

DIFFERENCES

By Christine Kniffen, LCSW

“You’re always late”, “You take everything too seriously” and “You’re never satisfied”. Many individuals within a couple find that they are *very different* from their partners in their approaches to life and their interactions with others. One partner likes to make friends more quickly, while the other likes to move slowly and see if a person can be trusted. One partner enjoys planning things fully, while the other prefers to fly by the seat of his or her pants. One partner feels it is rude to be late, while the other refuses to be a “slave” to time. As a result of these types of personal differences, many couples find that they have *repeatedly* argued over the same few issues, *often* for many years, with no real resolve. The greater the dichotomy between partners on certain issues the greater the chance of this happening. Major differences stem from each partner having *separate* personal values. These values are shaped by one’s life experiences and one’s upbringing. Therefore, a person may feel that their very values are being challenged on certain issues, which in turn causes them to cling harder to their way versus compromise. Each partner is fighting to be right. This “right fighting” as it has been termed will drive a relationship to its end if it is not resolved.

The first step in stopping this pattern is to begin to *understand* that many of the things couples argue over repeatedly are merely the result of *differences* between the partners. No one is necessarily right or necessarily wrong. Therefore, you must stop insisting that your partner understand and agree with your views. This may never happen. This is not the goal. Instead, the goal is to find compromise on specific issues that are unresolved. Many times there is a middle ground and each partner needs to identify something he or she can do to get there. This is the goal of conflict resolution. In the middle, each partner feels some sense of validation and equity in having gotten there.

The second step in stopping this pattern is to begin to think about what years of this type of fighting has done or can do to the relationship. This type of fighting often leaves deep wounds in the partners that will need much time to heal. Our values define who we are as a person. Therefore, if we insist on viewing mere differences as right or wrong we are in essence telling our partner that we do not accept them as they are. We are indirectly telling them that something is wrong with them. However, this is the opposite of love. This is the opposite of what anyone wants from his or her relationship.

If this is happening in your relationship right now, then take the time to do something about it. Work with your partner to identify the major issues that you seem unable to resolve. Is there a middle ground where both of you can move to? Not *all* issues will have a middle ground. Issues involving safety, excessive unhealthy behavior, illegal activity, etc. might fall into this group. However, if there is a middle ground then identify specifics that each partner can do to get there. Work towards achieving a compromise. You are not in this alone and it takes two to do the work. Any problem in the relationship

requires the time and attention of both partners. Meeting in the middle is essential for any relationship to survive.

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