

Resolving Conflict

in Your
Marriage



By S. Brent Scharman

Retired counselor, LDS Family Services

Matt and Margaret (all names have been changed) turned off the television following the concluding session of general conference. The messages had been inspiring, and they had enjoyed the positive atmosphere that had permeated their home that weekend.

Nobody could have been more disappointed than Matt and Margaret were when, less than 24 hours later, they were having a heated argument over whether to save an unexpected bonus Matt had received at work or spend it on school clothes for the older kids. The debate was not resolved, and Matt and Margaret each moved on to other tasks feeling misunderstood.

To create a lasting, happy marriage, couples must learn how to resolve conflicts so that each individual feels understood and decisions are made that involve acceptable compromise.

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Spiritual Warning and Guidance

Scriptures and words of prophets and apostles provide ample cautions about contention. In 3 Nephi we read, “He that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention” (3 Nephi 11:29). Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that Satan “works to drive a wedge of disharmony between a father and a mother. He entices children to be disobedient to their parents. . . . Satan knows that the surest and most effective way to disrupt the Lord’s work is to diminish the effectiveness of the family and the sanctity of the home.”¹

Differences of opinion, habit, or background are inevitable, but we have ample resources to help us know how to cope. Doctrine and instruction taught in Sunday worship and Church publications can help and can be supplemented with quality professional information as needed. Couples can learn methods for dealing with conflict. Inspiration can lead to changing hearts that soften each spouse from the inside.

President Thomas S. Monson cautioned: “Some of our greatest opportunities to demonstrate our love will be within the walls of our own homes. Love should be the very heart of family life, and yet sometimes it is not. There can be too much impatience, too much arguing, too many fights, too many tears.”²

When troubles persist and become destructive to family life, there can be more serious causes of conflict, including immaturity, selfishness, desire to win power struggles, and pride. President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) taught: “I have long felt that the greatest factor in a happy marriage is an anxious concern for the comfort and well-being of one’s companion. In most cases selfishness is the leading factor that causes argument, separation, divorce, and broken hearts.”³

Elder Marvin J. Ashton (1915–94) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also commented: “When one considers the bad feeling and the unpleasantness caused by contention, it is well to ask, ‘Why do I participate?’ . . .

“ . . . It is important to recognize that we choose our behavior. At the root of this issue is the age-old problem of pride.”⁴

Whatever the cause, we need to learn new skills and soften our hearts when problems persist.

Causes of Conflict

There are many causes of conflict, ranging from superficial personal biases to deeper ingrained communication styles. In addition to overcoming selfishness and immaturity, couples will face other common causes of conflict, including factors such as the following:

Newlyweds learning to adjust to one another’s styles	Natural differences between men and women	Irritability prompted by exhaustion	Different opinions on how to best raise children or manage finances
Children learning to use agency	Different likes and dislikes	Overreactions to stress	Lack of understanding or skill in resolving conflict



Cautions about Anger

Many marital or family conflicts arise because of uncontrolled anger. If we're not careful, we can follow an angry incident with constant thinking about how we were wronged. The longer we ruminate, the more reasons we can generate to justify our perspective. This brooding can prevent us from calming down, and when a second wave of anger emerges before the first is resolved, hormonal reactions can lead to additional outbursts.

For example, in a counseling session, Marilyn described how frustrating it had been to lie in bed after she and her husband had yelled at each other. "I knew

I was in the right," she said. "I knew he was going to flip on the light and apologize, but he never did. The more I thought about it, the madder I got. When I heard him start to snore, I couldn't stand it—I jumped out of bed and yelled at him some more and then went downstairs. Can you believe that he still didn't apologize?" Marilyn's experience is a good example of how not to deal with angry feelings.

Habits, even short-term ones, can seem hard to break. But spouses can learn skills to help. Here are some useful practices:



Challenge thoughts quickly.

In our example, Marilyn could have said to herself, "It seems like I'm right, but I'm blowing it out of proportion. My relationship with my husband matters more to me than what we're arguing about."



Let it out in productive ways.

Yelling about your feelings won't help you "get it out of your system." The more you vent in an angry manner, the more intense your feelings will become.



Find a distraction.

Choose to think about something else or take a walk.



Listen to calming music
or read uplifting literature.



Start over.

Catch yourself in the beginning of a disagreement. Research has shown that the first three to five minutes of a conversation lays the foundation for what is likely to follow. Say, "This is going in a bad direction. Let's start over."



Allow your emotions to calm
before you try tackling a problem. Wait out the chemical reaction that may be taking place.



Write down your thoughts.
For some, this helps to increase self-awareness.

Steps to Resolving Conflict

Strengthening Marriage, an LDS Family Services manual, recommends three steps for resolving conflict: (1) expressing views, (2) exploring concerns, and (3) selecting mutually satisfying solutions.⁵ These steps are based on a communication and sharing model that is cooperative and addresses the issues of all concerned.

1. Expressing Views	2. Exploring Concerns	3. Selecting Mutually Satisfying Solutions
<p>Each individual shares views in an honest but non-attacking manner. Sometimes thoughtful reflection resolves the problem as it becomes clear the disagreement was merely a misunderstanding. For example, a wife who thinks her husband is selfishly insisting that she attend a high school basketball game with him instead of going out to dinner for a date might come to understand that he is less interested in basketball than in showing attention to a player who has stopped attending his Sunday School class.</p>	<p>Couples explore concerns at a deeper level. The focus is on understanding and accepting one another's concerns. Continuing the basketball example, the wife, while understanding her husband's concern for the student, might believe that he is developing a pattern of always putting the needs of others before those of the marriage. In this case, a more thoughtful discussion must be held in which each expresses feelings in a sensitive manner and opposition gives way to cooperation.</p>	<p>Couples brainstorm and decide on mutually satisfying solutions. The focus is on what each individual can do to address the concerns rather than on what their spouse can do. Such negotiation can test maturity and patience but, over time, lead to a belief that there is safety in expressing feelings and confidence that each person's desires will be addressed. Our couple may agree to spend one Friday night together at a basketball game, one Friday night in which the husband attends the game alone, and two Friday nights doing couple activities. It is not as important how the couple chooses to spend Friday night as it is that the quality of the decision-making process is satisfying to both.</p>



Results of Resolving Conflict

Wonderful blessings flow from resolving conflicts in an atmosphere of love. These include security; personal growth, which leads to inner peace; increased faith; enhanced character; and personal righteousness.

When conflicts are resolved, new patterns can take their place. The door then opens for spouses to express positive thoughts and demonstrate support. Sister Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President, said: “Words have surprising power, both to build up and to tear down. We can all probably remember negative words that brought us low and other words spoken with love that made our spirits soar. Choosing to say only that which is positive about—and to—others lifts and strengthens those around us and helps others follow in the Savior’s way.”⁶

Couples who have made long-term progress in resolving conflict reap desirable rewards. A husband of a previously troubled relationship said, “It’s hard for me to look back on how it used to be and believe that it was real. How could I have treated my wife the way I did? I’m grateful for the Spirit getting my attention and for the patience my wife has shown to me.”

Conclusion

Overcoming conflict takes conscious effort and follow-through. The very next thing you say or do can start more positive communication patterns in your marriage. You too can reap the fruits of the Spirit as experienced by the Nephites: “There was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.

“And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults . . . ; and surely there could not be a happier people” (4 Nephi 1:15–16). ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. M. Russell Ballard, “The Sacred Responsibilities of Parenthood” (Brigham Young University devotional, Aug. 19, 2003), 3, speeches.byu.edu.
2. Thomas S. Monson, “Love—the Essence of the Gospel,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 92.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Loyalty,” *Ensign*, May 2003, 59.
4. Marvin J. Ashton, “No Time for Contention,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 9.
5. See *Strengthening Marriage: Resource Guide for Couples* (2006), 19–20.
6. Jean B. Bingham, “I Will Bring the Light of the Gospel into My Home,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2016, 7.

Rules for Discussing Problems

Listed below are some ideas that increase the likelihood of successful conflict resolution:

- Seek spiritual help.
- Decide on a time and a place to talk if there is a serious history of problems.
- Seek to understand instead of argue.
- Let your spouse talk.
- Speak softly and be kind.
- Take a break as needed.
- Use appropriate language.
- Stay on topic. Discuss only the current concern.
- Never use violence.
- Do not threaten divorce or separation.
- Find measurable solutions, such as “I’ll initiate family prayer, and you conduct family home evening.”
- Plan on exceptions.
- Agree on neutral reminders, such as “We’ll let the calendar tell us whose turn it is to clean the dishes.”
- Reevaluate and revise solutions as needed.

