



Wendy Trainor
communication and healing

Conflict in a relationship

Couples in long-term relationships have numerous issues to contend with: finances, time management, in-laws, work, household tasks, sex and children to name a few. All couples experience disagreements and conflicts. Research indicates that the inability to resolve conflict in a marriage is the best predictor of marital failure. Couples need to find ways to handle negative emotions such as anger, hostility, mistrust, fear and sadness without high levels of conflict or the loneliness caused by avoiding conflict altogether.

Four specific patterns of conflictual interactions that lead to marital problems have been identified:

1. **Escalation:** This occurs when one person expresses something to another and the other comes back with a counter complaint. Then the other responds with an attack and so on, each getting angrier and angrier with each exchange.
2. **Invalidation:** This is a pattern where one partner directly or indirectly puts down the thoughts, feelings or character of the other. These comments lower self esteem.
3. **Withdrawal and avoidance:** We notice these patterns in relationships where one member is unwilling to be engaged in important discussions. This may be noticed when one person prevents a conversation from happening in the first place or gets quiet or leaves the room during an argument.
4. **Negative interpretations:** This occurs when one partner consistently believes that the motives of one partner are more negative than they really are.

We all use these tactics at some time. The important thing is to catch ourselves early on in an argument and take steps to counteract these tendencies.

Our families are the preparation ground for handling conflict in intimate relationships. Unfortunately, few families pass on effective conflict resolution skills to their children. Marriage preparation courses, self help books and therapy sessions address these issues. It is important for couples to use these resources, not only for the sake of their relationships and their health but also so they can model more effective behaviors for their children.

This is the first article in a series on conflict in intimate relationships. We will look more closely at the four patterns identified above that lead to marital problems and develop strategies to prevent them. (These concepts are developed in: *Fighting for Your Marriage* by H. Markman, S. Stanley and S. Bloomberg.)

Wendy Trainor, MSW, RSW, RMFT, offers individual and relationship therapy and specializes in sex therapy. For more information or an appointment, contact Wendy at 416.204.0336 or wtrainor@sympatico.ca.

This article may be reprinted providing you credit Wendy Trainor, MSW, RSW, RMFT, and let her know where the article will appear.