

Session 3 - 'Resolving Conflict'

Talk – Introduction - Expressing our appreciation of each other - Introduction

What do you think most couples argue about?

One couple had argued all the way through their married life. There seemed to be no subject on which they were agreed. They argued and argued and argued.

To everyone's amazement they reached their 50th wedding anniversary. Their children decided to give them a visit to a top consultant psychiatrist as a golden wedding present.

The couple couldn't agree whether or not to accept it. They argued about when to go. They argued about how to get there. They were still arguing as they walked in.

The psychiatrist asked them one question. They started arguing. After a long time, the psychiatrist said, *'STOP! I'm going to do something I have never done before in my life.'*

He walked round his desk and took the little old lady in his arms and kissed her on the lips for a very long time. Then he said to the husband, *'Now that is what this woman needs three times every week.'*

The old man scratched his head and said, *'Okay, doctor, if that is what you say, I'll bring her in on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.'*

Disagreement is inevitable for every marriage. Let me give you four reasons why that is so:

1. We are different

We perceive things differently

We come into marriage with different backgrounds, different desires, different priorities, different personalities and so on.

2. We are all very self-centred

Added to this is the inherent selfishness of human nature: the desire to have it **my** way, to maintain my rights, to endorse **my** opinions, to pursue **my** rights.

One woman who had been married for six months said to us, 'I was more surprised by what I discovered about myself than what I discovered about my husband – it was like having a mirror held up to my face and I saw how selfish I really am.'

It's easier to do things alone and when we try to keep in step with each other we can feel held back, rushed or tied down. That can be very frustrating.

I remember vividly as a seven-year-old practising the three-legged race for our school sports day. For several weeks before the event I went round with my left leg tied with a red handkerchief to my friend's right leg. To start with it was agony. Our strides were different lengths; we kept forgetting which leg we had agreed to start with; we fell over on the tarmac; the handkerchief chafed our ankles and we had several heated arguments. However, we learnt to match our strides to each other and by sports day we could run almost as fast tied together as we could on our own. And we won the race!

Marriage is a bit like doing the three-legged race and it would be surprising if at times we would not prefer to be running on our own.

We are naturally self-centred and we are frustrated at having to take our partner into account.

3. We fail to handle anger properly

Anger is not wrong in itself; it is the God-given signal that there is something wrong, something that needs to be sorted out in the relationship: we may have been unjustly treated or hurt or offended in some way.

But **anger can be used wrongly** in a number of ways.

We want to look at two inappropriate ways of using anger and it seems that half of the population, if they haven't learnt to control anger, have a tendency to go one way; the other half have a tendency the other way.

Roughly half the population when they are angry is inclined to let you know it. We call them the '**rhinos**' because a rhino, if provoked, will put down its head and charge you.

The other half of the population, when they are angry, hides it. They become quiet and withdrawn and may sulk. We call them the '**hedgehogs**'. A hedgehog, when threatened, curls up and sticks out its prickles to keep others at a distance. It is not that the hedgehogs do nothing with their anger. It is rather that they show it in a different way to the rhino - perhaps by

withholding their affection or by suddenly developing selective hearing towards their husband or wife.

There will be a variety of reasons for our responses. It will be a combination of our personality, what was modelled in our home as we grew up, and the experiences of life that may have hurt us.

Many couples are made up of one *rhino* and one *hedgehog*. The following story will give you a clue as to which way round we are.

Kirsty, our first child, was six months old, and we were living in Japan. A bachelor friend, who lived two hundred miles away, had invited us to stay for the weekend.

He was a great entertainer with boundless energy and whenever we went to stay for the weekend he would arrange breakfast parties, invite friends over for mid-morning coffee, and then host lunch, tea and dinner parties!

On the Wednesday before we were due to go Megan expressed her anxiety about the weekend because she was exhausted from looking after a six month-old, and anticipated that a weekend socialising with our daughter on show might finish her off. I was adamant. Having accepted the invitation and knowing that a number of parties would have been arranged around us, I was convinced we had to go.

We both felt our particular point of view very strongly. When Megan had failed to convince me with her words and I did not seem to appreciate how tired she was, she saw red.

Unfortunately for me it happened to be the Japanese season for apples and we had just bought a large box of them. They were arranged in a pyramid in a basket and, starting at the top, Megan proceeded to hurl these apples at me one by one across the room.

I managed to escape serious injury by ducking down behind the sofa until the basket was empty. I need to add that these are the only objects Megan has ever thrown at me.

The conclusion to the story follows later.

Crystal is the rhino; I'm the hedgehog. Crystal's danger is explosion. My danger is to hold anger inside. As much as Crystal had had to control anger, after 25 years I've realised it's better to have things out in the open.

The following example shows what can happen when two people in a marriage both have hedgehog tendencies.

Paul and Caroline had been married for six years and they always used to boast they'd never had an argument. Friends didn't believe it, but it was true. That is, it was true until Christmas Eve last year. Neither of them can remember exactly how it started except that it had something to do with Christmas-tree lights and a roll of sellotape. But if this couple had not rowed for six years, they made up for it in that remarkable hour between six and

seven o'clock on that evening of goodwill. As the row intensified, hurts came tumbling out that had lain hidden for years, the oldest being something that happened on the afternoon of their wedding. They didn't say a word to each other for three days, and she honestly thought their marriage could end. By the New Year they had begun to grunt at each other and now they're fine except that they argue every two months. They've decided it's much healthier.

The Sixty Minute Marriage, Rob Parsons p.39

Both rhinos and the hedgehogs must learn to handle anger properly. Uncontrolled anger has terrible consequences.

Rhino-behaviour leads to a husband or wife living with the constant fear of an explosion.

Hedgehog-behaviour leads to an erosion of intimacy as resentment builds up.

Both are damaging and effective ways of reforming conflict.

Which do you tend towards? A rhino or a hedgehog? If you are not certain, spend 10 seconds consulting your husband or wife. They will probably have a good idea.

4. We think resolving conflict involves one of us losing

So we try to force a surrender out of our husband or wife.

When we are both doing that a type of 'trench warfare' evolves. Both husband and wife 'dig in', defending their own position against the other's attacks.

One or other may win the odd skirmish but really **both** have lost. There is no intimacy in the marriage as there is a hundred yards or so of 'no-man's land' between them. Instead of barbed wire it is full of barbed comments and instead of unexploded bombs it is full of unresolved anger.

Actually winning doesn't involve someone losing because **we're on the same side**. Winning means getting out of the trench, laying down our arms and going to join our partner and asking:

*'How can we fight problems **together**?'*

*'How can **we** work out a way forward?'*

Like the three-legged race, we are then working together.

This will often involve considering, *'How do I need to change for the sake of our marriage?'* That is how we match our strides to each other.

As Paul Tournier said:
'You have problems? That is quite normal; all couples do. As a matter of fact it is a good thing. Those who make a success of their marriage are those who tackle their problems together and who overcome them.'
Marriage Difficulties, Paul Tournier p.26

We are going to look at four principles for working together.

1. Expressing our appreciation for each other

Conflict causes us to tend to focus on each other's negative traits; teamwork involves encouraging each other.

James Dobson, founder of *Focus on the Family*, did a survey to identify the reasons for periods of depression in married women aged 27-40 (most of them with small children at home). They were asked to rank 10 possible reasons in order of priority.

The majority of the women chose **low self-esteem** as the greatest difficulty in their lives.

This need for encouragement is just as great for men as for women. We must make our husband or wife feel like the most important person in the world for us. In that way we build up their confidence.

Mark Twain once said: *'I can live for two months on a sincere compliment.'*

Appreciation is the opposite of criticism. When couples are going out they show much appreciation of each other. In marriage it is easy to focus on what irritates us.

We need to make a habit of focusing on what we like and admire about each other. ***It must be a daily discipline.***

One husband said to us, *'I told my wife on our wedding day that I loved her and would let her know if the situation changed. It hasn't, but she complains that I don't tell her about my feelings!'*

Exercise 1 – 'Showing appreciation'

(allow 10 minutes)

Instructions:

- Please turn to Exercise 1, *Showing Appreciation*, and fill in six things that you appreciate about your husband or wife.

- It may be thanking them for what they do or it may be expressing your appreciation for who they are. Try to make it a mixture.
- When you have both finished, show each other what you have written.

One couple on a *retreat*, who had been married for 24 years, read things they never realised the other admired about them. We discovered at the end of the retreat that this couple had been separated for the previous four years and had come on *retreat* seeking to get back together. This was a key moment in the course for them.

Talk – 2. Recognising our differences

Differences of temperament, personality, background, expectation and so on can cause conflict in a marriage, and sometimes we are not sure of the source of the tension. We may differ from our husbands or wives:

- **in the way we look at the world**
 - we may be more logical – we are drawn to hard facts and details
 - while our husbands or wife is more intuitive – they are drawn to the world of ideas
- **in how planned we like to be**
 - we may be well-organised: we like to make plans well in advance
 - while our husband or wife is more spontaneous: they like to keep their options open in case they have a better idea or find a cheaper deal
- **in where we derive our energy**
 - if we are an extrovert we will restore our energy through being with others – so on a Friday evening, after a hard week’s work, we might think, *‘What an awful day at work! Thank goodness we are seeing some friends tonight.’*
 - while, if our husband or wife is an introvert, they will restore their energy through being alone. So if they are exhausted on Friday night, they look forward to a quiet weekend.
(The other difference between the extrovert and introvert is that the extrovert tends to think out loud while the introvert sorts out their thoughts first and then speaks.)

I am married to an extrovert. Melissa may say something with great conviction and then have completely changed her mind after a few minutes. I have learnt not to react too strongly to her first few sentences.

As an introvert I like to work out what I think before speaking. So if we have a difficult decision I will typically go away by myself to think it through and

then tell Melissa what I think. She tells me, *'That's not a discussion. That's just your conclusion.'*

'Opposites attract' – this couple have recognised increasingly the way in which we are fascinated, intrigued, drawn to someone who has different qualities to ourselves.

But then the very differences that attracted us can start to irritate us.

One woman who had so admired her husband's decisiveness before marriage, after a few years, was greatly irritated by his stubbornness

In a marriage we must **accept our differences**.
One attitude is not better than another; it is just different.

A good marriage is where we see ourselves as a partnership, combining our strengths and complementing each other.

One of the most significant areas of difference can be **our attitude towards money**.

According to a survey by the relationship guidance organisation *Relate* :
'Money is the greatest cause of argument among British couples....'

This is an area of difference between many couples:

Melissa and I embarked upon marriage with very different attitudes towards money. This reflected our personalities, although our parents probably helped to shape our views.

There are three choices with money: save it, spend it or give it away. We have had no problem agreeing on how much and when we should give. With the other two options we are poles apart.

I would describe myself as a **'natural saver'** while Melissa is more of a **'natural spender'**. By that I do not mean she is in anyway a compulsive shopper, nor does she enjoy shopping any more than I do. It is just that she finds it **easier** to spend money than I do.

When we were first married, our housekeeping account went into overdraft every month. Because of my saving tendencies, we had put enough aside to pay it off. But every month ended with Melissa feeling **guilty** for overspending and me feeling resentful about it.

At that stage we both thought I was **better** with money than Melissa. It was only after 15 years of marriage that it all came to a head and we had a big discussion. It suddenly came home to me that I am not 'better'. In one sense Melissa is better with money than I am. She is incredibly generous. She is good at working out what is needed each week, as well as buying occasional treats and surprises for the family and presents for others.

We both realised we are better at different things. I am better at **managing** money; Melissa is better at **using** money. That realisation made all the difference. I no longer feel any resentment of the way Melissa spends more easily than I do. Rather I appreciate what Melissa is good at and we have recognised how we can help with each other.

That helped us to work out a proper budget together – discovering how much we were earning and how much we were spending. We then planned how much to spend on different areas, including putting a more realistic amount into our housekeeping account.

Melissa has helped me not to be over-cautious and to use money more freely for the benefit of others and ourselves. As an example of how overcautious I can be, for their weekly pocket money, our children used to have 1p for each year of their age: 6p when they were six, 8p when they were eight and so on. I saw no problem in this until Melissa pointed out that 10p was not really going to teach our ten-year old daughter to handle money sensibly. I am so glad now that Melissa, with the strong support of the children, persuaded me to change my mind!

On the other hand, I like to think I have helped Melissa to keep track of her spending and to stay within our budget.

We need to look for each other's strengths and support each other's weaknesses.

In this way we work together and complement each other.

Exercise 2 – 'Recognise your differences'

(allow 10 minutes)

Instructions:

- Against the issues, each of you put your own and each other's initial for where *you* consider you each come.
- You will see an example regarding money and punctuality (Some like to leave lots of time to catch a plane or a train; others prefer to cut it fine – they like to give the train a sporting chance – it makes the journey more exciting!).
- Do not look at what your husband or wife has put until you have **both** finished.
- Then discuss where your different strengths lie and how you can support each other's weaknesses.

Talk – 3. Negotiating areas of conflict

The third principle for working together is ***negotiating areas of conflict.***

People approach conflict differently

Some of us **attack** which is when we try to force our partner to do things our way

Some of us **surrender** – that’s when we simply give in every time in order to keep the peace. We say, ‘OK have it your way’ (not very effective for our marriage).

Others of us **bargain** – ‘I’ll do this if you do that’ – but that all too easily becomes: ‘I won’t do my bit because you haven’t done your bit.’

None of these is effective in resolving conflict or in building closeness in marriage.

A fourth way is to negotiate

Negotiation means discussing the issue together and finding a solution that’s best for our marriage.

It means seeing we’re on the same side - not opposite sides.

I’m going to look at **six steps for effective negotiation** or, as we’ve called it, ‘**Six steps for peace**’.

1. Find the best time

The Survey by *Relate*, the relationship guidance service, discovered about conflict between British couples:
‘Half of all arguments between couples take place in the evenings and a quarter of those surveyed admitted to arguing in the stressful moments leading up to a special occasion.’

We all recognise there are bad times to try and resolve arguments such as:

- in front of other people (we need privacy)
- when we are about to leave for work
- when we’ve just got in from work
- before a special occasion – as pointed out in the survey - as emotions are running high
- for most of us late at night – because our perspective tends to get distorted

In the early days of our marriage we recognised the most futile arguments we had were always late at night.

After being married about 9 months we went to have supper with some great friends who told us about a rule they had in their marriage called ‘*The 10 o’clock rule*’. They explained that if they were having a futile argument late in

the evening either one of them could call into play the *10 o'clock rule*. That meant the discussion had to be postponed until a better time. Perhaps earlier the next evening or over a cup of coffee at the weekend. We've tried to use the *10o'clock rule* ever since.

2. Identify the issue

Arguments so easily get widened and we can't remember what it is we're arguing about.

We find we're fighting on all fronts - by land, sea and air. If we are going to negotiate (and resolve the conflict effectively) we have to lay down our weapons and work out what the main issue is.

Once we've identified what it is, ***we need to take what's coming in between us and put it out in front of us*** and then we can work on it together.

Imagine a three seater sofa with the husband at one end and the wife at the other with the contentious issue in between them, separating them, stopping them seeing or hearing each other properly.

Identifying the issue means taking that issue that's coming between us and putting it out in front of us. Then as husband and wife we can ***move together*** on the sofa (with nothing between us) and work together on finding a solution for the issue that's out in front.

3. Discuss the issue rather than attack each other

This may well involve us ***finding ways in which to control our temper.***

Temper or uncontrolled anger is very destructive and tragically can cause people to become physically violent, which will destroy a marriage. If this is a problem in your marriage, we would suggest you seek help. We recommend Gary Chapman's book, *The Other Side Of Love: Handling Anger in a Godly Way*.

But equally devastating can be ***attacking each other with words*** in the heat of conflict.

Libby Purves, writer and journalist, quotes a young wife called Maureen, who suffered serious negative consequences as a result of an argument with her husband:
'My husband once told me I was a selfish, stupid, fat, frigid, bitch. Admittedly I had just called him worse things. But when he said that about being frigid I couldn't forget it. Whenever we make love now, I keep thinking that's what he thinks about me. I sort of stopped trusting him.'

Libby Purves comments about Maureen: *'She is also dieting obsessively, slim though she is, because of the fat bit of the insult. The old line, "angry*

people always say things they don't mean" is counterbalanced by the equally old line that ONLY when you are angry do you dare say what you really mean. Most of us have a fairly total recall of things said to us in anger.'
Libby Purves, *Nature's Masterpiece*, p.227

It is crucial that we learn to discuss the issue rather than attacking each other. There are some particular things that help.

- Avoid labeling –

This was a tip given to us by the priest who married us:
There are two phrases to avoid using at all costs in marriage:
'You always...' and
'You never...'

When we use these phrases we start to label each other's character.

So for example:

'You never lift a finger to help'

'You're always giving away our secrets'

'You always make us late'

- It's much better to use statements describing what we are feeling:

'I'm upset you didn't help me clear up '

'I get really embarrassed when you give away our secrets'

'I get so frustrated when we're late '

- If we are going to be able to discuss the issue, it will always involve listening to our partner – (that's particularly important if we know we are better with words than our husband or wife).

When we're having an argument we are very keen our partner understands our point of view but we're not quite so keen to understand theirs.

A simple but effective piece of advice is: ***'Take it in turns to talk.'***

It's only as we make the effort to listen to one another that we will move from blaming and attacking to understanding (as we discussed in Session 2).

- The other part of learning to discuss the issue is expressing our views - that is particularly important for anyone who acts like the hedgehog.

4. Work out possible solutions

We can work out together what practical actions we could take, what changes we could make.

When we start focussing on the issue, it's amazing how many solutions we can come up with, *eg if the conflict is money, you may decide to do a detailed budget together or change who organises the finances.*

It is sometimes a help to **write down some possible solutions** to see the different possibilities. You can then refer back to them if necessary.

5. Decide on what's the best solution for now

Try it out – and see if it works for your marriage.
If it works, the issue will stop causing conflict.

For Micky and me once we'd done a detailed budget and talked over how it would work out in practice money was no longer a contentious issue for us.

6. If there still seems to be conflict over the issue then re-evaluate your solution

Go back to the other possible solutions and try another one. It is important that these solutions are not set in stone forever. We have to be prepared to try something different.

This whole process of negotiation is going to involve each of us considering how we might need to change.

Jesus said ' *Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye, and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? First take the plank out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.*' (Matthew 7:3)

We hear of couples breaking up the grounds of incompatibility – but ***we're not incompatible***

- ***unless we refuse to change***
- ***unless we refuse to match our stride to our husband or wife***

I want to finish with a powerful visual picture of what it means to accommodate ourselves to each other. It was written by a surgeon called Richard Seltzer.

'I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the ones to the muscles of her mouth has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon has followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh, I

promise you that. Nevertheless to remove the tumor in her cheek I have cut a little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. "Who are they?" I ask myself. "He and this wry mouth that I have made. Who gaze at and touch each other so greedily." The young woman speaks, "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes it will" I say. "It's because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent but the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It's kind of cute" And all at once I know who he is and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. And unmindful I see he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close, I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show the kiss still works. And I remembered that the gods appeared in ancient times as mortals and I hold my breath and let the wonder in.'

Exercise 3 – 'Changing our behaviour'

(allow 30 minutes)

Instructions:

- Part of matching our strides to each other is knowing what causes our partner **frustration, resentment, hurt or anger** and telling them what causes these things for us. In this way we can grow in our understanding of each other.
- Please go to Exercise 3, *Changing our Behaviour*.
- Sometimes the real issues get buried under years of unresolved conflict **or** we've never told each other what frustrates or hurts us.
- We must tell each other the issues that matter to us.
- We are different. We can't assume our husband/wife understands our feelings.
- The aim of the exercise is to recognise what the common issues are that cause anger and conflict, and to recognise how each of us deals with conflict.
- Please write your own answers to the questions and then discuss with each other what you have written.

Talk – 4. Learning to pray together

We're going to speak for a few minutes about the fourth and final principle for resolving conflict- learning to pray together.

As we said on Session 1, you don't need to call yourself a Christian to benefit from this retreat. Therefore for this section we are going to speak very personally of the difference that praying together for each other on a regular basis can make. We will look at **how** we pray together; first I will talk about **why** it makes a difference.

Some people come into marriage expecting that their partner will meet their deepest needs, that they will find a source of unconditional love that will give them the purpose, security and self-esteem they need.

This attitude leads to a downward spiral in a marriage.

Expectations which are not fulfilled lead to demands, which lead to disappointment – because no human being can meet these needs; only God can do that – so it then leads to blame and criticism.

By contrast the Christian pattern for relationships is that each of us looks first to God for our deepest personal needs, for that unconditional love we crave, for a sense of significance, security and self-esteem - and then as we receive from God, **we are able to give to each other.**

A couple found things very difficult as issue after issue piled up. The wife said: *'Many of the tasks set just confirmed that my husband didn't actually know me – because I didn't allow him to. Every week I felt we left with more heaps of unresolved issues.'* She wrote a letter a year later to describe their situation which they have given permission to read out.

My husband and I had met as undergraduates. I came from an arts background, he was reading medicine. Initially it was his different thoughts, views and reasoning that so attracted me. I graduated one Saturday and we married the next. The honeymoon ended!

I remember once driving in the car through 'Thomas Hardy' country. I was picturing scenes from the 'Woodlanders' and 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'; my husband was silent. We were waiting at a level crossing and I asked him what he was thinking. He explained that he had just counted the carriages of the Inter City 125 that had just passed, estimated their length, multiplied and added the engines and, having timed how long it took to clear a certain mark, was trying to work out the speed of the train.

I thought the gulf was unbridgeable and over the next 16 years it widened. I was the hedgehog, he was a rhino and I just shut down. I didn't imagine it possible for the initial love or attraction to ever, ever, return. It was stone dead, buried under years of hurting each other, point scoring and my withdrawing into myself. But I hadn't reckoned on God.

We got to our summer holidays 1999 just after doing a retreat. We were arguing and things looked desperately grim.

I rose at 5.30 one morning and went to pray on the beach. As I walked along the beach a bright morning sun streamed down and I was utterly surprised by the absolute beauty. The sky and sea were brilliant blue and the beach was simply glorious and I felt God say, 'Your marriage is like this. If you will allow my light and my warmth into it, it need not be cold small and grey.' I answered that I felt we had hurt each other too deeply. I looked at my bare feet paddling through the waves. Pebbles on the beach had caused scars in the wet sand but with the waves, the water was washing the scars away and

my feet clean. Instantly I realised that God could forgive us and help us to forgive each other. It blew my mind.

Now a year on I can look back. It is so wonderful. God has worked in us, in our marriage, in our hearts, our home, in the children. We stand restored and forgiven. The science/arts divide, the Mars/Venus divide is bridged by God.

Nothing is impossible with God.

July 2000

How to get started

As we pray with one another it brings us into a closeness with God and with each other - it brings change.

For some of you this will be familiar ground. You already pray together.

For others it may be a totally new thought. In fact it may seem like a very radical one and you can't imagine that you could ever do this together.

We hope very much you will consider it as a possibility after we've talked about it. It is actually a radical thing for any of us to do – and it is hard at first – because prayer is a very intimate thing, a very private thing.

Daniel and I found it very difficult when we first got married but someone encouraged us to pray together – now it seems a very normal part of our relationship. But we just had to persevere at the beginning.

Whether it's familiar or something totally new we want to encourage you to give it a go.

I'm going to look at some practical things that have helped when I've spoken to couples over the years in praying together – and if you haven't prayed before I hope they will help you to get started.

1. Aim at a short time each day

Aim at about 5-10 minutes. A shorter time each day is much more effective than a long session a lot less regularly. (It is a more achievable goal.)

If it's short, the incentive is there to do it the next day. Praying together at the beginning of the day is best – if at all possible.

2. This is the time to pray for each other.

This is not the time to pray for the rest of the world, such as peace in Iraq or Third World Debt or all the other very important things to pray for – they can be kept for other times.

It's a time to pray very specifically ***with*** each other ***for*** each other.

It's a time to pray for very ***personal*** things – things our husband or wife are personally involved in. Things that matter to each of us or to both of us as a couple.

It's a time to bring before each other and to God:

- what's happening in the day
- what is worrying us or causing resentment or conflict
- our hopes and plans
- difficult decisions
- personal needs – such as a relationship at work or our need for more patience
- our needs as a couple – maybe financial or career plans
- our children's lives – their school friends, health, marriage partners etc.
- it's a time to say sorry and forgive one another

3. One of the best ways to start is by being thankful

Very often we don't feel like it, so it has to be a choice (as with prayer in general).

Thankfulness is an antidote to tension or resentment between us. (Sometimes it's because we're grumpy or tired.) It helps us to focus on God and to thank him.

There is so much to say thank you for – such as:

- saying thank you to God for his love for us
- thanking him for the husband or wife he has given to us

- being grateful for our homes, our children (if we have them), our jobs

4. Listen and respond to each other's requests.

We talked about listening last week. Praying together is a good place to put that into practice.

Draw out of your husband or wife what's on their mind.

I know for myself when something is not quite right, if I'm worried or I'm distracted and my husband asks me a question, it draws out of me what the real issue is. Then it is fantastic when he responds by praying for me. It makes me feel I matter to him and it helps put what I am worried about into proper perspective.

5. Accept the same request day after day.

This is not an admission of failure – on our part or God's. It's more a sign of our dependence on God.

There are some things we need help with every day.

I remember when our children were very small (four of them under eight years old) I constantly asked Micky to pray the same thing for me each day - more patience and more energy with the children. I know it made a difference. His willingness to pray the same prayer again and again showed his support for me as a full-time mother.

6. Prayers should be vertical (ie towards God) not horizontal and manipulative.

Prayer is not a way rather subtly to get at each other. (Our husband or wife doesn't really have the right of reply in prayer!)

I shouldn't pray, *'Please Lord help my husband to stop working such long hours and to spend some more time with the children,'* unless he's asked me to pray for that.

We need our partner's permission to be praying what we are praying for them.

7. Don't give up

Prayer is difficult.

Just like trying to find time together, everything seems to conspire against us. But it will be one of the most beneficial and most uniting things you do together.

You will go through seasons in your marriage when prayer is particularly difficult. This may be for practical reasons like having a young family. But do persevere. Children grow up and it gets easier again.

8. Don't put limitations on what God can do.

God can do what we humanly can't do or couldn't imagine.

Even if our circumstances are overwhelming us or dragging us down, God is bigger than our circumstances.

'Cast all your anxiety on God because he cares for you' (1 Peter 5:7).

Many times I have seen couples who haven't known what to do, and they've asked God for wisdom. Sometimes when they have disagreed, they have prayed and another way has become apparent.

..... On the evening of the apple throwing we decided we should pray together about what we should do, both still convinced of our own particular point of view.

I can't quite explain what happened but I remember after we had prayed realising that I had not taken into account quite how tired my wife was. I also realised that I had been more concerned about letting our friend down than I had about my wife's welfare.

I said to her that I felt we should ring our friend after all and say we were unable to go for the weekend. At which point she decided that with my new understanding of how she felt she would be able to cope.

We went to Tokyo and had a great weekend!

A couple who did a *retreat* said this:

'Praying together is one of the most intimate parts of our marriage - it definitely draws us closer together especially as we begin thanking God for each other.'

If you have never prayed together as a couple it can be helpful to read a few verses from the bible first - and they can lead you more easily into prayer.

We're going to finish this evening by giving you the opportunity to express your support for your husband or wife, perhaps by praying for them very simply and very briefly if you feel comfortable doing that

- ask them if there's one thing that's on their mind that they'd like you to pray for them such as a situation at work or at home, to do with a child, or a decision that needs to be made
- then we suggest you pray in whatever way you feel comfortable
- either silently or out loud
- decide who will pray first – then indicate you've finished and swap over (make it a short prayer)
- if you feel unable to pray, ask them how you could best support your husband or wife in what they've told you
- we'll close the evening with a final prayer from the front in a few minutes

Close

'And so we know and rely on the love God has for us' (1 John 4:16).

Thank you Lord that you not only love each one of us but you know each one of us intimately. Thank you for the uniqueness of each person here tonight, and also for the partnerships that have come into being in these marriages.

Fill us with your love that we might be strengthened in our love for each other.