

## How Do You and Your Spouse Handle Conflict?

October 13, 2010

Disagreements are common for married couples, including very happy ones. But conflicts can be approached in a variety of ways, and how couples handle disagreements may well influence their long-term happiness.

That is what a study released this fall by the University of Michigan shows. Commenting on it, Kira Birditt, the study report's lead author, said the likelihood of divorce declines for couples when both a husband and wife approach conflicts constructively. However, when both spouses handle disagreements in destructive ways, their likelihood of divorcing appears to increase.

But what are "constructive" and "destructive" approaches to marital conflicts? What I found fascinating was the study's detailed description of these approaches, as well as a third approach that involves one or both spouses withdrawing from conflicts.

Birditt is an assistant research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. She and a team of researchers published a report this October titled "Marital Conflict Behaviors and Implications for Divorce Over 16 Years" in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. This major study followed 373 couples for a period of 16 years; 46 percent had divorced by the 16th year, 2002.

It was certainly not this complex, scientific study's intent to come up with a set of steps for getting couples onto the same, positive page when problems arise. But after reading the report, I couldn't help feeling that husbands and wives would be well advised to make themselves as aware as possible of their usual manner of handling disagreements.

And I couldn't imagine the marriage educator who, learning of the study, wouldn't want to challenge couples to improve their communication skills and nurture the ability to disagree agreeably.

### Couples Can Evaluate Their Fighting Style

Accompanying the University of Michigan's news release on the study was a study questionnaire that asked couples to evaluate their "marital fight style" during a recent argument. Spouses responded to 21 statements, marking each one "not at all true," "not very true," "somewhat true" or "very true." Here are just a few of the statements:

"My spouse yelled or shouted at me." "I yelled or shouted at my spouse." "My spouse tried hard to find out what I was feeling." "I brought up things that happened long ago." "My spouse had to have the last word." "I tried to make my spouse laugh."

The questionnaire illustrates rather well the patterns husbands and wives often follow during conflicts. It enables them at the same time to see whether they are on the same page in handling disagreements. Does one listen, though one does not? Does one shout, while the other withdraws?

Discussing the three approaches to conflict that are a key focus of their study, the researchers explain that:

1. Destructive approaches include yelling, insulting one's spouse, bringing up things that happened long ago or demanding to have the last word. Belligerence, contempt and criticism often are said to characterize a destructive approach.
2. Constructive approaches include listening to the other's point of view, attempting to find out what one's spouse is feeling, attempting to say kind things or trying to make the other person laugh.
3. Withdrawal approaches involve disengaging from the conflict by becoming quiet and pulling away or leaving the discussion.

Birditt said marriages seem to be harmed when one spouse tends to deal with conflict constructively and the other withdraws. It is possible, she commented, that the spouse whose approach is constructive views the partner's "habit of withdrawing as a lack of investment in the relationship rather than an attempt to cool down."

Perhaps surprisingly, husbands in the study reported using more constructive behaviors and fewer destructive behaviors than wives. However, the study reported that wives who early on employed destructive strategies or withdrew when conflicts arose became less likely to do so over time, though husbands who employed such strategies continued doing so over the years.

The study speculates that problems that once led wives to withdraw from conflicts or to approach them in destructive ways may get resolved over time. Or, it says, "relationships and the quality of relationships may be more central to women's lives than they are to men." Possibly these wives also gained "more effective conflict skills" and became better at expressing negative feelings.

As a result, Birditt commented, "over the course of marriage, women may be more likely to recognize that withdrawing from conflict or using destructive strategies is neither effective nor beneficial to the overall well-being and stability of their marriages."

#### Communication Can Improve Over Time

So, are couples fated for life to handle conflicts poorly if they handle them that way early on? Sadly, it seems many couples do not grow beyond negative habits they develop. Yet, when it comes to long-term marriages, the researchers say their study is consistent with what some others have found, namely that over time these marriages become "more enjoyable and tolerant, and have improved communication."

It is noteworthy, Birditt suggested to me, that "couples appear to become better able to deal with conflict over time." She said the point to take away from this study is that while problems are "a normal part of marriage," it is "how we deal with those problems that is important for" a marriage's longevity.

It is particularly important, she told me, "that both spouses use constructive strategies together" when conflicts arise.

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## **Predicting divorce: U-M study shows how fight styles affect marriage**

ANN ARBOR, Mich.—It's common knowledge that newlyweds who yell or call each other names have a higher chance of getting divorced. But a new University of Michigan study shows that other conflict patterns also predict divorce.

A particularly toxic pattern is when one spouse deals with conflict constructively, by calmly discussing the situation, listening to their partner's point of view, or trying hard to find out what their partner is feeling, for example—and the other spouse withdraws.

"This pattern seems to have a damaging effect on the longevity of marriage," said U-M researcher Kira Birditt, first author of a study on marital conflict behaviors and implications for divorce published in the current issue (October 2010) of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. "Spouses who deal with conflicts constructively may view their partners' habit of withdrawing as a lack of investment in the relationship rather than an attempt to cool down."

Couples in which both spouses used constructive strategies had lower divorce rates, Birditt found.

The data are from the Early Years of Marriage Study, supported by funding from the National Institute of Aging and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. It is one of the largest and longest research projects to look at patterns of marital conflict, with 373 couples interviewed four times over a 16-year period, starting the first year of their marriages. The study is also one of just a few to include a high enough proportion of Black couples that researchers can assess racial differences in conflict strategies and their effects.

The researchers looked at how both individual behaviors and patterns of behavior between partners affected the likelihood of divorce. They also examined whether behavior changed over time, and whether there were racial or gender differences in behavior patterns and outcomes.

Astonishingly, the researchers found that 29 percent of husbands and 21 percent of wives reported having no conflicts at all in the first year of their marriage—1986. Nonetheless, 46 percent of the couples had divorced by Year 16 of the study—2002. Interestingly, whether or not couples reported any conflict during the first year of marriage did not affect whether they had divorced by the last year studied.

Overall, husbands reported using more constructive behaviors and fewer destructive behaviors than wives. But over time, wives were less likely to use destructive strategies or withdraw, while husbands' use of these behaviors stayed the same through the years.

"The problems that cause wives to withdraw or use destructive behaviors early in a marriage may be resolved over time," Birditt said. "Or, relationships and the quality of relationships may be more central to women's lives than they are to men. As a result, over the course of marriage, women may be more likely to recognize that withdrawing from conflict or using destructive strategies is neither effective nor beneficial to the overall well-being and stability of their marriages."

Birditt and colleagues found that black American couples were more likely to withdraw during conflicts than were white couples, although black couples were less likely to withdraw from conflict over time.

"We hope this study will lead to additional research on the complex dynamics of conflict between husbands and wives, and the potential explanations for changes versus stability in conflict behaviors over time," Birditt said.

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## **What a Couple's Arguing 'Style' May Say About Their Marriage (05 October 2010)**

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Rachel Valltos and Evan Sapperstein are dentists who share an office and a life together. In nine years of marriage, they have built not just a successful dental practice, but also a family.

Rachel and Evan laugh about the last time they argued at their Washington-area home. He wanted her attention. So did one of their three children. Evan yelled at the child.

Rachel told Evan that he was the one acting like a baby. That only brought more yelling, which Rachel ignored.

RACHEL VALLTOS: "In the heat of the argument, I usually will back away because I want to avoid confrontation in front of the children. But I always have plans to go back and have a discussion about it later."

Rachel and Evan made peace. But researchers might describe the way she dealt with the argument at first as a withdrawal strategy.

A team at the University of Michigan recently published a study of how married couples fight. They also looked at how different "styles" of arguing might predict the future of a marriage.

The findings appeared in the Journal of Marriage and Family.

The study followed three hundred seventy-three couples over sixteen years. Forty-six percent of them had divorced by the final year in two thousand two.

The couples were asked at four different times to report on their most recent conflict. First, they had to agree on which conflict was their most recent.

The husbands and wives each had to choose from a list of behaviors to describe the strategies they used. The list included behaviors like calm discussion, listening and trying hard to find out the other person's feelings.

The list also included behaviors like yelling, using insults, walking away or not communicating -- in other words, the silent treatment.

Assistant professor Kira Birditt led the study.

KIRA BIRDITT: "The husbands were more likely to use the constructive strategies like discussing the problem, finding solutions, and wives were more likely to use those destructive or withdrawal strategies."

But Professor Birditt says the study found that over time, wives became less destructive in the way they argued. Husbands stayed the same.

KIRA BIRDITT: "It looked like wives got better at dealing with conflict over time using the fewer destructive and withdrawal strategies."

She says the researchers also found that different combinations of strategies may help predict whether a couple will stay together. The chances decrease if only one partner uses constructive strategies.

KIRA BIRDITT: "Try as you might to use the constructive strategy, you have to have both partners using that strategy."

So now back to Evan and Rachel. We spoke with Doctor Sapperstein just after he finished a long, difficult root canal on a patient. If he had to choose between another operation like that or a fight with his wife?

EVAN SAPPERSTEIN: "Oh, definitely, the root canal."

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report, written by Caty Weaver. I'm Jim Tedder.

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Health

## Marriage: It's Only Going to Get Worse

By Jeanna Bryner, LiveScience Staff Writer

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If your spouse already bugs you now, the future is bleak. New research suggests couples view one another as even more irritating and demanding the longer they are together.

The same trend was not found for relationships with children or friends.

The study results could be a consequence of accumulated contact with a spouse, such that the nitpicking or frequent demands that once triggered just a mild chafe develops into a major pain. But accumulated irritation has its silver lining.

"As we age and become closer and more comfortable with one another, it could be that we're more able to express ourselves to each other," said lead study author Kira Birditt, a research fellow at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. "In other words, it's possible that negativity is a normal aspect of close relationships that include a great deal of daily contact."

Rather than breeding unhappy couples and ill health, the increase in negativity could be a normal part of relationships.

"Because we found that pattern was overall among the participants, it appears to be normative. It's not something unusual that happens," Birditt said.

### Relationship report

Birditt and U-M colleagues Lisa Jackey and Toni Antonucci looked at how negative views of spouses, friends and children changed over time and among different age groups, including young adults (ages 20 to 39), middle-aged adults (40 to 59) and older adults (60 and over).

The researchers analyzed responses collected in 1992 and 2005 as part of the Social Relations and Health Over the Life Course study, a regionally representative sample of people from the greater Detroit metropolitan area.

More than 800 individuals indicated the level of negativity in relationships with their spouses or partners, children and best friends. Participants also noted whether or not their responses referred to the same spouse, child and friend during the 2005 interviews.

Each participant rated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with two statements:

- "My (spouse/partner, child, friend) gets on my nerves."
- "My (spouse/partner, child, friend) makes too many demands on me."

### Irksome partners

In all age groups, individuals reported viewing their spouse as the most negative compared with children and friends. The negative view of spouses tended to increase over time.

"We were surprised because in the gerontological research, it suggests that as people age they get better at regulating their emotions and experience less negative relationships," Birditt told *LiveScience*. "But we found that it depends on which relationship you're looking at."

As relationships with spouses became more negative, relationships with children and friends seemed to become less demanding and irritating over time. Negativity toward friends decreases over time partially because we can continuously choose and weed our friends, ditching those pals who are irritating, according to the researchers.

"Relationships with children may become less negative because of role changes as children move through adolescence and young adulthood, grow and mature, usually becoming more stable and independent," Birditt explained. Kids moving out didn't seem to impact spousal negativity, however, as the researchers found the same trend for spouses irrespective of the age group.

Participants in their 20s and 30s reported having the most negative relationships overall. Older adults had the least negative relationships with spouses, children and friends. Past research by Birditt and others has shown that older adults are more likely to report less conflict in their relationships compared with younger adults.

"Older adults are more likely than younger people to report that they try to deal with conflict by avoiding confrontations, rather than by discussing problems," Birditt said.

In general, the longer partners stay together, the more they have to deal with the other's idiosyncrasies, for instance. "When you're living together, it's a lot harder to avoid each other," Birditt said.

The research was presented in November at an annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, and it has also been submitted to a journal for publication.

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