



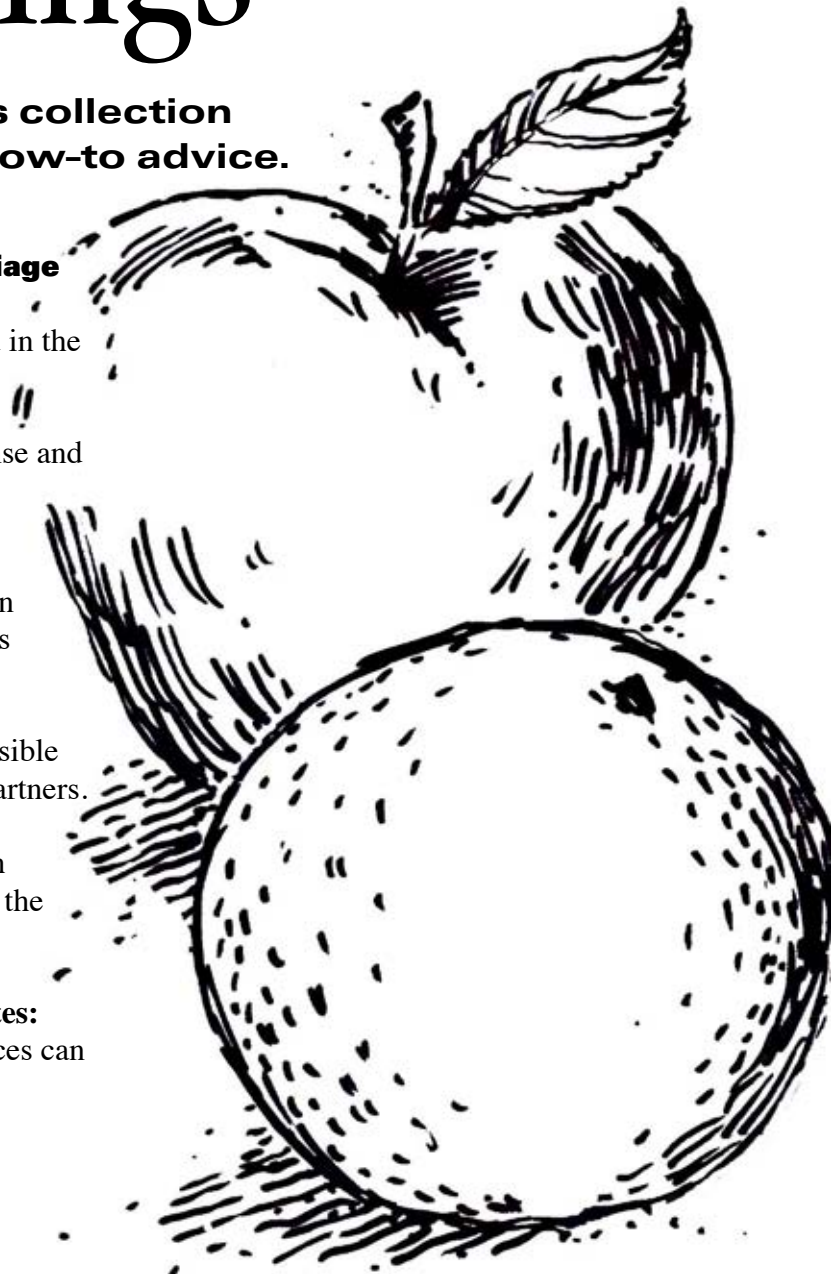
Solve:

Turn Differences into Blessings

Get ready to garden with this collection of tips, plans, and practical how-to advice.

Review — Guiding Principles for Marriage

- **Seek the light:** More truth will be found in the light than the darkness.
- **Notice your feelings:** If we dwell on tense and angry feelings, those feelings will grow.
- **Speak from peace:** Thinking peaceful thoughts prepares us to share ourselves in a helpful way and move our relationships forward.
- **Weed your own garden:** We are responsible for changing ourselves rather than our partners.
- **Manage expectations:** Roses come with thorns. Rather than waste time resenting the thorns, enjoy the rose.
- **When your soul speaks, take great notes:** Focusing on good feelings and experiences can increase their power in our lives.



Turning differences into blessings

We may have very different visions for our shared gardens. One gardener may favor colorful annuals while the other insists on fruit trees. These differences may not simply disappear with a calm discussion. Each partnership will have differences that cannot be resolved. If we choose to stay calm, listen attentively, understand our partner's view, and use creativity, it is possible to turn differences into strengths.

1. Problems that can be weeded out – and problems that can't

Weeds and bugs are a natural part of every garden. With proper care, the garden can still flourish. Likewise, occasional disagreements and conflicts are a natural and normal part of all marriages.

No couple agrees on everything or gets along with each other 100% of the time. In fact, daily irritations and periodic battles are normal. If you've been married longer than 5 minutes, you probably know this. Some conflicts are likely in marriage simply because married couples are so close and they deal with more things together than with anyone else. This closeness and sharing of experiences also makes marriage one of the most rewarding and happy relationships we can have.

In fact, researchers have found that happily married couples "aren't smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than other couples." They are simply willing to keep their negative thoughts and feelings about one another from overwhelming their positive ones. In other words, they don't get so obsessed with the weeds and bugs in their marriage gardens that they forget the flowers.



In addition, these happy couples know which problems can be weeded out of their marriage gardens and which ones can't. According to marriage researcher John Gottman, 70% of what we don't like about our partner will never change. We can pester, threaten, or beg, but some parts of our partner simply are not going to change. Part of having a happy marriage is to accept our spouse, warts and all.

Marital problems come in two kinds: those that are resolvable and those that are perpetual. This lesson focuses on proper "weeding techniques" for resolvable problems and acceptance strategies for coping with long-term differences.

2. Weed eaters are not for marriage gardens

Taking a weed eater to the flower-bed of marriage is not the best way to deal with problems and differences. That's because weed eaters destroy everything in their path. Weeding our marriage gardens is a delicate process that requires a gentler, more caring approach. The weeds must be pulled out by hand. This takes longer, but the results are much better.

Gottman notes that when differences arise in marriage, there are a variety of unhelpful strategies that many couples employ (think of the weed eater). Some of these include:

- Harsh Startups – Immediately attacking or accusing our partner from the start of the conversation. As Gottman puts it, we are "practicing a crabby state of mind."
- Criticism – Attacking our partner's personality or character with accusations and blame (e.g., "You never think of anyone else!" or "How can you be so stupid?"). Criticism produces results completely opposite what was intended. Trying to "fix" someone else almost always backfires.

- Contempt – Intentional insults, name calling, mocking, rolling our eyes, sneering, etc. This is one of the most toxic and destructive behaviors in marriage.
- Defensiveness – Feeling injured by others in response to criticism and contempt and refusing to take responsibility for personal actions. Being defensive blocks a couple’s ability to deal with an issue. Even when one partner feels completely justified in his or her actions, becoming defensive will only add to the couple’s problems.
- Stonewalling – Withdrawing from interactions and refusing to communicate at all. When couples refuse to communicate about their differences, the relationship becomes fragile. Note: It is fair in a relationship to explain to your partner that you are overloaded emotionally and that you need to take a break and calm down before you say something you don’t mean. Once you are calm, however, you should return to the conversation.
- Failed repair attempts – A spouse rejecting his or her partner’s attempts to apologize and soothe hurt feelings.
- Rewriting history for the worst – Telling ourselves that our spouse is “always” this way, that he or she will “never” change, or that we don’t think we “ever” loved him or her.

Another way of saying this is that our “automatic responses can be deadly to marriage.”

That’s because so many of our learned or automatic responses to marital difficulties are counterproductive. We are primed to defend ourselves rather than understand each other. But it’s possible to learn better ways.

In fact, new research challenges the idea that you must express all your feelings of discontent. It turns out that as people talk about their angry feelings, they often get angrier. In addition, when we chew people out, we damage relationships. Usually the best way to deal with angry feelings is to stay calm until we can turn our angry feelings into a reasonable request.

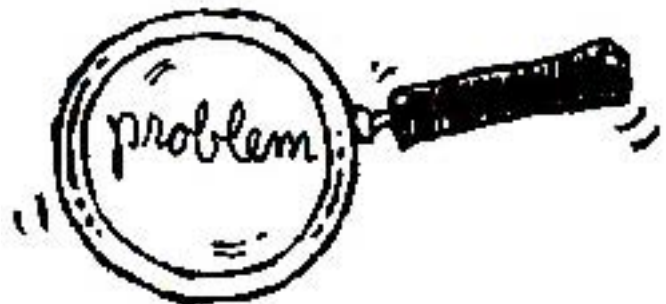
Reflection:

- Why do you think harshness, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, failed repair attempts, and negative thinking are so destructive in marriage relationships?

Key Point: If we are not careful, we may let destructive attitudes and behaviors chip away at our marriages until negativity prevails.

3. Solving the right problem

The first step in developing a healthy approach to solving problems is making sure that we are addressing the right problem in the relationship. Sometimes we ourselves may be that problem. Author and relationship expert C. Terry Warner has said, “If we do not suspect ourselves of having been wrong, our search for what is right won’t be completely sincere.” Searching for what is right takes humility and a realization that our view is not the only (or necessarily the best) view.



Consider the stories of Glen and Becky (as recounted in Warner's book *Bonds That Make Us Free*):

Glen's story

When Glen and Becky married, Glen believed that his wife was just about perfect. In fact, her perfection turned out to be her one fault. Becky was always concerned with doing things "just right" and fulfilling every "supposed to" she had ever heard. Glen found Becky's perfectionist mind set most troubling at Christmas time. She did not believe that you ought to give a gift unless you made it yourself. She thought buying a gift was thoughtless. She also believed that Christmas cards had to be hand made and the letters had to be hand written. Becky's homemade gift philosophy applied to family and friends alike. Glen went along with Becky initially, but as their own and their extended families grew, preparing for Christmas became more of a challenge. Every year it seemed they had to start their preparations earlier. Glen began to feel like Christmas was a black hole that was swallowing up the entire year. And the thing he resented the most was Becky saying that she "felt like she was dragging everyone else through Christmas" and that if it wasn't for her "no one would ever get a present ready or even think about making Christmas nice."

Becky's story

Becky looked forward to building family traditions that would hold their family together and Christmas seemed to be a good time to do that. She believed that making homemade gifts was one of the best ways to share something of oneself and show how much they cared. Glen did things like that before they were married so she thought he would continue to share her commitment. Becky would not have minded buying gifts, if they were thoughtfully picked out so they would be meaningful to the person

receiving them. But as a young couple, money was tight so making gifts was a practical way to be economical. Becky was frustrated that Glen seemed oblivious to her efforts to economize while still making Christmas nice and meaningful. She was also frustrated by Glen's willingness to leave everything to her at Christmas time. He would postpone anything that she asked him to do and she could see the enthusiasm drain out of him whenever there was something about Christmas that needed to be done. His work seemed more important to him than his family. So, in order to keep it all from being put off till the last minute, Becky would start talking about Christmas early, hoping to get Glen interested and involved, and allowing herself more time to do it if he was unwilling.



Glen and Becky are sharing accounts of the same events, yet they experienced them very differently. In Glen's mind, he had to hold back; otherwise, Christmas would have taken over their lives. In Becky's mind, she had to pressure Glen; otherwise, he wouldn't do anything at all to prepare for Christmas. What each of them thought was the solution to their problem was the very problem the other was trying to solve. They were unwilling to see and experience life from each other's point of view.

Seeing our spouse as the problem is the problem. Sometimes in marriage we tell stories in very different ways. Unfortunately, the stories we tell often portray our spouse as the villain and us as the hero. When we do this we are not open to our spouse's views or who they are as a person. We may even begin to see them as less than human. We may begin to see and treat them as an object. We are on unstable ground when we begin to see our spouse as a tool we can use to get what we want, an obstacle in the way of our happiness, or as someone whose opinions and feelings just don't matter.

If we find ourselves criticizing and accusing others, boasting, becoming angry, lying, or justifying ourselves, we have the opportunity to decide whether we will continue to do so or whether we will do something different. Instead we can ask ourselves, “Might I be in the wrong?” or “What is the right thing to do?” or “What is the other person struggling with?” and then let the truth guide our actions.

One of the most important parts of solving the right problem is to get our hearts right. Softening our hearts toward our spouse frees us from the prison of our accusing, self-victimizing thoughts and feelings. We no longer feel threatened by our spouse. We are able to see and experience life more fully and clearly. This was the case with Glen and Becky.

A change of heart:

One Christmas, Becky and a friend decided to make some homemade gifts for a few of their friends. Glen explains that around that time something happened that he cannot completely remember or reconstruct, but he began to soften his heart toward Becky. Glen recalls being very much in love and vowing to honestly put his whole heart into anything Becky wanted him to do that Christmas season. The vow was not based on gritty determination or a desire to suppress his wants in favor of Becky’s. It was a vow without reservation that came from the bottom of his heart.

Glen followed his heart that he had fully opened to Becky that Christmas season. He cheerfully participated in all Christmas preparations, from assisting with the homemade gifts to the writing of the Christmas cards. One evening, in the midst of homemade gift making, Becky said something that stunned Glen. She said, “Why don’t we put all this stuff away and just sit and enjoy being together?” She went on to say, “It doesn’t matter that much if we don’t get all these gifts

finished.” She then expressed her concern for Glen and his work. She wanted him to have time to do all that he needed to at work. Becky’s heart had changed toward Glen as well.

The remainder of that Christmas season they worked on some projects, but not at the expense of more important things. They relaxed and enjoyed the season. Even though they did not get everything done it did not bother Becky at all. It was a very happy Christmas season.



The power of a change of heart is not mysterious. Warner points out that “When we abandon our resentments, we no longer live in a resentful world. Others become real to us. We have a sense of how they feel and what will please them. And pleasing them is what we desire to do, because we have put away our resentment.” That’s exactly what Glen and Becky did. They each responded with more sensitivity and care to the other’s growing sensitivity and care.

Solving the right problem also requires a willingness to be open to our spouse’s views. There are two keys to opening our hearts to our partners: understanding his or her perspective and validating his or her feelings.

Perspective-taking:

Honestly try to put yourself in the place of your spouse. Try to see, feel, and experience the issue as he or she does. This can be a difficult thing to do because as C. Terry Warner has pointed out, “It is the nature of most humans to assume they are seeing the world correctly. This is self-fulfilling. We see things in a way that assures us that our way of seeing things is right.” Just remember that we may not be seeing things correctly, and we never see everything.

Validation:

Validation involves understanding and valuing our spouse. To validate our spouse we must:

- a. Listen by giving our full attention.
- b. Listen to the emotions being expressed.
- c. Listen to the needs being expressed.
- d. Understand the issue from the other person's point of view.

Reflection:

- When have you experienced a positive change of heart toward someone? How has it influenced that relationship?
- What is it like to have someone earnestly try to see something from your point of view?
- What steps do you take to see things from your partner's point of view?

Key Point: Problem solving requires a change of heart and a humble, willing attitude. It requires us to be willing to see and experience things from our spouse's point of view.

4. Creative and helpful weeding techniques

Problem solving often requires creativity. There are many possible ways to solve problems in marriage. We can consider multiple courses of action. We can soften our hearts. We can team up with our partner to identify solutions that will work best for both of us. We can compromise. We can use appropriate humor. We can seek the well-being of our partner over our own self-interest.

If neither partner is willing to budge no progress will be made. Cooperation is a key to change in problem solving. We need to stop thinking of each other as the problem and team up against an outside problem. For example, maybe a wife is too tired at the end of the day to worry about intimacy, so the husband makes it his responsibility to get the children ready for bed. This requires a change in behavior (and attitude) and a realization that what we have been doing is not working and is perhaps even wrong.

Reflection:

- What is one way that you have been creative in solving a relationship problem?

Key Point: If what we have been trying is not working, let's change our hearts and try something new.

John Gottman points out that there are some important things couples can do to resolve conflict in a loving relationship—things that will help us overcome our automatic responses.

■ **Soften your startup** – A soft startup doesn't necessarily have to be diplomatic. It just has to be devoid of criticism or contempt. This is crucial to resolving conflicts because discussions invariably end on the same note they begin. If you feel too angry to discuss a matter calmly, it's best not to discuss it at all until you've calmed down. Keep in mind that if your words focus on how you're feeling rather than on accusing your spouse, your discussion will be far more successful.

■ **Learn to make and receive repair attempts** – A repair attempt is any statement or action (silly or otherwise) that prevents negativity from escalating out of control. It is an effort to heal the relationship.

- **Soothe yourself and each other** – You do not have to get angry about your differences. You can calm yourself and your partner by speaking in a soft voice, smiling, using humor, speaking non-defensively, relaxing, calling “time out,” thinking positively about your partner, etc.

- **Compromise** – The cornerstone of any compromise is a willingness to accept influence from your spouse. You don’t always have to have things your way.

- **Be tolerant of each other’s faults** – If you don’t, you will be on a relentless campaign to change your spouse.

Reflection:

- Think of a time when you have worked well together to solve a difficult problem. What did you do that worked?
- Think of a time when you have done well at one or more of the following:
 1. Stayed calm in the face of a difference with your partner.
 2. Been open to your partner’s views.
 3. Considered multiple courses of action for solving a problem.
 4. Accepted some differences as part of a relationship.
 5. Allowed time for change.

Write a short description of what you did.

What else do you feel prompted to do to make your relationship better?



Key Point: Not all marital problems can be resolved but some can. It is our job to accept some differences that may not change and work to peacefully resolve those that can.

5. Not all differences in marriage can (or need to) be weeded out

In both this lesson and in Lesson 3 (Nurture), we’ve noted that about 70% of what we don’t like about our partner may never change.

Diane Sollee, director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education, says, “Every couple has about 10 unresolvable differences. The reason couples divorce is they don’t know how to deal with those differences.” Sollee says, “Even if you switch partners, you’ll still have about 10 unresolvable differences.” You simply have to learn how to live with some of your differences.

Sometimes when things don’t seem to be going well in a relationship, we focus much of our time and attention on the problems, and we may even begin to see our partner as the problem. But it’s important to keep our perspective during difficult times.

Consider the following story:

“Lucky for him...”

On her golden wedding anniversary, my grandmother revealed the secret of her long and happy marriage. “On my wedding day, I decided to choose ten of my husband’s faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook,” she explained. A guest asked her to name some of the faults. “To tell the truth,” she replied, “I never did get around to

listing them. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, ‘Lucky for him that’s one of the ten.’” (Roderick MacFarlane, *Reader’s Digest*, Dec.1992, p.104)

Differences of opinion, taste, and belief are a part of all relationships. We can accept some differences as a part of our relationships. In fact, John Gottman believes that the key to all conflict resolution requires “communicating a basic acceptance of our partner’s personality.”

It has been said that fault-finding is our national blood sport. Unfortunately, many of us spend too much time finding fault with our spouse, rather than focusing on his or her good qualities and endearing attributes. If we are unwilling to accept differences in our spouse, why would we expect our spouse to accept differences in us?

Consider this story:

The Grapefruit Syndrome

As a newlywed, Ms. Lola Walters read in a magazine that in order to strengthen a marriage a couple should have regular, candid sharing sessions in which they would list any mannerisms they found annoying. She wrote: “We were to name five things we found annoying, and I started off. ... I told him I didn’t like the way he ate grapefruit. He peeled it and ate it like an orange! Nobody else I knew ate grapefruit like that. Could a girl be expected to spend a lifetime, even eternity, watching her husband eat grapefruit like an orange! After I finished, it was his turn to tell the things he disliked about me. ... He said, ‘Well, to tell the truth, I can’t think of anything I don’t like about you, Honey.’ Gasp. I quickly turned my back because I didn’t know how to explain the tears that had filled my eyes and were running down my face. ... Whenever I hear of married couples being incompatible, I always wonder if they are suffering from what I now call the Grapefruit Syndrome.” (Joe J. Christensen, *Ensign*, May 1995, pp. 64-66)

Reflection:

- What lessons or ideas in these stories stood out most for you?
- What is it like to have someone overlook one of your faults?
- What might it mean to someone else (e.g., your spouse) if you overlooked one of their faults?
- Imagine what would happen in your relationship if you spent most of your time thinking and talking about the things you do not like about your spouse.
- In contrast, imagine what would happen in your relationship if you spent the majority of your time thinking and talking about the good in your spouse and your marriage relationship.

Key Point: Pointing out someone’s faults and criticizing them doesn’t usually inspire them to change or cooperate with you.

6. Some differences are blessings

Most couples who marry do so because they love each other very much, they have many things in common, they have shared goals, and they have hopes and dreams for their future together. However, most couples soon realize that they have a number of differences as well. For example, a wife is an excellent financial manager and her husband is not. A husband is a great cook and really enjoys being in the kitchen while his wife is less interested in cooking. A wife really enjoys gardening and focuses her efforts on maintaining a beautiful flower bed, while her husband focuses more on keeping the lawn looking nice.

If we are not careful we may let these differences become major sources of contention. A husband may say to his wife, “How come you’re always so concerned about where every penny gets spent?” A wife may say to her husband, “Why do you spend so much time on the yard? There are other things that need to be done as well.”

A better choice is for spouses to look at their differences as blessings, rather than as annoyances or major sources of conflict. For example, a husband with a wife who manages money well may tell her, “I sure am glad you are so conscientious with money. You make sure the bills get paid on time and our account balances. That’s something I don’t have to worry about.” A wife with a husband who takes pride in maintaining a nice yard may say, “Thank you for keeping the yard looking so nice. It really is inviting.”

Reflection:

- What are some differences you have with your spouse that you think of as blessings? Are there other differences that you can begin to think of and see as blessings?

Key Point: Differences can be seen as blessings rather than points of contention.

Each of us can work toward a bountiful harvest

Additional lessons will provide many more ideas for developing a healthy marriage garden. You may find many more ways to build toward the garden of your dreams in these lessons.

“For a marriage to go forward happily, you need to pardon each other and give up on past resentments.” —John Gottman

Concluding Reflection:

Think of a situation in which you have often acted badly. Think how to apply the ideas in this publication to that situation. Mentally rehearse the new way, then try it.

For example, you may decide to remain calm when your partner does something you do not like or you may decide to accept a difference in your partner you have been struggling to change. Picture specific things you will do. Imagine the likely response. Prepare yourself to handle any difficulties. In your mind, practice carrying out your plan several times.

Teaching Resources:

Teaching tips and teaching outline

Select the major points you want to emphasize. Build a session using the stories, exercises, and group discussion that your time allows.

Resources you might use:

Arbinger Institute. (2000). *Leadership and self-deception: Getting out of the box*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Gottman, J.M. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Fireside.

Gottman, J.M. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Gottman, J.M. (2001). *The Relationship Cure*. New York: Crown.

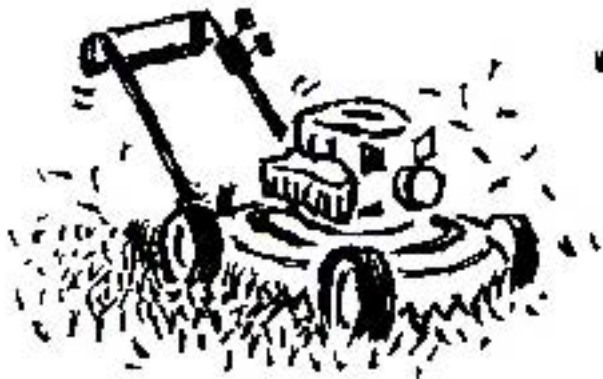
Warner, C. T. (2001). *Bonds That Make us Free: Healing Our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves*. Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain.

Supplemental stories:

Sports Nut

I had always been a bit of a sports nut when it came to college and professional football. This was a challenge at home because my wife cannot stand football. When the playoffs rolled around she felt she lost me on Saturdays as well as Sundays. Moreover, when I was immersed in a game in front of the TV, I had to have absolute quiet.

Generally, it was understood that my Saturday contribution to the chores around the house was the great outdoors. I had the lawn, the flower beds, the garden in the summer, and even walking Beaugard, our greyhound. Often on Saturdays in the early fall, when I had squandered the morning by sleeping late or talking on the phone, my wife would wait until the game had started and then fire up the lawnmower right outside the family room window where I was. She knew I hated to have her do the lawn or, heaven forbid, have the neighbors see her doing it. I think that is why she would go around to mow the front lawn first. Sometimes I would shut the blinds and turn up the TV. Other times, I would go outside and in a truly Oscar-winning martyr performance, forcibly take the lawn mower from her, increase the speed of the self-propelled monster, and resentfully attend to the task. I did this all the while telling myself I had a witch for a wife.



Meanwhile, she would storm inside and begin vacuuming—the family room first, of course—so as to be able to remind me later that she had “already done that room, and “I don’t want it messed up again.” My presence in the room, of course, was what would mess it up. Last fall each Saturday unfolded more or less like this. Although the exact events would vary, the attitude and childish complaining were the same. This year I geared up for another long string of miserable Saturdays.



One Friday night in late August my neighbor good naturedly said to me, “Well, it is just about time for the football wars to start.” I thought he was talking about the college season beginning and agreed that it would be great to see who was going to prevail in the race for the conference crown. He smiled and said, “Well, yes, that will be interesting, but not quite as interesting as the wars at your house as to when the lawn will get mown.” I laughed and waved and walked in the house seething. I had no idea the ongoing battle between my wife and I was public knowledge. I tried to tell myself this whole thing was her fault—was a symptom of her obsession about how the lawn needed to be done before anything else. Then I made the mistake of looking in the mirror. It was as if my own face were calling me out. I avoided looking in my own eyes.

The problem was this. I am a manager in a manufacturing plant. I am good at seeing when employees give themselves excuses for not just doing what needs to be done. There I was, doing the same thing at home and feeling justified about it. I had my story down pat. It was my wife’s Nazi-like insistence on messing up my one hobby, my one way to relax, that was my problem. I had to stand firm or I would

be trapped doing chores all day long and have no freedom at all. Wait. I was already trapped. I spent so much time resisting getting the lawn done, that I either did take all day doing it, or I would miss the game trying to make sure she didn't embarrass me in front of the neighbors by trying to do it herself. No wonder the neighbors had us figured out. We were on stage every Saturday.

I put my manager hat on at home and examined my behavior as if I had been a recalcitrant employee. The solution was so obvious it was embarrassing all over again. Get up, do the lawn, water the garden, watch the game, walk the dog. What I had seen as my wife's problem became a recognition of my own foolishness. I changed in an instant.

I got up, did the lawn, watered the garden, and so on, for three straight Saturdays before she came to me and said, "O.K. What are you up to? This isn't you." I had to confess that what wasn't me was the way I had been behaving before. I was unwilling to be at home what I prided myself in being at work. The irritation of how we attacked Saturdays was, in this case, a problem of my own creation.

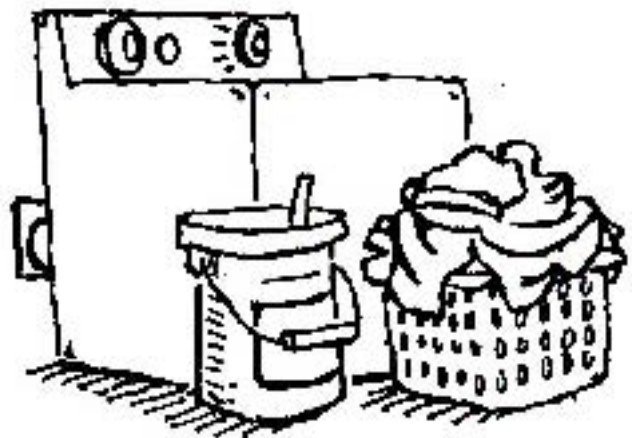
I wish the solutions to differences were always this easy. And yet, other little problems my wife and I had began to look different. This change seemed to have something to do with my willingness to identify and accept my role in our problems—to get my heart right toward my wife—instead of seeking to blame her for all that I thought was wrong in our relationship. It also had something to do with each of us being interested in how we could make a positive change regarding the differences we had. We work through more things now. We are more patient, more willing to laugh, more willing to examine possibilities. Maybe our situation has changed only slightly. But who we are with each other has changed greatly.

Nag No More

My husband thinks I constantly nag him to do things around the house for me. On one occasion, I was 8-months pregnant and had purchased an economy size bucket of laundry detergent. I had struggled mightily to get the detergent into the trunk of my car. Since I was pregnant, I couldn't lift the heavy detergent from the trunk when I arrived home. I asked my husband if he would please go out to the car and bring the detergent in for me. He got distracted and didn't do it, so I asked him again the next day, and the next.

I finally decided I was not going to nag him any longer so I didn't mention the detergent again. I knew that I could go at least a week or more without washing any clothes. Only a few days passed and my husband woke up early one morning with no clean pants to wear to work. He asked me why he didn't have any clean clothes and I responded that the detergent was still in the trunk of my car.

That afternoon when I arrived at home the detergent was in the laundry room and he had started washing clothes. I had to be creative and come up with a way to get the detergent into the house without nagging him to death.



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