

# Fighting for Your Marriage

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## Chapter 3: Changing Roles, Changing Rules Men and Women in Conflict

- I. **INTRODUCTION.** Men and women are different and these differences cause many problems in marriage. There are many issues surrounding the differences. There are a many studies that have put differences between men and women under the microscope. The authors chose to address some of the major differences, especially how marriage affects them and how they behave in marriage. They affirm that the differences really matter. They focus more on the fun kind of differences.

II. **WHAT'S TRUE AND WHAT'S FALSE?**

A. Here is a True or False Quiz?

1. \_\_\_ Men are more rational than women.
2. \_\_\_ Women are more likely to be depressed if they are married.
3. \_\_\_ Men tend to benefit from being married, whereas women are harmed by being married.
4. \_\_\_ Women tend to report less happiness in marriage than men.
5. \_\_\_ Most men hate talking with their wives and therefore avoid it if they can.
6. \_\_\_ In dual-earner marriages, men and women do an equal amount of housework.
7. \_\_\_ Women are more committed to their marriages than men are.
8. \_\_\_ Men, being more competitive, are more likely than women to have already looked at the correct answers below so that they can get a higher score on this quiz.
9. \_\_\_ Couples who live together to test their relationship before deciding to marry have lower rates of divorce if they marry.

The correct answers are (1) false, (2) false, (3) false, (4) false, (5) false, (6) false, (7) false, (8) true (did you?) and (9) false. We'll briefly tell you what the research says about each statement.

B. **What's All the Fuss About?**

1. There are real differences, on average, between men and women in marriage.
2. The differences between men and women in marriage have been highly inflated.
3. Men and women are really a lot more similar in what they want out of marriage.
4. Both want to be loved, close, and connected, and to have a deep friend for life.

C. **Research About Each Statement:**

1. **Men are more rational than women. (F)** This is a long - standing myth. Usually people who believe this think it has something to do with not being emotional, as though "rational" and "emotional" traits couldn't exist in the same person. There are plenty of studies that do show that women, on average, express more emotion in their conversations than men. However, some studies show that when men feel safe talking with their partners, they express similar levels of emotion. We said "express" because the jury is still out on whether or not women "feel" more emotion or if men really "feel" less. There are real differences, on average, between men and women in marriage. You've likely noticed that. But it's also true that the differences between men and women in marriage have been highly inflated. What we mean by that is that men and women are really a lot more similar in what they want out of marriage than they are different. Again, both want to be loved, close, and connected, and to have a deep friend for life in a mate.

2. **Women are more likely to be depressed if they are married. (F)** This is a myth based on one relatively flawed, poorly designed study many years ago. The truth is that both men and women are considerably less likely to be depressed if they are married, as compared to single women or divorced women. However, when there are marital difficulties, there is evidence that it raises the risk for depression for both women and men. In a recent study, we found that women are particularly vulnerable to increases in depressive symptoms when they are losing confidence in their marriage. So two things are true that can sound a bit inconsistent: marriage can be a powerful buffer against depression if it's healthy and going well, but marital difficulties put both women and men at risk. This is just another reason to work to make your marriage a safe haven for both of you.
3. **Men tend to benefit from being married, whereas women are harmed by being married. (F)** OK, this one was a bit tricky. You could say it is half true. Men do tend to benefit from being married, as compared to unmarried men (for example, married men live longer). However, it is a myth that women are generally harmed by marriage, whether in terms of physical or financial health. Linda Waite of the University of Chicago said "Both men and women live longer, healthier, and wealthier lives when married." Although analyzing the benefits of marriage can be complex, what we do know is that a happy, healthy marriage is good for both men and women. There is virtually nothing you can do that has more power to enhance your life than to build and protect a great and happy marriage. It's also one of the best things you can possibly do to enhance your children's well-being. There is virtually nothing you can do that has more power to enhance your life than to build and protect a great and happy marriage.
4. **Women tend to report less happiness in marriage than men. (F)** A few studies over the years have found this to be true. However, even in large samples, across a wide range of couples, the differences are just too small to measure. Further, women are just as likely as men to report that marriage enhances their overall well-being.
5. **Most men hate talking with their wives and therefore avoid it if they can. (F)** This one is also partially true in the sense that the biggest complaint that women have about their husbands is that "he doesn't talk to me," so many of our women readers may have marked this one as true. However, we find that men enjoy talking with their partners, and over 80 percent of married men say their wives are their best friend. What men do hate and try to avoid is fighting and talking about problems.
6. **In dual-earner marriages, men and women do an equal amount of housework. (F)** This sounds like a nice idea, but it just isn't so. Even though more women than ever before work outside the home, they still do the lion's share of the work at home. The good news is that sharing of housework is slowly increasing over time.
7. **Women are more committed to their marriages than men are. (F)** A number of studies have tested this over the years. One of the most important kinds of commitment is what we call dedication. Dedication to one's partner can be expressed in many ways. In two large studies, we have found almost no differences between the dedication levels of husbands and wives. Men can be as dedicated as women, but they may demonstrate their commitment differently. In each new study we conduct, we see evidence suggesting that the level of dedication men have and show in marriage may be particularly important for the happiness of women.
8. **Men, being more competitive, are more likely than women to have already looked at the correct answers below so that they can get a higher score on this quiz. (T)** Did you look? There really does seem to be a difference between men and women when it comes to competition of some kinds. Surely there are many women who love to compete and win, but men seem more often to be the ones who are driven toward the kind of success that comes from competing and winning. As noted by Carol Gilligan, author of *In a Different Voice*, women are more likely than men to put the goal of preserving relationships ahead of winning when in conflict with others. Such matters are complex and vary greatly from relationship to relationship.

9. **Couples who live together to test their relationship before deciding to marry have lower rates of divorce if they marry. (F)** Our research with Galena Rhoades clearly shows that couples who live together before making a commitment to marry have a significantly higher risk of divorce. In large part we believe this is due to couples' sliding into marriage, rather than deciding to get married.

III. **WHEN ONE WANTS TO TALK AND THE OTHER DOESN'T.** As we discussed in the chapter on danger signs, a couple in which one partner pursues and one withdraws is at high risk for marital distress and divorce. Furthermore, the research shows that it's a pattern closely associated with differences between men and women. Let's look deeper.

A. **What Do You Want?** When we did this for the last version of our book, it seemed to us that there were more books about what women want than about what men want. These days there seems to be equal and enormous interest in what both sexes want, as reflected by books, news stories, online advice, and even some research on what people want (and presumably can't get) in relationships. Ask yourself two questions that are far more important: What does my partner want? and What do I want? Our chapter on expectations is focused on helping the two of you figure out what you want and expect in your relationship, and what you are going to do about those wants and expectations. Here we are looking at what seems to be different about what men and women may want when they are talking about issues or are in conflict. Sometimes you can tell what people want by looking at what they complain about. Women often voice concerns about withdrawn, avoidant husbands who will not open up and talk. When their husbands act that way, women feel shut out and get pretty unhappy. Often they begin to feel that their husbands don't care about the relationship. This is the most common complaint we hear from women who come in for marital counseling. It's very important to women for their husbands to communicate openly and often. Women do appear to value and seek communication about how the relationship is going more than men do. In contrast, men frequently complain that their wives get upset too much of the time, griping about this or that and picking fights. Dare we use the N word (hint: rhymes with bag)? Usually men feel hassled and want peace — at any price. Often at a price way too steep for women. In one way or another, we hear men saying they want some way to stop having fights with their wives. In essence, it seems very important to them to have harmony and calm in their relationships with their wives. This is all well and good until you put a man and a woman together. (Tell the story of Mel and Sandy) - To sum up Sandy's and Mel's concerns bluntly, she wanted him to "open up," and he wanted her to "shut up." At face value, it sounds as though they had very different goals for their relationship, but it's not that simple. She was looking for a way to connect, to be intimate with Mel, and he cut her off. Are men afraid of, or not interested in, intimacy? We don't think so. Yet that is the most common interpretation of the difference between men and women in marriage.

B. **What Is "Intimate" to You?** Many people have concluded that men are less interested in intimacy and seek to avoid it. But maybe intimacy is in the eye of the beholder. There is little doubt that men and women naturally seek out different kinds of intimacy, but that's different from saying that men are not as interested in it. Whereas women tend to define intimacy more in terms of verbal communication, there is some evidence that men define intimacy more in terms of shared activities. This is a critical point to keep in mind. When a female asks her husband to spend some time talking about feelings, she may be showing her preference for intimacy; but so is a male who asks his wife to take a walk or make love.....Before we leave the topic of intimacy, here's some simple but powerful advice: you should spend more time figuring out what is intimate for your partner rather than assuming too much about what your partner likes and wants based on his or her gender. Further, the happiest couples have usually developed the capacity to connect on several dimensions of intimacy, including verbal communication, shared activity, and sensual partnership, to name a few.

IV. **CONFLICT, THE BIG DIFFERENCE.** If men and women both want intimacy and are only different in the ways they prefer to attain it, what accounts for the widespread perception that men are just not interested in protecting and nurturing intimacy? Let's look at the possible reasons why someone might withdraw from talking to his or her partner:

1. The withdrawer is not interested in intimacy.
2. The withdrawer simply does not want to change and therefore refuses to talk about the subject.
3. The withdrawer is pulling a power move; showing that the pursuer does not have control.
4. The withdrawer fears arguing with the pursuer & attempting to stop what looks like a fight coming.

We certainly don't believe that point one has any merit. As just discussed, we think men and women both desire intimacy, though they may well have different preferences for what form it will take. As for point two, surely there are times when a person does not want to change something and avoids talking to his or her partner about the topic. Worse, there are times in some relationships when one shuts the other out, deliberately, as a kind of power move. That's also called being passive-aggressive, and it's very destructive. So point three is valid, and when a partner acts this way, it powerfully undermines the relationship. Having discussed the possible validity of points one through three, we think those are, most often, negative interpretations of what the withdrawal means. In our interviews with couples, and especially with withdrawers, the reason we most often hear is number four. Withdrawers are not avoiding intimacy; they are avoiding conflict. This is one of the most important differences between men and women in intimate relationships. In the face of conflict, men are more likely to withdraw than women. It's not that men do not want to talk or are not capable of being intimate; it's that men do not want talking to lead to conflict.

A. **Who's Raising the Issues?** Although many researchers have done an admirable job of bringing more light to the pursuer-withdrawer pattern, one whose work stands out is Andrew Christensen at UCLA. In addition to his excellent research on the topic of acceptance in marriage, he and his colleagues have made a long-term study of what happens between two partners when one pursues and one withdraws. He calls it the demand-withdraw pattern. One of the fundamental points that Christensen makes is that this pattern is most often triggered when one partner wants some kind of change or wants to discuss some issue that the partner feels he or she needs to talk about. Whether it is the female or the male who desires the discussion, males are more likely to withdraw than females. However, Christensen and colleagues have found that the pattern was strongest when the woman was asking the man for changes. Further, there is strong reason to believe that women raise issues more often than men. A number of studies show this clearly. In part this is because women often feel more responsible for how relationships are going and are therefore going to feel that it's their job to bring things up — issues, problems, conflicts.

V. **NEGATIVE INTERPRETATIONS, ROUND TWO.** ... women are more likely to feel that it is their job to watch out for how the relationship is doing; this explains why some of them get so frustrated or angry with their husbands. From the woman's point of view, she's trying to take care of the relationship or deal with something that needs resolution, but the man will have nothing to do with this type of talk. In many ways, people can be the most vulnerable when they are really motivated in their relationship. They care. They are showing it. When you try to do something you think is good for the relationship and the other does not seem to appreciate it, it can leave you hanging out there and feeling alone. This could be why women lose their marriage when there are these negative patterns, and that in turn leads to greater risk for symptoms of depression.

**A. Marital Confidence and Symptoms of Depression.** Many studies over the years have linked symptoms of depression with how a marriage is going. It's clear that marriages affect depression and depression affects marriages. A colleague of ours, Steven Beach at the University of Georgia, suggests that one way marriage and depression are linked is by negativity and conflict. Poorly handled conflict (like our Communication Danger Signs) puts both women and men at higher risk for symptoms of depression. In a study by Sarah Whitton, coauthors Scott and Howard, and the research team at the University of Denver, we found a special relationship between confidence and depressive symptoms for women. We measured confidence in terms of how strongly the person feels that her relationship has a solid future and also how strongly she feels that the two partners can successfully handle the issues that come their way in life.....We found that the Communication Danger Signs led to women having lower confidence in the marriage, and that this lower level of confidence led to an increase in symptoms of depression. ....If you and your spouse repeatedly have conflicts that become hostile or don't go well, there is a chance that you may start to feel some hopelessness about your ability to resolve disagreements as a team and keep your marriage happy. These kinds of feelings, especially if they stick around for a while, can put you at risk for depression. So, as is true of most couples, when one withdrew, the other tended to up the ante and push harder. This can be motivated by frustration that something is not going to get resolved. On a deeper level, it can be motivated by panic - panic that the partner is detaching from the relationship. ....Look, and look hard, for evidence that tells you he does care. You think your partner gets some secret pleasure in hassling you? We really think that's unlikely. If you have concerns about something, work to raise them firmly but gently. The loudest voice can't get the attention of someone who doesn't want to listen.

**B. You Make Me Sick.** Janice Kiecolt-Glaser of the Ohio State University College of Medicine has been studying the physical reactions people have to conflict in marriage. In her own and others' work, poorly handled marital conflict has negative effects on the functioning of the cardiovascular, immune, and endocrine systems. This seems to be especially true for women, but it can cause these problems for either partner in a relationship. We believe that fear and anxiety about conflict leads many men to withdraw from their wives when conflicts arise. For women, it looks as though they are so motivated to keep their relationships strong that they're at risk for becoming sick when these goals seem to be blocked. For this and many other reasons, we have come to believe that it is important for women to keep pushing on important concerns in relationships. However, life is so much better when two people are pulling together rather than one having to push the other. Do you want to live long and prosper? Look for ways to show your partner that you are concerned about how your relationship is doing. Try not to pull away from discussions when your partner is concerned. Actively respond to your partner as a teammate, not an enemy. By doing so, you will be protecting both you and your marriage. If you tend to be the one who pursues talking about issues, recognize that your partner is your teammate. If he or she pulls away at such times, consider that your partner may simply want to avoid arguing with you, not that he or she doesn't love you. Both of you need to commit to talking without fighting about important issues under your control. You can learn to do it.

.....Let's recap. We believe that the pursuit-withdrawal pattern discussed in this chapter is a major contributor to the death of many marriages. We believe the following:

- The person more likely to withdraw in any talk is the one who feels more anxious about the topic or tone....
- The person who withdraws is very likely the one who feels less confident that something good for the couple is about to happen.
- Our avoidance and withdrawal in relationships is often similar to our behavior in other areas of life: most of us pull away from things that we're not sure we can handle well.
- In most marriages, pulling back has far more to do with conflict than with a lack of commitment or caring.
- Partners have to work together to stop this dance. You are not very likely to experience this pursuing and withdrawing dance when you are talking about something you both enjoy talking about.

...Bottom line? If you are both committed to staying close, being friends, and being a team in dealing with life, you have to be able to talk safely about the issues that come up and that are more difficult to talk about. You also have to be able to protect the great things that bond the two of you together. You need to protect your relationship from poorly handled conflict. At times, that means dealing with issues head-on, but with mutual respect and a sense of teamwork. At other times, protecting your relationship means keeping issues and conflicts from wrecking or intruding on the great times that bond the two of you together.

...A great deal of what's ahead in this book (especially Part Three) is designed to help the two of you protect your relationship from the sense that no time together is emotionally safe. Reading this chapter, you may have been thinking that even though men are more likely than women to withdraw in marriage, there are other areas in which men are less intimidated by conflict: sports, the military, and business. What do these situations have in common, and how do these settings tend to differ from marriage? **Rules! Rules that bring some degree of structure to the conflict.** We think that one powerful way to make talks safe is to have agreed - on rules for when and how you will talk about the more difficult matters in life. Our goal in this book is to teach you a set of rules that will help you handle emotional conflict and make it safe to find intimacy in your relationship. Protecting your relationship means keeping issues and conflicts from wrecking or intruding on the great times that bond the two of you together.

### C. Talking Points:

1. Talk about issues only when you mutually decide it is a good time and you are both ready. Doing so will help you avoid the pursuit-withdrawal dance.
2. You need to talk about issues in a safe way that feels good to both of you. Safety is the best antidote to withdrawal. If you already have a good way to communicate safely, be sure to use that. If you don't, you'll soon be learning the Speaker Listener Technique (Chapter Five), and when it's working well for you, you can use it at these times.
3. Look for the best in your mate, not the worst. Give him or her benefit of the doubt: your partner may have good intentions behind those negative behaviors.

VI. **EXERCISES.** The exercises we suggest here call for reflection. We want you to think about the questions here and plan some time to talk together about your own perceptions of how these patterns work for you. Most of the exercises in this book will have you focus together on your relationship. Here it's more up to each of you to consider how the pattern works within you.

**A. Thinking About What You Do.** You were asked in the preceding chapter to consider who withdraws more and who pursues more. Here we ask you to reflect on why you do what you do, whichever role you identify with more. If you avoid or withdraw, why do you do that? Is it about power or about being afraid of change or about being afraid of conflict? How does physiology or upbringing fit in with your pattern? If you tend to pursue, Why? What are you seeking when you pursue? Are you looking for more intimacy or for proof of commitment?

**B. Talking About Your Thinking.** After reflecting on your own understanding of what you do in your relationship, plan some time together to discuss your perceptions. You should focus on this being a calm, open talk. Share with each other your own perceptions of why you do what you do, not why you think your partner does what he or she does. This is a time to share and feel closer — a start to understanding how to communicate more effectively.

VII. **CONCLUSION** (recap the highlights of this chapter)