



EVERYBODY WINS

*The Chapman Guide to
Solving Conflicts Without Arguing*

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Everybody Wins: The Chapman Guide to Solving Conflicts without Arguing

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Introduction

*F*or more than thirty years, couples have been walking into my office seeking help. Almost without exception, they come in because of unresolved conflicts. They have argued for so long that each knows what the other is going to say. Their arguments have become predictable, but resolution eludes them. Exhausted, they have now come for professional help. However, I often sense that they view me more as a judge than a counselor, secretly hoping that I will pronounce their spouse guilty of illogical thinking and unreasonable demands.

Because I am a counselor and not a judge, I begin the arduous task of listening to their complaints. They review their well-worn speeches for me, certain that I will see the logic of their respective positions. I listen carefully and take notes, but as a counselor, I'm not as concerned with logic as I am about relationships. I know that in their hearts they want more than to resolve a disagreement. What they deeply long for is a better relationship. Behind the frustration of unresolved conflicts is the desire for harmony.

Loving relationships are fostered by understanding, not by winning arguments. So I begin to ask a question such as, “How do you feel when those words come out of his mouth?” or “What happens inside you when you hear her make that comment?” I listen, take notes, and ask more questions, seeking to discover the feelings that lie beneath the conflicts. No conflict will ever be resolved successfully unless we first understand the underlying feelings.

I also ask couples questions about values: “Why is this so important to you?” The answer to that question often reveals the values that created a conflict in the first place. If I don’t understand their values, I will never comprehend why they feel so strongly about the issues. As a counselor, I am doing for these couples what they have never learned to do for themselves. I am seeking to understand them. Understanding fosters resolution and harmony.

When I did the research for my book *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, I encountered hundreds of couples who admitted to having a “winter” marriage; that is, their marriages were characterized by anger, disappointment, loneliness, negativity, discouragement, frustration, and hopelessness. Their relationships were detached, cold, harsh, and bitter. They felt alone and betrayed. They had hunkered down in

the igloo and hoped for spring, but for many, spring never came.[†]

Almost all of these couples started their marriages in spring. They had great visions of a happy life together. They intended to make their spouse supremely happy. Life would be beautiful. But some of these couples went straight from spring to winter, skipping summer and fall altogether. Others could look back on a former season in their marriages when the flowers bloomed and the sun was shining. Now they have to admit that the flowers have been dead for a long time.

What brought these couples from the anticipation of spring to the harshness of winter in their marriage relationships? Almost without exception, the process involved unresolved conflicts. Differences emerged, and some of these differences became divisive. The couples had no training in how to resolve conflicts, so they ended up trying to convince their spouse of the validity of their own perspective by means of carefully worded arguments. When the arguments were unconvincing, they repeated them with more intensity

[†] The four seasons of marriage refer to the “climate” within a marriage relationship, not the “season of life” a couple is in or the literal season in which they were married. As I explain in the book *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, the natural seasons of the year provide us with an apt analogy for the changes that occur in a marriage relationship.

and blamed their spouse for being illogical and unreasonable. Eventually, tired of arguing, they withdrew from each other, and the coldness of winter settled over the marriage.

Couples have conflicts in all four seasons of marriage. Those who learn to resolve their conflicts spend more time in spring and summer. Those who fail to resolve conflicts inevitably drift to a fall or winter marriage. These unresolved conflicts create a sense of hopelessness for many couples. They see only two options: remain in the marriage and be miserable, or dissolve the marriage and hope that somewhere in the future they will find someone with whom they are “more compatible.” Those who choose the latter option fail to realize that no marriage is without conflict.

I believe there is a third option: Couples who learn how to resolve their conflicts without arguing turn the coldness of winter to the hope and promise of spring. Whatever the season of your marriage—spring, summer, fall, or winter—I believe that your relationship will be strengthened if you can learn the art of resolving conflicts in a positive way.

In this short book, my objective is to help you learn how to understand your spouse so that you can resolve

conflicts rather than simply win (or lose) arguments. When you win an argument, your spouse is the loser. And we all know it's no fun to live with a loser. When you resolve a conflict, you and your spouse both win and your friendship is strengthened. Good marriages are based on friendship, not on winning arguments.

I wrote this book for the thousands of couples who will never seek the services of a professional counselor but who would desperately like to learn how to resolve conflicts. I have chosen to write in the language of everyday life, not with highly technical terminology or lofty theological concepts. My desire is that this book will enhance the quality of your marriage by teaching you how to resolve conflicts without arguing.

1



WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT ARGUING?

*L*et's start at the beginning. In the dating phase of your relationship, chances are that you and your spouse were enamored with each other. You liked what you saw. You enjoyed spending time together. You could talk for hours. He or she was the most wonderful person you could imagine. In short, you were smitten. The courtship may have been long or short, but your positive feelings led you to the marriage altar, where you made a commitment "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, so long as we

both shall live.” The promises you made to each other were colossal, but at the time you fully intended to keep them. You were caught up in the current of love and it all seemed so effortless. You knew that you and your mate had differences, but you never thought that someday those differences would become divisive.

Unfortunately, the euphoric feelings of being in love have an average life span of two years.¹ Then we come back to the world of reality, where theoretical differences become actual. Some of these differences we come to view as assets. Alan likes to cook; Nancy doesn't. She likes to clear the table and wash dishes; he doesn't. These differences make for a harmonious mealtime experience. Alan and Nancy work together as a team, each using his or her expertise for the benefit of the other. They experience the pleasure of harmony and may even express it with statements such as, “We were meant for each other,” “We are a perfect match,” “Life could not be better,” and “I'm so glad I married you.” When differences are viewed as assets, and husbands and wives work together in harmony, life is beautiful.

Other differences may become divisive. Bob likes sports and spends every Monday night watching football. Jill says, "Football is fine for the players, who are making millions of dollars by bashing their bodies against one another, but why would people want to waste their lives watching other people play a stupid game?" Surely the man she married is smarter than that.

"It's just my way of relaxing," Bob says.

"It's just your way of wasting your life," Jill replies.

"You have got to be crazy. Every man in the world watches *Monday Night Football*."

"Only the losers."

"Look, I work five days a week. Give me a break and let me watch football on Monday nights."

"Sure you work. So do I. But how about *us*? Why can't we spend a night together? It's football, baseball, basketball, car races. And if nothing else is on, you watch that dumb wrestling. There's never any time for *us*." Jill starts to cry and walks out of

the room. Bob turns off the TV and now the real fight begins. *Monday Night Football* gives way to a verbal boxing match. Before the evening is over, Bob and Jill will argue themselves into an intense state of unhappiness.

What did an evening of argument accomplish? Some might say, “Nothing,” but that answer would be naive. The argument accomplished a great deal. For one thing, it created greater emotional distance between a husband and wife who now view each other as an enemy rather than a friend. Each feels the other is unreasonable and, perhaps, irrational. Not only that, but they have also stimulated feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment, and troubling questions are rushing to their minds:

“What has gotten into him?”

“What is her problem?”

“I can’t believe the things she said.”

“How could he be so cruel?”

“What happened to our love?”

“Have I married the wrong person?”

They may even end up sleeping in separate bedrooms that night, or lying stock still and rigid in the same bed as they silently replay the argument in their minds. Yes, the argument accomplished a great deal. Unfortunately, the accomplishments were all destructive.

Perhaps the only positive thing that came from the argument was that Bob and Jill identified a point of conflict in their marriage. He discovered that she intensely dislikes his watching *Monday Night Football*, and she discovered that he finds great pleasure in watching football on Monday nights. But because the argument did not resolve the conflict, it now stands as an emotional barrier between them that will affect the way they process their relationship. Now, every Monday night, Bob will watch television with a conscious awareness that he is displeasing his wife. And every Monday night, Jill will say to herself, “He loves football more than he loves me. What kind of husband is that?”

We’ll come back to Bob and Jill later, but first let me clarify what I mean by the word *argue*. It is a word that is best known in the legal arena,

where attorneys present arguments to show that a defendant is either guilty or not guilty. These arguments are statements made by the attorneys based on available evidence. They are designed to appeal to a jury's sense of logic and reason. The implication is clear: Any reasonable person would agree with my argument. On occasion, an attorney may also appeal to the emotions of a jury by presenting aspects of the case designed to stimulate empathy for the attorney's argument.

In a courtroom, arguments are perfectly permissible. In fact, cases could not be tried without arguments from both sides. Both attorneys present evidence and their interpretation of the evidence, seeking to convince the jury that their position is the correct one. Witnesses can be cross-examined, and implications can be challenged. The judicial system is based on the assumption that by means of argument and counterargument, we are likely to discover the truth about guilt or innocence.

We all know that the cause of justice is not always served in the courtroom, but at least the case is resolved. Defendants who are found not guilty

go free. Defendants who are found guilty may pay a fine, be placed on probation, or go to prison, depending on the severity of the case. Or the case might be appealed to a higher court, in which case more arguments would be presented at each level of appeal until a final judgment is handed down. In every case, somebody wins and somebody loses. Occasionally, one might hear an attorney make a statement such as, “I thought our arguments were good, but apparently the jury was not convinced.” Or the winning attorney might say, “We made our case. The arguments were solid, and I think the jury recognized the truth.”

When you choose to argue with your spouse, you are electing to use a judicial system to convince your spouse of the truth or validity of your position. Unfortunately, what works fairly well in a court of law works very poorly in a marriage relationship, because there is no judge available to determine whether you or your spouse is “out of order.” Arguments quickly become charged with emotion and you may end up yelling, screaming, or crying; pouring out words that assassinate your

mate's character; questioning his or her motives; and condemning his or her behavior as unloving, unkind, and undisciplined.

When you argue, your objective is the same as it would be in a courtroom: You want to win the case. You want your side to be vindicated and your spouse to be found guilty of your accusations. This is what is so gravely harmful about arguments. They ultimately lead to one of three results: (1) You win and your spouse loses; (2) you lose and your spouse wins; or (3) you argue to a draw. When an argument ends in a draw, both spouses are losers. Neither one is convinced by the other's arguments, and both parties walk away disappointed, frustrated, hurt, angry, bitter, and often despairing of hope for their marriage.

None of these outcomes is good. The winner may feel good for a few moments or a few days, but eventually, living with the loser becomes unbearable. The loser walks away from an argument like a whipped dog that goes away to lick its wounds. It's not a pretty picture, but it's a common experience. In fact, it's so common that we have a saying for

it: “He’s in the doghouse.” Being in the doghouse means that one spouse has incurred the displeasure of the other and must live at a distance until he or she can once again find the spouse’s favor. When conflicts are not resolved and both spouses walk away with stinging words of rebuke and condemnation ringing in their ears, they will typically withdraw from each other emotionally and hope for a better day. If a better day does not come in time, they may eventually seek a “better partner” or resign themselves to the coldness of a winter marriage.

Any victory won by means of an argument will be short lived. The loser will eventually come back with a new argument (or an old argument restated) in an effort to persuade his or her spouse. But the renewed argument will also end with a win, lose, or draw verdict. So you see, arguments never resolve anything; they only reveal conflicts. Once a conflict is revealed, a couple must find a way to resolve it with dignity and with respect for the other person. I believe there are thousands of couples who would like to learn how to resolve conflicts without arguing. That is the purpose of this book.



PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

1. List three issues you and your spouse have argued about within the past year.
2. What do you find most painful about arguments?
3. What have arguments accomplished in your marriage?
4. On a scale of 1–10, how strongly are you motivated to find a better way to resolve conflicts?



EPILOGUE

*T*he ideas I have shared in this book were not devised in an ivory tower. They grow out of thirty years of listening to couples who have spent hours arguing and have come to the point of desperation. They come from more than forty years of experience in my own marriage. What I have shared with couples in counseling, I have now shared with you. But I am fully aware that knowledge alone is not enough. In order to be helpful, knowledge must be applied to life. Now that you have read the book, I want to challenge you to read it again, this time with your spouse. (You've already seen that the chapters

are short, so you know we're not talking about a great deal of time.) Share your answers to the questions at the end of each chapter. Your answers will reveal your thoughts, feelings, and desires related to the topic of the chapter. Then, as conflicts arise in your marriage, seek to apply the principles you have read and discussed with each other.

Argumentative patterns from the past will not die quickly, but you can learn a better way. It will take time and effort, but it is effort well invested. If the two of you can learn to resolve your conflicts without arguing, you will experience the joy of working in harmony as a team. This is what marriage is all about: a husband and wife using their unique ideas, emotions, and desires to strengthen each other's lives. Resolving conflicts in a healthy manner deepens a marriage relationship. You can learn to resolve conflicts without arguing.

If you find this book helpful, I hope you will share it with a friend. If you have stories to share with me, I invite you to select the Contact link at www.garychapman.org.



SOME THOUGHTS WORTH REMEMBERING

- ☛ When you win an argument, your spouse is the loser. And we all know it's no fun to live with a loser.
- ☛ Arguments accomplish a great deal. Unfortunately, the accomplishments are all destructive.
- ☛ As surely as you can learn to ride a bicycle, drive a car, or use a computer, you can learn how to resolve conflicts.
- ☛ The answer to conflict resolution is not in seeking to rid ourselves of our differences

CHAPTER 1

1. Dorothy Tennov, *Love and Limerence* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 142.

CHAPTER 2

1. Ecclesiastes 4:9.

— *About the Author*

Dr. Gary Chapman is the author of the perennial best seller *The Five Love Languages* (more than 3.5 million copies sold) and numerous other marriage and family books. He is currently working with best-selling author Catherine Palmer on a new fiction series based on *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, the first book of which is scheduled to release in the spring of 2007. Dr. Chapman is the director of Marriage and Family Life Consultants, Inc.; an internationally known speaker; and the host of *A Growing Marriage*, a syndicated radio program heard on more than 100 stations across North America. He and his wife, Karolyn, live in North Carolina.