

Defusing the Power Struggle

By Kenneth A. Sprang

Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness.

--James Thurber

In Imago Relationship Therapy, which we use regularly in our coaching and counseling practice, we teach couples a lot about the “power struggle.” The power struggle is the cause of the conflicts that often arise early in a relationship or marriage, in which characteristics or attributes which first attracted us to our partner oftentimes became the source of conflict. It is out of this uncomfortable place that we can begin to stretch, grow and truly enrich our relationships.

A recent letter to a relationship coaches’ forum in which I participate illustrates this struggle. The writer and her husband have been married for several months. He’s a mathematician. She never felt very confident with math, so she deferred to him in handling the family finances. Imagine her shock when she tried to use her credit card and learned that the bank would not accept it because it was over its limit. She further explained that her husband sits down with the checkbook once a month and “he gets so angry, he fuses and fumes and sometimes worse because he can’t get it to balance.” Sometimes he even yells at her. He rejects her offers to handle finances, because he thinks that as a mathematician he should do it and “he thinks I would bankrupt us with my first attempt,” she wrote.

Two things were evident from the woman’s letter. First, doing the family finances causes her husband unreasonable frustration. Second, there are some serious questions about mutual respect and trust in the relationship that need to be addressed. The following is my edited response, which I think illustrates the problem of the “power struggle”:

When faced with a conflict like this, a couple should first seek practical answers to the issue. For example, mathematics is different from arithmetic. It involves different thought processes. One could be a brilliant mathematician and have trouble balancing his checkbook (think of Einstein). So paying the bills may not be using your husband’s strengths in the way he thinks. You might therefore consider on line banking or software that would simplify the home accounting tasks.

Even if the problem can be simply solved, however, couples have to further scratch the surface and examine the source of the problem. First, sit down together at a time when finances (or whatever the problem happens to be) are not at issue. Turn off the phone and television and make the time between you uninterrupted. Tell your partner that you are concerned for him because you observe your partner’s anger and frustration.

A second conversation or series of them should deal with how you feel about not being trusted or his comment that you would “bankrupt” your marriage on the first attempt. We usually lash out at those we love out of our own insecurities and frustrations. Whatever the reason, the finances are the effect of an underlying question of how you each honor and respect one another and affirm one another, rather than getting into a “power struggle.”

It is important for you to share with your husband how you feel when he disparages you in this way. He may not realize that he is hurting you. Then think together of different ways of expressing differences to one another that do not involve shaming or negating one another. Using “I” messages and talking about feelings is one technique.

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Perhaps the most important thing for this writer, and for all of us to remember, is that her husband's frustration, venting, and concern about letting go of finances is about him, not about her. When one partner has a "charge" about something, the charge comes from his/or her past, not from the acts or omissions of a spouse or partner. Often the charged or heated response is indicative of a coping mechanism learned in childhood.

Our challenge in relationship is to keep talking about these issues so that the one experiencing the emotional heat about them can discover the real source of the matter. The answer lies in helping our partner soothe his anxiety and fears, not in something we do or don't do, know or don't know. We need to create a safe space in which both partners can speak candidly. As a committed partner, we can over time, help our partner deal with his frustration in a way no one else can.

Readers: Please write with your questions about marriage, family and relationships. I'll try to address them in this column.

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