

≡ TIM & JOY DOWNS ≡

FIGHT FAIR!

WINNING AT CONFLICT
WITHOUT LOSING
AT LOVE



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Attitude Is EVERYTHING



"I don't care. I still say it's just your opinion."

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

SEVEN obstacles to resolving a conflict

1 ANGER

Many people don't want to give up their feelings of anger in order to forgive.

2 FEAR

Some people refuse to think about an incident that caused them great pain, much less focus on forgiving those who caused it.

3 PRIDE

Some people are too proud to admit that they have been hurt, since to them admitting hurt is admitting weakness or vulnerability.

4 BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING

Some people firmly believe that it is foolish to believe that a person can change. They believe that once someone has hurt you, you can't trust that person.

Many contests are won or lost before they even begin; it all has to do with the mind-set you bring to the game. Conflict is no different. It would be misleading for us to claim that success in conflict resolution all comes down to following a set of rules or being a good referee. The truth is, no set of rules will help you if you lack these six essential attitudes.

WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE

The most important element in a game-winning attitude is a willingness to play the game at all. Don't take this attitude for granted; more is involved here than meets the eye.

Some people firmly believe that it is foolish to believe that a person can change. They believe that once someone has hurt you, you can't trust that person.

To "engage" means more than simply showing up. The word itself means "to involve oneself or become occupied; to become meshed or interlocked." It means to be willing to expend the energy necessary to wrestle through all the complexity and confusion of a conflict. It's what psychologist Tom Barrett calls "getting in the mud puddle" with your mate.

Are you willing to do what it takes to really resolve this issue, or do you just want to make it go away as quickly as possible?

Just showing up is better than nothing at all, but your mate can tell the difference between a begrudging, obligatory appearance and a wholehearted effort to listen and understand.

The Word

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

PSALM 19:14 NLT

HUMILITY

We often approach a conflict with the firm conviction that “I am absolutely right and my mate is completely wrong.” The discussion that follows has a nasty habit of shattering that illusion.

An essential attitude in conflict resolution is the willingness to admit that you—yes, you, paragon of virtue that you are—just might be wrong, not just in this case but at any given moment. Conflicts become stubbornly entrenched when both spouses insist on attributing all the fault to their partner. Marital experience will teach you that perspectives can be remarkably different, and the sooner we become willing to admit that we probably played *some* role in the current disagreement, the sooner we’ll be able to work toward resolution.

INSIGHT

**Lord, when we are wrong,
make us willing to change,
and when we are right, make
us easy to live with.**

—Peter Marshall

WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

If *humility* is the willingness to admit that you might be wrong, *responsibility* is the willingness to face the consequences of your actions. In marriage we are constantly being reminded of what we shouldn’t have said, shouldn’t have done, or shouldn’t have forgotten. When the flaming finger of fault points to you, you have one of two choices: You can shift the blame to someone or something else, or you can take responsibility yourself.

The willingness to take responsibility is the dividing line between childhood and maturity. “We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood,” writes Sydney J. Harris, “until we have stopped saying ‘It got lost,’ and say, ‘I lost it.’”

WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE

With age comes a phenomenon known as “hardening of the attitudes.” We speak of people becoming “set in their ways,” as though, like curing concrete, they have thickened and toughened and ceased

5

UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS

In order to forgive, we must understand that we all make mistakes, we all fall short of our potential, and we all have a dark side.

6

SITTING IN JUDGMENT

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to forgiveness is our tendency to judge others harshly.

7

LACK OF EMPATHY

In order for some of us to gain empathy for wrongdoers, we need to admit to ourselves that we have been guilty of committing the same or a similar offense.

—Adapted from *The Power of Apology* by Beverly Engel,
88–101

INSIGHT

**It is human to err,
but it is devilish to
remain willfully
in error.**

—Saint Augustine

FOUR tests of true humility

1

A nondefensive spirit when confronted

2

A willingness to be accountable

3

An attitude of “Nothing to prove, nothing to lose”

4

An authentic desire to help others

—Adapted from *Improving Your Serve* by Charles Swindoll, 25

INSIGHT

Often we change jobs, friends, and spouses instead of ourselves.

—Akbarali H. Jetha

INSIGHT

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.

—Victor Borge

TIP

ASK YOUR MATE, “WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO CHANGE?”

to adapt. But change is a part of life, and a willingness to change is a vital attitude in marriage.

Francis Bacon once wrote, “He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils.” Those “new evils” might include recurring arguments, growing bitterness,

and a mate who suspects you of arrogance and inflexibility. There are bountiful dividends from assuming an attitude that says to your mate, “I’m willing to change anything that will give us a better life together.”

SENSE OF HUMOR

Whoever said, “There is a fine line between tragedy and comedy” must have been married. It’s a wise person who is able to spot the humor in all the strangeness and confusion of relationships.

A sense of humor has to be seasoned with humility. That means the starting point of all humor is the ability to laugh at yourself, not your mate. Anyone can laugh at someone else’s foibles; that may be nothing more than arrogance or indifference. Humility is contagious, and the way to cultivate a sense of humor in your home is by demonstrating the ability to laugh at your own weirdness, pomposity, and eccentricity.

A THICK SKIN

In a crowd, it’s impossible to avoid getting our toes stepped on—and nothing is as crowded as a busy family. It’s inevitable that we’ll get our feelings hurt from time to time, and that’s why there’s no more valuable asset than a thick skin.

A “thick skin” is simply the ability to let things go. In marriage we all need the wisdom to know the difference between a serious offense and a minor faux pas. Treating every slight or snub as a conflict requiring discussion and resolution would be

INSIGHT

All the water in all the oceans cannot sink a ship unless it gets inside.

—Eugene Peterson

**INSIGHT — We all know a fool when we see one—
but not when we are one.** —Arnold H. Glasgow

exhausting. Some things we simply have to overlook—and we have to be able to overlook them without bitterness or resentment.

Conflict is often a game played without rules. More important, conflict is often a game played with a losing attitude. These are the attitudes that are crucial to winning at conflict. If you have them, you'll find that the rules seem less necessary; without them, no number of rules will take their place. For more help with discovering a winning attitude, see Appendix B: Attitude Is Everything.



INSIGHT

A marriage without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs —jolted by every bump in the road.

—Henry Ward Beecher

TIP— BE WILLING TO CONSIDER THAT A MINOR OFFENSE IN YOUR EYES MAY BE A BIGGER OFFENSE IN YOUR MATE'S.

INSIGHT

A good laugh is as good as a prayer sometimes.

—L. M. Montgomery

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