



THE INSTITUTE FOR HEALTHY FAMILIES OF NORTH TEXAS

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IHF Newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 9

September 15, 2011

Couples in Conflict: Two Sides to Every Story

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I am reminded with every couple's session that there are two sides presented by each spouse and there are two ways to handle conflict or emotional needs. The scenario goes like this....

She: "Well, what is it with you? You are*add here whatever is happening....grouchy and impatient with the kids. Won't help out around the house with the chores or pick up the kids from school.*" (I tried to tell him that he needs to be more helpful...that I can't do it all.)

He: "I am having a rough time at work. I was accused of ...*add here whatever is happening....being a racist, sexual harassment, lying to my supervisor, haranguing my team members, or changing the financial books.*" (I tried to explain how defeated I felt to my spouse and she just shrugged her shoulders and walked away.)

She: "Do you think it is easy for me to be a Mom for three kids....and work outside the home, then come home to clean house and do laundry? C'mon!"

He: "I am the main breadwinner and I work 50 hours a week. I am come home very tired, and need to be cut a little slack once in a while. I am fed up listening to you gripe and complain about being a Mom and taking care of the house. That is your job anyway."

She: "So, now you are saying that everything is all my fault! Well, have I got news for you, big boy. I will get an apartment of my own and we will split our time with the kids. With child support and my job, I will be able to get by and not have to listen to you complain about your job and having to help out at home."

He: "Fine! Do what you want. But, if you leave, that is final. Don't come crawling back to me begging for another chance, because if you walk out of here, we are done, done, done. Do you hear me?"

******Whoa, whoa, whoa!****** What is happening here? This is a classic case of non-communication! Oh, they are *talking* and listening to each other, but they can't *hear* each other because of the contempt. He says....she says....and it goes down-hill from there. Try listening with your heart and reflect the content of what is being said. Let's try again.

She: "Honey, I need a hand with the kids. Would you see to it that they get in the tub and their jammies for me?"

He: "Sure, but please let me close my eyes for just 15 minutes. I have had a really rough day at work and I need a little down time. But, I will help you with the kids in 15 minutes. See, I am setting the alarm on my iphone."

She: "OK. After we get the kids in bed, tell me what happened at work."

He: (*After the kids are in bed*). "I almost got fired at work today. There were so many misunderstandings, but I had to go to HR to hear the charges against me. It seems that my team workers think I am too hard on them and they are accusing me of being unfair and demanding. One of the workers even accused me of being a racist. That really got to me—I have always considered myself to be fair to all my team members."

She: “That is terrible! I am so sorry to see you treated that way. You have worked for (XXX Company) for 10 years. Surely they know that you are doing your best to lead your team and that you are not a racist. What did your boss say or do?”

He: “He said it was an HR decision. He would not give me any advice at all, so I felt let down.”

She: “Do you still have a job? What are you going to do?”

He: “Thankfully, I was offered another job in another division. Yes, I have a job. That would have just crushed me if I had to come home and tell you that I was out of work.”

She: “So, HR really did not believe the lies told about you. I am proud of you for standing up to this!”

He: “Thanks, Honey. I feel better telling you about this. I am so ashamed that this problem at work almost brought us to the brink of financial ruin to be without a job. I don’t know what I would do without my family.”

She: “I know that you have other things on your mind, but we do need to talk about my work load, the housework and caring for the kids sometime. But, I can save that subject for another time.”

He: “I promise to find some time to help you with the kids and housework. I know that you are doing “double-duty” as a Mom and working at another job. I have even thought of asking Grandma to take the kids for a weekend so that we can get away just for ourselves.”

She: “Oh, I would really like that. Thanks for bringing it up.”

What did you notice in the above scenario as compared to the previous one?

1. Reflective and active listening
2. Respectful language toward one another
3. Absence of idle threats or accusations
4. Understanding of each other’s problems
5. Being there emotionally for each other
6. Giving each other space and “down time.”
7. Promising to spend quality time with each other
8. Thoughtful behavior

What changes can you make starting today to be there emotionally for your spouse?

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