



THE INSTITUTE FOR HEALTHY FAMILIES OF NORTH TEXAS

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IHF Newsletter, Vol. 5, No. 9

September 15, 2013

Learning to "Fight Fair!"

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In our day-to-day living with spouses or another family member, sometimes we can get caught up in the silliest arguments that cause hurt feelings and anger. Here is an example of a typical conflict between spouses.

Stanley admitted that noisy birds bothered his work flow when he needed to work at home and make conference calls. His wife, Patsy, loves animals and they are a big part of her life. Without Stanley's knowledge, Patsy moved the birds to his office so that they would be away from the phone when he made conference calls. However, moving the birds to the office also posed a problem because that is where his work computer was located. What happened after that deteriorated into words that should not have been spoken to each other and resulted in hurt feelings and a huge fight.

Analyzing their Issues:

1. Did Stanley feel justified in his anger or was he feeling "second best" to the birds and animals? Is he clinging to a cultural belief that animals belong outside?
2. Did Patsy allow her feelings for animals to take precedence over her feelings for her husband, or was this only in Stanley's head?
3. Did Stanley expect a decision to be made together about how to handle the birds, or does he normally allow Patsy to take action on her own?
4. Should Patsy have acted as the "Lone Ranger" in deciding how to manage and move the birds without input from Stanley?

Communication Solutions: Here are some ideas to analyze what happened and to learn from that experience to guide the couple through a process of solving the current and future conflicts:

1. When faced with a confrontation or disagreement, agree to "back off" for at least an hour to calm your emotions. That does not mean that you "forget about it." You cannot afford to keep "stuffing" or ignoring issues that bother you.
2. When you arrange for a date, time and place to discuss the issue or conflict, make sure that your emotions are under control.
3. Use "I messages" when stating your side of the issue. "You" messages convey that your partner's ideas are wrong or are not worthy enough to be considered. Ask yourself, "Is what I am about to say to my partner or family member going to sound disrespectful or unloving?"
4. Do not criticize your partner or family member for his or her point of view. Comments like "That is stupid" or "unreasonable" or "crazy talk" will only make your partner madder and defensive. If you slip and say something mean, you can always say, "That came across as disrespectful and unloving. I am sorry that I said that. What I meant to say was....."
5. Listen to what your partner has to say about the issue without interruption. If your partner speaks with fire and anger, listen quietly to the "venting" and then say, "I can see that we are still not ready to discuss this to come up with a reasonable solution." Agree on a cooling-off period and come back to it later.
6. When your partner has stated their side of the issue, find where you have some common ground and go from there.
7. The next step is to negotiate by listing all the reasonable options to be considered.
8. When you decide on a reasonable option, the final step is for the two of you to discuss the selected option and negotiate a decision that both of you can adopt.

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