

# How To Disagree With Your Spouse

by Mgr. Kelly

Coming from different backgrounds, a husband and wife do not view all of life's problems in the same way. They have different ideas on how money should be spent, how the household should be run, on health habits, recreation, eating, sleeping and many other activities of daily life. No couple can reasonably hope to live together in a continuously serene atmosphere, unbroken by disagreements. We all prefer to do things in certain ways, and these preferences-plus our weaknesses of character- make it certain that any two persons will have some differences. However, there are no differences, no matter what their seriousness, which cannot be handled on a peaceful basis. Even if the problem is one that is vitally important to both of you, you can resolve it in a calm, affectionate way and thus strengthen the bonds of your marriage. On the other hand, if your approach involves bitterness and stubbornness, you may not only fail to solve your problems, but even add deep and long-remembered wounds.

Mature husbands and wives disagree; they do not fight. There is a difference-the difference between a happy marriage and one with an underlying fabric of tension and bitterness. Discussions of disagreements are the friendly way to reconcile different backgrounds and experiences so that you can work together to achieve your common goal. Fights tear apart the unity of marriage; they are the means each spouse uses to gain his own way without considering the other partner. They lead to name-calling, taking up of the past, a spirit of hatred. Therefore one of the most important ways to insure married happiness is to learn the art of disagreeing in a friendly way. You can acquire this skill by mastering nine principles.

**1. Don't blow up trivial differences.** Dozens of minor irritations occur in everyone's life every day. Overlook them! Don't make an issue of them. Your wife does not have the breakfast toast ready with the eggs; your husband drops his pyjamas on the bedroom floor and neglects to hang them up before he leaves for work; your wife invited friends to dinner last Saturday and forgot to tell you until Saturday afternoon-all these occurrences are trivial. Yet these incidents were sparks in actual marriages and set off fires that were not extinguished until there had been agonising hours of charge and counter-charge, accusation and counter-accusation, name-calling and recrimination.

It seems obvious, yet all of us must constantly remind ourselves that we are not perfect. Your spouse's habits may irritate you, but you doubtless have habits which are also minor irritants. Do you expect your spouse to correct annoying mannerisms? Then prepare, in justice, to correct your own. Would you rather keep your habits because they give you pleasure? Then extend the same privilege to your spouse.

If any incident upsets you, ask yourself if any harm results because things are not done your way. If so, mention the incident to your partner in an affectionate way. Two wives add too much starch to shirt collars when laundering them. One husband shouts, "When are you going to learn how to starch a shirt?" The second husband puts his arm around his wife and says, "Honey, my neck is growing more sensitive to stiff collars." Which wife will correct her error more willingly?

**2. If you have a grievance, get it out of your system.** Psychologists say that the person who continually suppresses deep anger creates a reservoir of resentment which may ultimately break out in a violent form. In a typical case, a book-keeper employed by a large corporation was continually urged by his father-in-law to seek a position as a department head. The young man did not feel qualified for the position. At first, he simply smiled when his father-in-law mentioned the matter. But whenever they met, the older man asked, "Did you get that job yet?" The bookkeeper began to see this prodding as a reflection on his own judgement. He seethed inwardly. One day, his wife mentioned that they had been invited to her parents' home for Sunday dinner. He exploded with a barrage of invective against her father. She responded by dredging up complaints against his relatives. The battle did not end until dozens of old wounds in their relationship were reopened. It is now fifteen years later, but both partners feel resentment toward each other when they recall the hateful things said that day.

The situation would have been avoided if the husband had told his wife promptly that he felt annoyed at her father's suggestion because he, the husband, was in a better position to decide when he should bid for a promotion. If he had pleasantly explained his feelings, she could have supported him whenever the question arose or could have urged her father to drop the subject. But by keeping his feelings to himself, the husband built up anger that was certain to explode, eventually.

A habit that weakens many marriages-the habit of pouting-also can be averted by bringing grievances into the open. Instead, of telling his wife what irritates him, the pouter retreats into martyred, sulky silence. He realises that the annoyance is not important enough to justify his actions and that he will appear silly if he mentions it. But he enjoys the self-pity in which he clothes himself.

If you are a pouter, you especially need to apply principles one and two: If the matter is trivial, pass over it. But if it continues to irritate you, bring it out into the open.

**3. Always guard your tongue.** For more than forty years, Father John A. O'Brien has advocated a way to enable couples to settle disputes without rancour. He states that this technique can reduce the number of estrangements by fifty percent or more. He has seen it carry thousands of couples through difficulties which otherwise would have overwhelmed them. In addition, it has prevented heartaches and deepened happiness in countless marriages.

After every wedding in which he officiates, Father O'Brien explains in his book, *Happy Marriage*, he takes the couple aside and tells them:

"In an impressive ceremony you have just pronounced your vow of conjugal fidelity and I know you will keep it. There is another vow which is scarcely less important in safeguarding the happiness of your wedded life. I almost hesitate to suggest it to a couple who have just plighted their deathless love. It is implicit in that vow, of course, but it is well to make it explicit: to promise each other that no matter what difficulties arise you will not speak an angry word to each other.

"Right now you can scarcely conceive of differences arising between you; but they will arise, for you are only human. There is no difficulty, no divergence, no matter how serious, however, which can't be settled if you will bring to it mutual understanding, good will, and, holding hands, talk it over in a calm, friendly manner. Similarly, there is no difference, no matter how trivial, which can be settled unless you bring to it sympathetic understanding and a willingness to talk it over in a friendly spirit.

"Are you willing, then, to promise that, no matter what provocation may arise, you will never stab each other with sharp angry words but will discuss any differences in a calm, friendly manner?"

Father O'Brien adds, "Never have I had a couple refuse." Then I have them pronounce a second vow of matrimony: 'I solemnly promise always to speak in a kind, friendly, and affectionate manner to my beloved wife (husband) and never to utter an angry, mean, bitter, or spiteful word that would hurt and wound her (him). So help me God.'

"My whole ministry has been spent among young people on the campuses of three universities-Illinois, Oxford, and Notre Dame. For forty years I have mingled intimately with tens of thousands of young people at three large universities, listened to their problems, heard the cry of their hearts reaching out, wistfully for friendship and love, introduced thousands of young couples, married great numbers, and followed them in their enlarging family life. Never have I heard of one such marriage hitting the rocks or even being clouded by serious domestic strife."

When you discover your emotional temperature rising, also remember that the subject is not worth angry words. If you have been married for several years or longer, try to recall subjects over which you had bitter words in your first year together. Probably only in rare cases can you do so. How many of the specific subjects that you recall remain a major issue in your marriage? If you are like the typical couple, you will recall few specific disagreements worthy of the intense language you may have used in discussing them. But this is the key test: You probably remember the harsh, cutting words spoken by your spouse in anger although you have forgotten what caused the argument in the first place.

Guarding your tongue requires diligent practice. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus advised, "Reckon the days in which you have not been angry. I used to be angry every day; then every other day; then every third and fourth day; and if you miss it as long as thirty days, offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God."

**4. Keep discussions within bounds.** When arguments get acrimonious, it is usually because this rule is not observed. When the monthly statements arrive, John sees a bill for a woman's hat at fifteen dollars and asks Joan if she bought it.

Perhaps feeling guilty over buying something she did not need and no longer even likes, she admits that she did. But to justify herself, she recalls the time John met some friends at a restaurant and insisted upon paying the large bill for the entire party. John recalls Joan's expensive winter coat which she can no longer bear to wear. She mentions the vacation two years ago when John lost eighty dollars at a race track. Unchecked the discussion moves to the spending habits of the in-laws and of every neighbour on the block. What began as a simple question-not even a difference of opinion-suddenly got out of hand because Joan and John failed to keep the discussion within the limits first set for it.

Judging from comments of husbands, this inability to stick to the subject is a common failing of wives. But men are guilty too. We all have a powerful sense of self-defence, and we recognise that in war the best defence is a good offence. When facing a situation in which we are wrong, we tend to cover our defects quickly by pointing to the other's shortcomings. This may be good military strategy but it is poor marital strategy.

If you must defend your actions, only two conclusions are generally possible-you are either wrong or right. If you are wrong, why not admit it and let the matter rest there? If you are right, why not defend yourself solely in terms of the subject under discussion, explaining your actions as calmly and pleasantly as you can? After your explanation, if your spouse disagrees with your reason, at least you both will realise that there was a logical basis for what you did. And you will have kept the area of difference as small as it was in the beginning.

**5. If you must criticise, criticise the act--not your spouse for performing it.** One wise couple had developed this principle to a fine art. When the bathroom tap continued to leak for months, the wife complained about the high water bills-never her husband's laziness in failing to repair it. If his socks remained unmended, the husband commented upon his discomfort when wearing them-never upon his wife's fault as a housekeeper. Of course, their criticisms of actions diminished over the years, because both were willing to correct conditions called to their attention in that inoffensive way. Their egos were not involved, so they did not feel it necessary to defend themselves.

What if your husband or wife has shortcomings which require direct correction? Take a tip from corporation executives who have mastered the science of getting the most out of people: Always precede serious criticism with a statement of genuine appreciation for some good quality. You feel both; express both. Don't speak out only when you have something negative to say.

**6. Keep disagreements between yourselves.** Never carry them outside to in-laws, friends, or neighbours. In every good marriage, the husband and wife always feel free to communicate their innermost thoughts to each other. Often they make statements which, if repeated out of context, would make them appear foolish, vicious, or worse. If you repeat your spouse's confidential statements and hold him up to ridicule to outsiders, he will not speak freely to you again. The precious art of communication will be lost.

Sometimes young wives report quarrels to the husband's mother or father. They could hardly conceive of a more effective way to feed the flames. The typical husband will be angrier than before when he learns that his wife is trying to align his family against him, and angrier still if they agree with her.

**7. Give in on little things.** Because of your particular background, you have stronger convictions about certain aspects of life than upon others. So, too, has your spouse. Considerate partners give in on matters on which their spouses feel much more strongly than they.

One man was taught as a boy that it would hurt his health to sleep during the winter with the window open. His wife had slept with the windows open as a child, but she did not feel strongly on the subject. After marriage, when the question of open or shut windows arose, there could have been a prolonged argument. Disputes over this issue, in fact, have reached the courts in the form of divorce suits. However, the wife wisely recognised that her husband had powerful convictions and she did not care strongly enough to make an issue of it.

A typical husband "blows his top" over trifles. He explodes if his wife misplaces his cuff links or delays dinner a few minutes, or if the teenagers turn up the radio volume while he pores over his newspaper. The wise wife knows that his anger will disappear rapidly if she remains quiet. But if she chooses to dispute him, a full-scale battle may be under way. Even if his anger is completely unjustified, she gets more constructive results by waiting until he can discuss the problem calmly. After their anger subsides, most husbands will admit that they were wrong in losing their tempers.

A humorous story illustrates the point that husbands and wives should remain silent amid the other's outbursts. An eighty-year old man appeared at a doctor's office for a check-up. After examining the man from head to toe, the doctor remarked that he was in excellent physical condition.

"One thing is responsible for my good health," the man explained. "Sixty years ago, when Ellen and I were married, we made a promise to each other. Whenever I got angry, she was to leave the room immediately and do her housework elsewhere. When she got angry, I was to leave the house and take a long walk until she cooled off.

"And, Doc," the man added, "for sixty years I've had the greatest outdoor life you ever did see."

To apply this principle of giving in on little things, you must reject the false notion that marriage is a "fifty-fifty proposition". At times you will demand ninety per cent, whether you are aware of it or not. At other times, you will be asked to give the ninety per cent. But marriage is not a ball game with a score keeper. It does not matter whether you get forty per cent today and sixty per cent tomorrow, or even whether you continually provide more than an exact fifty per cent. The important thing is that your contribution and your spouse's contribution add up to one hundred per cent.

However, there is a way for you to determine whether you demand too much from your spouse. If you frequently disagree with other people too, perhaps you habitually expect too much and give too little. Occasionally a strong-willed man cannot make or hold friends because he constantly demands his own way. At home, all is tranquillity. This peace is almost always due to the wife's spirit of self-sacrifice which enables her to bow to him as a matter of course.

**8. Develop an outlet.** As certain as death and taxes is the fact that sometimes you will be frustrated in your marriage. Despite your best intentions, and even when you discuss disagreements in a temperate way, you and your spouse sometimes will fail to see eye to eye. Perhaps you suppress a deep sense of futility over your spouse's inability to see a problem from your logical point of view. You feel that you must vent your feelings on something.

For your mental and physical health, work off anger or frustration by engaging in physical activity-sweeping the sidewalk, walking to the post office, transplanting your shrubs, washing the car. One man has a wood-working shop in his basement. In moments of frustration, he retires to his shop and pounds boards for hours. Often after such exercise, he can appreciate that his wife's opinion rests on a logical basis. Whenever problems with her husband reach a stalemate, a certain wife mops the kitchen and bathroom floors; her hard work helps her feel less tense and more willing to view matters from his position.

Whenever you seem unable to settle your problem after a reasonable period of discussion, postpone further talk about it for a while. Attend evening devotions or take a walk together. You will often be surprised at the new outlook you acquire after giving the subject a rest.

**9. Never let bitterness carry over the night.** Even if you cannot agree, give each other the benefit of good intentions. Kiss each other good night. This simple, tender act at the end of each day ensures starting the next one on a loving basis. You will be less inclined to spend a restless night brooding, and often you will awaken with a new understanding of your problem. Moreover, if discussion is renewed it will be on a friendly basis.

It is not always easy to prevent rancour from entering into your disagreements. Habits of name-calling, raking over old coals, using sarcasm and ridicule to gain one's way perhaps must be unlearned. Making progress may be a slow process. But it will be worthwhile. For if you truly follow the principles outlined above and learn to resolve your differences in an atmosphere of affection and mutual respect, you will develop a deeper love for each other than you ever had before.

When serious conflict persists over a long period of time and threatens the stability of the home itself, then a trained marriage counsellor ought to be consulted. Sometimes one of the parties, usually the husband, even when he may be more sinned against than sinning, strongly resists taking his problems elsewhere. But the wise man is never so stiff-necked as to prefer a broken home or an unhappy home to an honest airing of differences before a neutral and skilled listener.