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Making Friends With Conflict

By Betsy Bergquist, Imago Therapist

I again begin with a quote from Gary Simmons' remarkable book, *The I of the Storm*.

"The idea of making friends with conflict seems so unnatural, given the world in which we live.

How do we override the tendency to push away
what looks and feels bad?

The answer lies in knowing our wholeness and worth."

Conflict is the opportunity to bring us closer to our partners and closer to ourselves. It is our fears, our false beliefs, judgments, and other limitations that keep us from our potential awakening to the possibilities that conflict can bring us. By focusing within ourselves when we feel threatened we become better acquainted with our fears that play out when we feel threatened.

All too typically, however, we react to perceived threats with a "fight or flight" response. By merely reacting to the other, we fall into blame, defense and criticism and only add fuel to the fire. In fact this seems to be the most common way couples interact when in conflict. They are blind to what is happening within them but hyperalert to the behavior of their partner.

The task of shifting from partner blaming to what I call "self focusing" can be really daunting. When the relationship has moved from the romantic stage to the power struggle - as it invariably does - it is much easier to see how our partners have changed than it is to see how we have changed.

For instance, when a client I'll call Robert was a young boy, he was frequently blamed when anything went wrong in the family. He was the oldest of five so when his siblings fought, the finger was pointed at him. In order to stay out of trouble and survive in his family, he closed down emotionally, physically, and mentally. When he was home he spent most of his time in his room or at a friend's house and made sure to keep his feelings under lock and key. He felt smothered and shamed by his parents.

In his adult relationship with his partner, he continued this behavior whenever his partner began to blame him for anything. He disappeared in order to stay safe and avoid those childhood feelings still under lock and key. His reactive behavior, of course, only added fuel to the fire.

On the other hand, when his partner, whom I'll call Sarah, was a young girl, she was the youngest of three and there was very little attention left for her. She felt invisible in her family. No one asked her questions or asked her what she needed or wanted or acknowledged her attempts to be heard. She felt alone and neglected.

So when those feelings of neglect and loneliness surfaced with Robert, her reactive behavior was to blame him for her feelings.

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What neither was able to see was that their behaviors constituted a re-enactment of their childhoods. To self-focus, instead of react - either by attacking or disappearing - was a huge stretch for both of them, because attacking and disappearing were in their childhoods their survival adaptations and defenses.

This is where the couple's dialogue comes in. Following the structure of dialogue for Robert and Sarah has meant giving up the outcome ("who's right, who's wrong") and instead each focusing on the process and structure of their communication, so that listening and understanding of each other can replace the blame, criticism, and win-lose dimensions of the conflict.

Dialogue is now becoming for them the safe place where the opportunity for growth presented by conflict can be seized!

Self-focusing means learning how to manage ourselves and our reactivity in spite of what may be going on around us. Managing ourselves instead of trying to manage what is going on externally means letting go of blame and judgment and becoming more conscious.

Through facing the challenge of giving up unworkable childhood survival patterns that no longer serves their real needs, Robert and Sarah are coming to see conflict through new eyes and with new understanding, and in Gary Simmons' words, "finding [their] wholeness and worth."

If any of this makes sense to you or you can identify with the story of Sarah and Robert in any way, then consider joining us in a weekend of learning new skills that will help you to deepen your understanding of you and your partner in a safe environment where you can focus on your partner, you, and your relationship.