

COMMON MARRIAGE “STRESSORS” AND HOW TO MANAGE THEM AS A TEAM

*Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

—Proverbs 12:18

Overview

Conflict in marriage is inevitable, normal, and even necessary for building a healthy marriage. A longitudinal study carried out by John Gottman and associates from the University of Washington in Seattle resulted in two major findings on why some marriages succeed and others fail:

1. Couples stay together if their ratio of positive to negative interchanges is five to one.
2. Couples stay together if they discover a conflict resolution process that works for them and allows them to deal effectively with differences and marital stressors.

Husbands and wives can handle marital conflicts in ways that escalate the conflicts or in ways that successfully address them. The first stage of marital conflict is a negative interchange or “marital pinch.” Two destructive methods of addressing a marital pinch use “power over” techniques that consume the energy and resources of a couple as they work against each other. The “power with” model encourages couples to work together as a team, using the energy and resources of both husband and wife to face and find solutions to common marital conflicts.

The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage readings for this session:
pp. 95–96, 200–201, 202–203, 226–227, 228–229.

① Which method do you think your spouse uses most?

Answering this question is a bit risky, so contemplate your choice carefully!

- **Avoid:** My spouse usually ignores problems to avoid conflict.
- **Accommodate:** My spouse usually gives in to keep peace.
- **Compete:** My spouse usually starts an argument and then tries to win it.
- **Compromise:** My spouse usually gives a little and takes a little to settle a conflict.
- **Collaborate:** My spouse usually looks for a win-win solution that meets the needs of both of us.

② Steps to resolve problems:

- **Identify and define the problem:** Find out what needs of yours are in conflict with your spouse's needs.
- **Generate possible solutions to the problem:** Brainstorm a solution or solutions that meet your needs and your spouse's needs.
- **Evaluate all possible solutions:** Test out the pros and cons of each solution.
- **Make a decision:** Make a joint decision about a new action or plan to address the problem.
- **Implement the decision:** Agree on who is to do what and by when. Jot this down so it's not forgotten.
- **Evaluate the solution:** Review how the plan is working. If it's going well, celebrate. If the plan isn't working, decide what changes need to be made to make it work better.



Martin Luther wrote: "No one can have real happiness in marriage who does not recognize in firm faith that this estate together with all its works, however insignificant, is pleasing to God and precious in his sight."

—Luther's Works 45:42

Use the following questions to get discussion going in your small group. When your discussion time is up, return to the large group.

- 1** The recent study led by John Gottman highlights two major criteria for making marriages work: a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interchanges and a conflict resolution process that works for the couple. Do you agree or disagree with these criteria? What other criteria would you add for a successful marriage?
- 2** A “marital pinch” is any comment or behavior that makes a marriage partner feel belittled, demeaned, diminished, used, or controlled. It is the first of four stages of conflict:

Stage 1: Marital Pinch

Stage 2: Conflict Avoided—hurt, resentment, disappointment, anger, disillusionment, rage, denial, and guilt

Stage 3: Conflict Unresolved—apathy, indifference, and depression

Stage 4: Relationship Destroyed

Make a list of reasons why couples, in general, are afraid to address marital conflicts.

- 3** Here is the model of a marital pinch addressed and resolved:

Stage 1: Marital Pinch

Stage 2: Conflict Shared—risk, clarification, listening, non-defensive communication, “I” messages, problem-solving

Stage 3: Conflict Resolved—love, respect, care

Stage 4: Relationship Restored

Using the four stages above, tell about a time when you and your spouse successfully addressed a marital pinch.

- 4** Three methods couples typically use to address conflicts are “power over” (husband), “power over” (wife), and “power with” (together). What model did you see demonstrated when you were growing up? Does this have anything to do with the way you address conflicts now?

Wrap-Up



Group response for closing litany: Thank you, God.

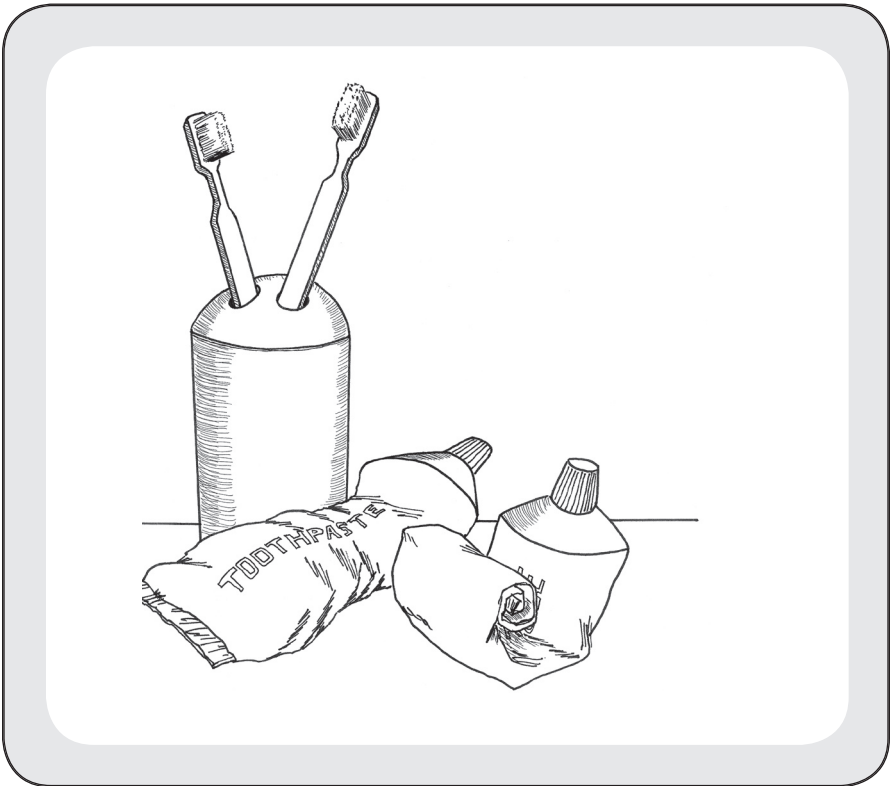
The questions and activities on this page are for you and your spouse to use as you wish. Be sure to read the selected *Handbook* pages too.

Discuss: What did we learn from this session that will affect the way we address conflict in the future?

Try this: Use the six steps to resolving problems (p. 13) to brainstorm creative solutions and come up with a plan for negotiating where you go for holidays, getting household chores done, or sharing the TV remote control. (The *Handbook* readings for this session can help you get started.)

Celebrate: Plan a meal that the two of you can prepare and enjoy together.

Read: For Session 3, read pages 86–89, 90–91, and 92–94 in *The Lutheran Handbook on Marriage*.



*When you marry, you do not suddenly become of one mind.
Don't expect to be in total agreement all the time.*