

The Good News



Avoid the Trap

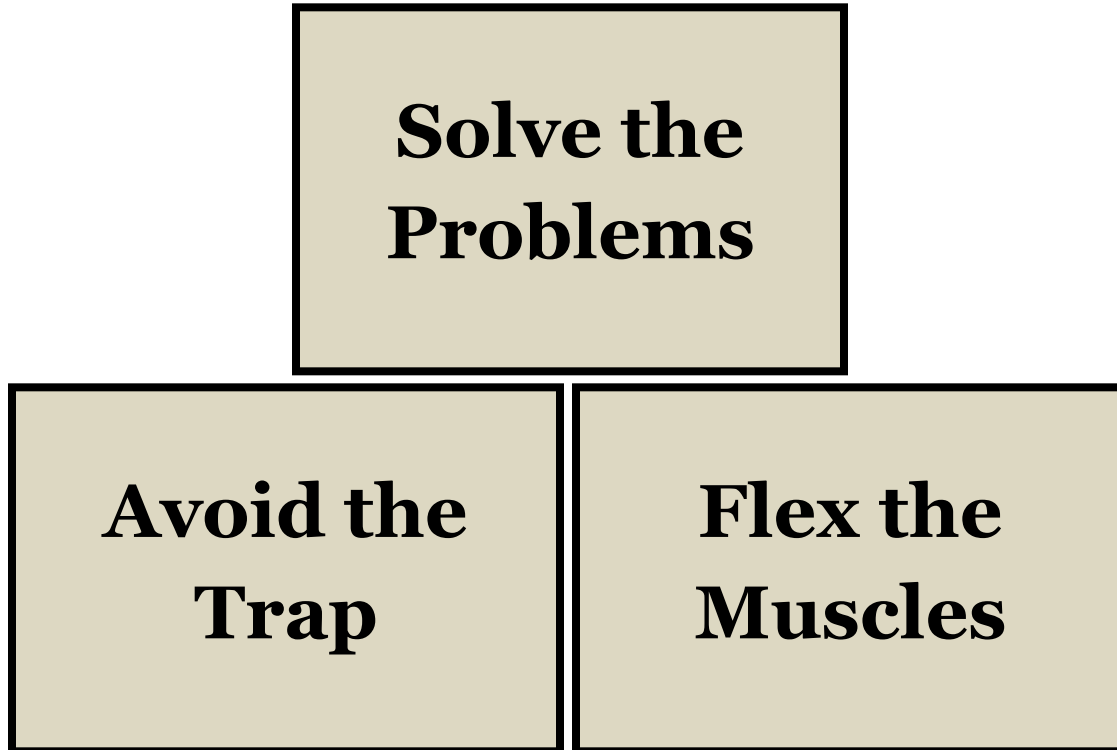
Flex the Muscles

Solve the Problems

The Positive Effects

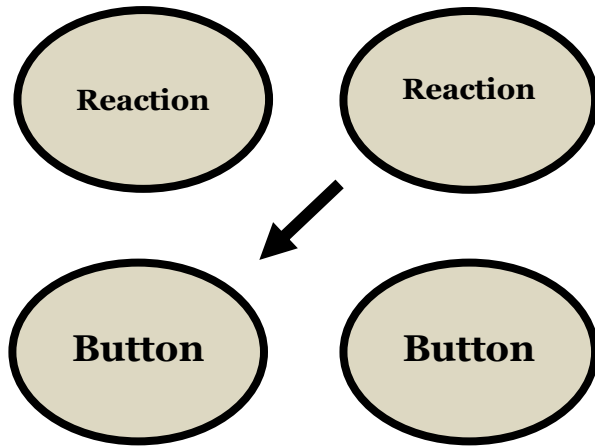
Read the sections below and then answer the questions that follow.

Good Conflict



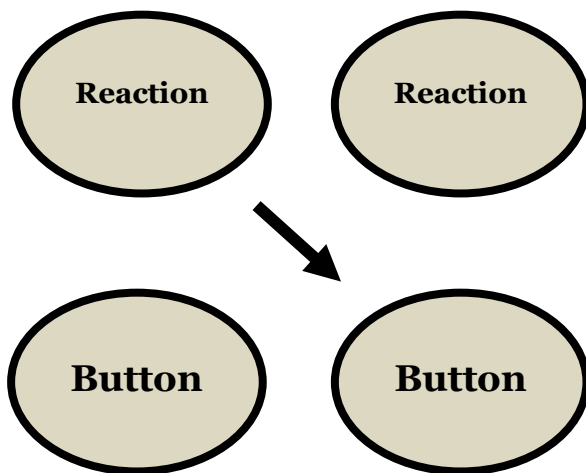
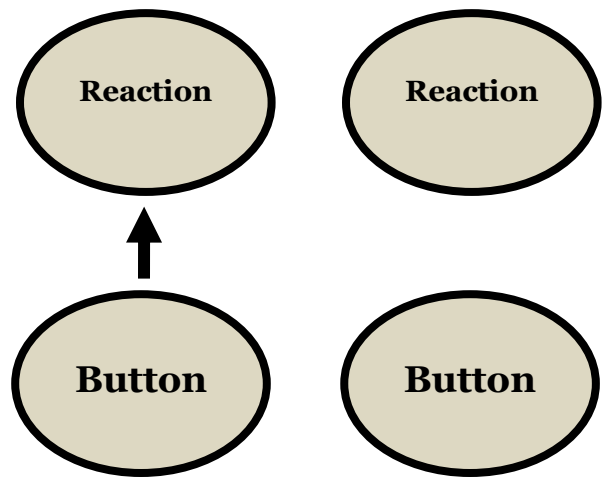
Bad conflict (described in Part 1) is easy. All you have to do is to follow your natural inclinations. Good conflict is harder, not because it's so complicated, but because it doesn't come naturally to us. "Working it out" means solving the problems that occur in close relationships (the top block). But to solve those problems we must avoid the natural tendencies to slip back into the conflict trap and use "muscles" which enable us to be reasonable (the bottom two blocks). Let's examine all three components.

Avoid the Trap



Guard Your Buttons
We all have places of emotional sensitivity. They may be related to past hurts, personal preferences, or personality characteristics. Guarding your buttons requires that you first know where they are. The better you know your buttons, the less likely they are to get pushed.

Respond Instead of React
Once you react to a button push, you're caught in the trap. It's important to replace your impulsive reactions with pre-planned chosen responses. The better alternative to attacking or withdrawing is talking.



Don't Push Buttons
We're all prone to engage in strike-back activities. But the attack then elicits a counter-attack and the cycle continues. It's unnatural to do so, but restraining your button-pushing impulses will help you stay out of the trap.

Questions for Couple Reflection

(If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Do you remember a time in which you purposely guarded a button? Which button was it? How did you do that?
- Describe a time in which you replaced an instinctive reaction with a pre-planned, chosen response.
- Take turns describing a time in which you kept yourself from pushing the other's button. You wanted to but didn't.

Questions for Group Discussion

(If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- Sometimes, you're told to "keep your guard up." In what ways can that be a good thing or a bad thing? Explain.
- Replacing reactions with responses is easier said than done. What makes it so hard?
- Why do you think we're so inclined to strike back when we're struck?

Questions for Individual Reflection

(If you're doing this study by yourself)

- Describe a time in which you guarded one of your buttons with your spouse. What happened?
- If you could change your most typical ways of reacting into healthier responses, what would you do?
- Imagine yourself the next time you're prone to push your spouse's buttons but you decide not to. How will you do that?

Flex the Muscles

(Handling Personal Wrongness)

Muscle	When Strong	When Atrophied
Humility	I could be wrong, you could be right, let's talk	I'm right, you're wrong, end of discussion
Awareness	I see where I'm wrong	I only see where I'm right
Responsibility	It bothers me when I'm wrong	If I'm wrong, so what?
Empathy	It bothers me when I hurt you	I'm only bothered when you hurt me
Reliability	When I'm wrong, I'll change	I'll not change because I'm not wrong

It's been said that we're all cut from the crooked timber of humanity. In other words, there's something wrong with all of us. We have our warts, foibles, and imperfections. Nowhere do these flaws display themselves more vividly than in close personal relationships like marriage. The above "reason muscles" are the qualities needed to handle personal wrongness well. They enable us to be reasonable or reason-able. Muscles get stronger when we use them but atrophy from disuse.

Questions for Couple Reflection

(If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Which of the muscles described above would you personally like to strengthen the most? Why?
- Which of the muscles described above would you like your partner to strengthen the most? Why?
- Was it less comfortable for you to answer the second question above? Why?

Questions for Group Discussion

(If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- What's it like to be around someone with atrophied reason muscles?
- How do you suppose people go about making these muscles stronger?
- Describe an argument between spouses who had atrophied reason muscles?

Questions for Individual Reflection

(If you're doing this study by yourself)

- If you could single out one of the reason muscles you'd like to make stronger, which one would that be?
- Answer the question above about your spouse.
- List some things you could do to strengthen the muscle you selected.

Solve the Problems (Five Questions to Answer)

Question	Solution Options	Muscle
What are we solving?	Our Way “Win-win”	Awareness
How do <u>you</u> see it?	Partly Both “Compromise”	Empathy
How do we solve it?	Your Way “Deferring”	Humility
How will it look?	Wait “Sleep on it”	Reliability
What if it fails?	No Way “Agree to disagree agreeably”	Responsibility

If you’ve ever solved a conflict problem, you followed a structure. You probably didn’t realize it at the time but you did. In the left-hand column above, there are five questions to answer in the solving of a conflict problem. The right-hand column contains the corresponding reason muscles needed to answer each of those questions. And the middle column is related to the third question. That is, there are five solutions for answering the question, “How do we solve it?”

Questions for Couple Reflection

(If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Do we argue about one thing at a time or do we argue about multiple topics simultaneously? Why is that?
- Take turns responding to the following true or false statement: I typically feel heard by you. Explain.
- Which of the solution options seems most typical for us? Explain.

Questions for Group Discussion

(If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- Does answering the five problem-solving questions seem complicated? Why or why not? (Hint: Yes and No are both correct)
- Take a few minutes to explain how the different reason muscles relate to the problem-solving questions.
- Give an example of an “agreeing to disagree agreeably” solution.

Questions for Individual Reflection

(If you're doing this study by yourself)

- It takes work to answer all five of the problem-solving questions. Where do you and your spouse most often get stuck?
- Have you ever said or thought, “If (wife or husband) ain't happy, no one's happy”? As a result, did you give in to “keep the peace”? How did you feel about that?
- The next time you have something to work out with your spouse, try answering the five questions to get to a solution. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about that? Why?

Positive Effects of Good Conflict

Solved Problems

Problems can be solved and laid to rest. The circular process of bad conflict is replaced with a linear process in which problem solving conversations produce solutions. Solved problems are forgotten problems.

Restored Warmth

With bad conflict, warm feelings become neutral or cold. With good conflict, a shift takes place in which cold feelings can warm back up.

Closeness

Bad conflict results in the “porcupine dance.” Since good conflict enables problems to be solved, the porcupines can relax their quills and experience the closeness relationships are supposed to provide. “Problem solving also demonstrated a sizable association with relationship satisfaction” (Woodin, p. 332) “Partners who can handle conflict more constructively . . . create an environment which allows for higher levels of self disclosure and acceptance of vulnerabilities, which are central aspects of intimacy.” (Bertoni, p. 182)

Better Self

With closeness comes friction. Bad conflict is like the friction produced when a grain of sand gets in your eye. Such friction may result in blindness. Good conflict is like the friction produced by sand paper which makes something ugly into a thing of beauty. Bad conflict turns you into a worse version of yourself while good conflict makes for a better self. “The ability to engage in constructive problem solving . . . contributes to feeling satisfied with the relationship, which in turn contributes to feeling satisfied with themselves.” (Kim, p. 604). And conflict affects physical health.

In people, impaired memory, coronary heart disease, increased susceptibility to infection, and autoimmune disorders are all exacerbated by emotional stress. What all the studies point to is the fact that it is not the conflict, but how you respond to the conflict that predicts the health outcome. (Hall)

Questions for Couple Reflection

(If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Have you ever argued about something, resolved it, and then forgot what you argued about? Describe that.
- In contrast to how bad unresolved conflict feels, what's it like to solve something and lay it to rest?
- Take turns describing a way in which the marriage has turned you into a better version of yourself. What part did conflict play in that improvement?

Questions for Group Discussion

(If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- People use the phrase “elephants in the room” to illustrate conflicts that go unresolved. Explain how conflict resolution kills the elephants.
- Explain the relationship of intimacy and conflict resolution.
- Give an example of good friction—that is, how handling differences well knocked off rough edges and turned someone into a better version of himself/herself.

Questions for Individual Reflection

(If you're doing this study by yourself)

- Think of a time when you resolved a conflict with your spouse. How did you do that and did it feel after you did?
- Explain how and why resolving conflict helps us “porcupines” relax our quills.
- How would you explain the relationship of solving conflict problems and personal growth?