your dirty underwear from the horizontal planes of our bedroom (i.e. the floor, bed, dresser top, etc.) before you go to work each morning for the next two weeks?"

Want to go deeper?

4. *Couples who are truly great communicators understand the symbolic meaning of their requests - that is the deeper issue.* Couples often come into counseling saying that they argue about the silliest little things - like how to squeeze the tooth paste or which way to put the toilet paper on the holder. These are not little things; they are usually deep with symbolic meaning such as trust, care, value, tradition, conservation of family resources and the like.

The couple arguing about the dirty underwear is really talking about *respect*. The wife felt deeply disrespected that she had to either live in or clean up her husband's mess. When she stopped criticizing and made a clear request explaining why this was so important to her (and avoided "rabbit trails") she got her husband's attention.

The World's Greatest Criticizer

I had the good pleasure of counseling a woman who simply had to be the *world's greatest criticizer*. I have to admit that I was in awe at her absolute hard core ability to criticize. I can remember sitting back and thinking, "Wow, this lady could win some kind of award - she is amazing!" Her husband was a pot smoker and there was nothing good she could say about him - from the way he chewed his food, to his driving, or the way he snored at night. She was also one of the hardest working people I have ever counseled. Her desire to change over shadowed any and all short comings she possessed. In time she became one of the world's greatest *requesters*. One Mother's Day (instead of criticizing) she composed a Wish List for her husband. It started with something like this - "Dear Husband, if you would like to have an immensely happy wife this Mother's Day you can do so by getting me one of the following..."

She listed about eight items each with a box to check next to the items she desired. Much to her surprise she received several things off the list (not just one!). She promptly rewarded her husband by telling him how happy she was and gave him a huge, heartfelt hug. (This was a major change from the "if only you had..." or "why couldn't you have..." she used to respond to him with). Her husband began to learn that he could make his wife happy. This took a long time because he had come to believe that there was *nothing* that he could say or do that would ever please her.

So what happened with this marriage?

In spite of the fact that she became an excellent *requester*, her husband would not give up his pot and she really struggled with staying married to him. She was lonely and the kids had an absent father. After much debate and prayer she decided to stay. She would love this man with his addiction. Years later she gave me a call. Her good *requesting* had got her husband to go to church with her. In time his heart was won over to Christ and he fell deeply in love with his Maker. There was no going back for either now. The *world's greatest criticizer* became the *world's most grateful wife*.

From Scriptures - Some nice alternatives to *Criticizing*

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:5-7

*In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my **requests** before you and wait in expectation. - Psalm 5:3*

Some people that made requests in the Bible...

*Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your **request** is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. **Matthew 15:28***

*Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my **request**. **Esther 7:3** (and with that Esther saved her entire nation!)"*

Jesus summed it up by saying...

*So I say to you: Ask and it **will** be given to you; seek and you **will** find; knock and the door **will** be opened to you. - Luke 11:9*

Do You Need Help?

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