

Walls

Protecting and Destroying Marriages Every Day

A wall is defined in many ways particularly with respect to literal and figurative representations. In general a wall is used to hold something up, keep something out, keep something in, or keep things separated. Figuratively speaking, a wall in marriage serves a similar purpose. In a negative sense, a wall divides and emotionally separates you from your spouse and causes long term damage to your relationship with him or her. In a positive sense, a wall can protect your marriage by providing a hedge of protection around your relationship thereby creating a safe environment that allows for healing and growth.

All marriages contain both positive and negative walls to some extent. Some walls are small and not more than a level or two and are easily stepped over and around. In other words, some walls in and of themselves, are easily ignored or are so immaterial they have little impact on the overall health of the marriage. Other walls have become so high they appear to be unmovable. But, appearance isn't always reality. This is particularly true when it comes to tearing down negative walls and building positive walls in their place. To begin the process of tearing down negative walls you must first understand how the walls were created.

The Symptoms

For every wall in a marriage there are corresponding symptoms and a root purpose for that wall. Symptoms are a reaction to or caused by the wall being there, but not the root reason for the wall. To explain, let's look at negative walls first. Symptoms or results of negative walls include separation, lack of emotional attachment, anger, hurt, etc. If your spouse emotionally hurts you each time you are in a particular situation your tendency will be to avoid that situation or react in such a way as to try and prevent being emotionally hurt.

Let's assume your wife is very critical of your driving. You know each time you are riding together she will instruct you on how to drive, criticize the way you drive, and/or get angry with you about how you are driving. Your response is to get offended and begin to resent her because of her unsolicited advice and criticism. And it is only downhill from there. Each other's actions and comments are taken personally and a wall is built separating them emotionally. Every driving experience simply adds to the height and thickness of the wall.

Your wife's 'advice' and the offense you feel are only symptoms of the event but not the root problem. There are several issue that can be at the root and only by talking with your spouse will you be able to identify the actual root issue. Let me throw out a couple of options to help you understand this concept.

Let's assume your wife thinks you drive too fast. From her perspective, she is likely not at all concerned about your driving because she wants to control you or make you do things her way. If that was the case, she would advise you about your driving every time you grabbed the keys, whether or not she was going to be in the vehicle with you. Much the same way both of you would do with a teen who was taking the family car out for the night. The root issue may simply be that her main concern is safety and the speed of your driving is making her 'feel' unsafe. Her concern, whether warranted or not, is how she feels and she is expressing her fear through a very natural response, opposing it by criticizing your driving. From your perspective, you feel that your wife should trust that you know what you are doing and that she should trust you. As the husband, you see her criticizing as an attack against you personally and as an attack against your ego and pride. The root problem is not that she is hurting your feelings it is more that you feel she sees you as a failure, you are failing to make her feel safe. No one likes to be a failure, so rather than change your driving style, you react emotionally and begin to defend your driving ability. This inflames her concerns which elevates her criticism, thereby stepping up your defense and the cycle spins out of control until neither of you is talking. The symptom became the focal point of the argument and the root of the problem was never addressed. In most cases, the root problem is never even identified so, the cycle is almost guaranteed to repeat itself the next time you are in the vehicle together.

The Solution

A simple solution to this cycle is to address the root problem instead of the symptom which avoids making the conversation personal. Your wife can state that she knows you are a great driver, but at the moment she feels a bit uncomfortable by the speed at which you're driving. She is simply saying she doesn't like fast driving. It has nothing to do with your driving ability, it is just the way she is wired and would feel the same way with anyone driving at that speed. You, on the other hand, now know that she is not questioning your driving ability, but simply stating that she doesn't like driving fast. This should be as non threatening as her saying she does not like being on roller coasters. As such, you should honor your wife's request and slow down. Trying to convince her that she has nothing to fear or that driving fast is better, is a fruitless effort. It is also pointless, does plus or minus five miles-per-hour really make any difference? I suspect, if you're honest, it really doesn't make any difference.

Dismantling Walls

Avoiding walls is relatively simple if you understand and address the root problem. By doing so the symptoms usually take care of themselves. But what do you do about walls, particularly high walls, that already exist? The goal is the same, address the root problem, but the process is bit different.

Recall the purpose of a wall is to hold something up, keep something out, keep something in, or keep things separated. When tearing down a negative wall, one that separates for example, measures need to be taken to prepare for the fallout from that wall coming down. To illustrate let's look at Terry's situation. Terry and his wife, Alice, had gotten to the point where they rarely communicated except to yell at each other. Regardless of the other person's comment it was almost always taken negatively. Both felt they were being criticized by the other which triggered a defensive response. The wall between Terry and Alice was very high and quite thick and neither was willing to begin dismantling the wall. The logical question is, if things were so bad why weren't Terry and Alice willing to work toward taking down that wall? The answer is simple, both had contributed to building that wall to protect themselves from the emotional attacks of the other. If the wall was gone, they felt they would be completely vulnerable and both were certain that being vulnerable would lead to more pain and heartache. So, like a wounded animal, their instinct was to push anything that approached them away for fear of getting hurt more even if the acts of their spouse were intended to help the relationship.

From the outside looking in, Terry and Alice's reactions make no sense and appear illogical. But in the heat of the battle, couples tends to go with natural instinct instead of logic. To get past this stage a wall of protection, a safety zone, around the marriage needs to be built. What I mean by that is an environment must be created where each couple feels safe in letting their anger out and to expose their feelings without fear of their spouse attacking them or using their vulnerability against them. This takes time and a huge effort. Over weeks and months, each person will begin to trust in the wall of protection, the safety zone, and begin to open up more as time passes.

It should be noted in the early stages of this process things typically get worse before they get better. This is a logical response. As each person begins to open up, test the waters so to speak, they will get scared and push back out of fear. This is especially true when only one person is making the effort to build the outer wall of protection. Mainly because you have probably gone through more than one cycle of 'being good' only to revert back to old habits and the cycle of emotional pain continues.

It takes time to rebuild trust so, give your spouse lots of freedom to move toward you and freedom to push back. Pushing back is a good sign. It shows that your spouse is wanting to rebuild trust he/she is just being cautious in doing so.

There will also be times when the outer wall of protection will get damaged meaning you reverted back to a bad habit, said something you shouldn't have said. That's okay, walls get damaged. When that happens, just repair the damage. This can come in the form of an apology, a discussion about what happened, why it was wrong, and how to help avoid it from happening in the future. Everyone is going to fail. The failure is not the issue, it's what you do with the failure that makes all the difference.

Final question: are you building walls of protection around your marriage or between you and your spouse?