

# INVALIDATION IN MARRIAGE

To Close or Open Your Spouse's Spirit  
The Four Conflict Styles in Your Marriage – Part 3  
by Dr. Kevin Downing & Dr. Peter Robbins

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.

Dr. Downing and Dr. Robbins are available to see clients at the Fullerton office. Call 1-800-998-6329 today to schedule an appointment! We have over 40 locations in southern California. [www.turningpointcounseling.org](http://www.turningpointcounseling.org)