

WHOSE FAULT IS IT - MINE OR YOURS?

The 'Hot Potato' of Blame in Your Marriage

FACTS AND FALLACIES OF INTIMACY: PART 2

By Dr. Kevin Downing

FALLACY

Everything that goes wrong in our marriage is ALL your fault (or – ALL my fault).

FACT

When things go wrong in our marriage there are times I am responsible for the problem and times you are. Frequently we both have some contribution to the problems that we face. We both share some responsibility in working together to solve most of the problems we face.

FAULT!

The word 'fault' belongs to the family of what we call 'black and white' language. 'Fault' is a cousin to 'you always' and 'you never'. Rarely are 'black and white' statements true - especially when we try to assign 'fault' or 'blame' in marriage. You often see it in children who keep egging each other on. They fan the flames of feuding with each other.

BIG BROTHER AND LITTLE SISTER

At one time our kids were having a hard time getting along. Our son who is four and a half years older than his little sister looked like the problem. (How dare our great big son pick on his sister that way!) Then one day my wife saw our then three year old daughter peg our son in the head with a heavy wooden play block – and she wasn't playing! It really hurt our son and there were plenty of tears (it was also the last day we owned wooden play blocks). The attack was unprovoked and we realized our little victim daughter wasn't so innocent! Our son was not at fault - as in 100% to blame for their fighting. It became painfully clear that our daughter shared in this problem. They were both 'responsible'.

HOW DO YOU CONTRIBUTE TO CONFLICT? LIKE YOUR SPOUSE – OR JUST THE OPPOSITE?

Symmetrical Fighters... fight the same way. He yells, so she yells. Or – she gets quiet, so he gets quiet. Couples can do the same with: sarcasms, criticism, one-upping, undermining...etc.

Complementary Fighters... fight the opposite way. So, the more she yells, the quieter he gets. (And the quieter he gets the more she yells!) Both types of fights can really escalate.

SO I'M RESPONSIBLE?!*

Far from the world of fault-finding, blaming and finger pointing is the world of personal responsibility. We often say when it comes to family problems – no one is at fault and everyone is responsible. Rarely is a family problem entirely your fault – quite often everyone shares some responsibility.

WHEN OTHERS DO WRONG – I'LL DO GOOD

In the thousands of couple I have worked with over the years I have found that marriages turn to the good when one of the spouses takes on the attitude of: I'm going to do the right thing even when my mate does the wrong thing. I accept that this isn't fair – but I'm going to do this anyway. This is what we call integrity. And of course things really turn around fast when both husband and wife take on this mindset. Consider some of the following...

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1

This sounds like complementary peacemaking! (i.e. responding in a different way that stops a fight.) Do you have an escalating marriage – one where you both raise your voices higher and higher and tempers flare hotter and hotter? Try not yelling. Get control of yourself and talk with “gentle answers”. You will ruin the fight!

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.** Colossians 3:13*

Here we have symmetrical peacemaking. (i.e. God’s good actions spur us on to do the same.) Years ago I was training my son to say “thank you” at the appropriate times. I would encourage him by saying – “say ‘thank you’ son”. He would and then I’d say “thank you for saying ‘thank you’”. As you might guess – he followed my lead and responded with “ thank you for saying ‘thank you’ for me saying ‘thank you’ “. I know we could have gone on and on with this – but I probably would have got lost in the counter ‘thank you’s! The point being – good begets good.

OWNING YOUR SHORTCOMINGS SUPERCHARGES INTIMACY!

Few things are more powerful in relationships than confession of one’s shortcomings. Whether the relationship is with your mate, your child, God, a co-worker or others – honesty is an indispensable tool! Confession has spearheaded revivals and turned seemingly hopeless marriages around throughout the years.

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13

‘Mercy’ is the opposite end of the continuum from blame and finger pointing.

At the root of most blame is shame. Whereas guilt says that we have made a mistake, shame says that we are a mistake. In an attempt to protect ourselves and avoid the negative feelings of shame – we often play hot potato with shame and throw it off on our mate by blaming them for the problems in our marriage. (We will talk more about shame in future articles on intimacy in marriage.)

Faulting and blaming in marriage can have a pendulum effect. It can look like this...

Bill was doing his best to discuss with wife Kelly the problem of her criticizing him.

Bill: “Kelly you look down today. Are you OK?”

Kelly: “I can never depend on you. If you don’t want to do something you just aren’t going to do it - so why should I even ask?”

Bill: “Kelly if you tell me what you want instead of criticizing me I will probably do a better job of hearing you and giving you the response you want. Please tell me what is on your mind”

Kelly: “Oh, so it’s my fault. Because I’m not asking you in the right way that’s why we are having these problems. OK – I get it. I’m just a total and complete screw up. OK – your life would be better off without me messing everything up”.

WOW! The pendulum really swung on this one.

Kelly accused Bill of being the problem. She MINDREADS or dictates his motive by declaring that he won’t do anything that she asks – to the point that it is vain to even try to make a request. But when

asked to take responsibility for her behavior she caves and says to just forget it all because she is to terrible.

This kind of hot potato - fault tossing is a common occurrence with both husbands and wives. Between the pendulum extremes of – “you are so terrible, it’s all your fault” and “I’m so horrible, go ahead and blame me for everything” is a truthful and wonderful place. It’s where we can honestly see our short-comings and have the courage to admit them. It’s where our vulnerability and transparencies create an environment of integrity and wholeness.

Let’s listen in on the Bill and Kelly’s conversation again – this time without the pendulum swings.

Bill: “Kelly you look down today. Are you OK?”

Kelly: “I am down. There is something that I want from you, but lately I don’t seem to be getting through to you. I’m wondering what I can do to get you to hear me.”

Bill: “Whoa. Sounds like we have a problem ...you know I have been busy and when I get this busy I can be a bit of a steam roller.”

Kelly: “You have been a steamroller!”

Bill: “OK – Well I’ll be all ears right now. You have my full attention. What’s up?”

Kelly: “We have been very short on our alone time together. It’s been months since we went out together with just you and me.”

Bill: “OK – so you want to go out? I can clear my schedule – we can go out tonight if you’d like.”

Kelly: “That’s what I want and I’d like for us to have time for the two of us on a regular basis.”

Bill: “Bring your calendar and I will bring mine too. You know if it’s not on my calendar it’s not going to happen.”

Kelly: “Thanks Bill – for listening.”

Bill: “No prob.”

That was much nicer the second time around for Bill and Kelly.

TAKE A-WAYS:

How is the blame factor in your marriage? Is someone being accused of 100% fault for some problem.

How do you contribute to the frustrations in your marriage? (You don’t walk on water – so if you come up with nothing – you have a real blind spot. Generally family members – including your kids - will be happy to tell you in great abundance your short comings.)

Make amends – admit to your flaws and watch the intimacy grow in your marriage!

Dr. Downing is available to see clients at the Fullerton office. Call 1-800-998-6329 today to schedule an appointment!