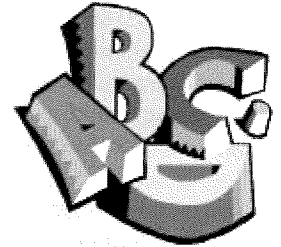


The “ABCs” of Resolving Relational Conflict Between Couples

By Marta J. Papa, P.C.



Marta J. Papa is an Attorney, Mediator and President of a successful family law firm in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ways to help couples overcome difficulties in love and marriage is essential information for any

counselor. With divorce rates maintaining their grip on 50% of all marriages, relationship difficulties remain at the top of the list of issues that bring people to counseling. Following these “ABC’s” will help counselors give couples a map for success in their relationships and for resolving conflicts while keeping the relationship intact.

- A. Alternative methods for resolving conflict between couples in a way that keeps their relationship intact;
- B. Best practices to help couples maintain an intimate relationship without either partner losing their sense of self;
- C. Conscious awareness of putting the common goal of preserving the welfare of their union above each individual’s goals.

In my practice as a divorce mediator I hear both sides of the story from couples who see separation or divorce as their only option. What I hear repeatedly is their struggle to maintain a union without losing themselves as individuals in the process. Lack of respect for their differences pushes them to try to

resolve their differences at all costs. I watch them blame the other, shame the other, threaten, coerce, and belittle the other, all in an attempt to maintain the illusion that they must have the same set of beliefs for their marriage to be safe. Where did we learn that we must clone each other in order to have a meaningful intimate relationship?

Cannot a Republican be happily married to a Democrat? Cannot a Protestant live in a respectful, intimate relationship with a Catholic? What about differences in the level of education, societal position, wealth, race, and differing parenting beliefs? How can a counselor help couples navigate their way to mutually respectful, equal, and intimate relationships in spite of their differences? A closer examination of the “ABCs” may be the answer:

A. Alternative methods for resolving conflict between couples in a way that keeps their relationship intact.

The most common method of “trying to get what you want from someone else” is to use Positional Bargaining. This concept was coined by two Harvard business graduate students, Roger Fisher and William Ury. Their senior dissertation sought to answer/explore how people resolved conflict (or in other words, bargained for what they wanted from another person). Positional Bargaining was clearly the most popular method. In Positional Bargaining one person starts with a “Position” and presents it to the other party in an effort to reach agreement. The parties are seen as opponents, each of whom thinks there is only one right

(Continued on Page 6)

solution—theirs! Expounding on this theory, Fisher and Ury eventually concluded that such bargaining 1) damages relationships; 2) polarizes people; and 3) discourages exploration of the other options that might resolve the issue.

These researchers reported another method of conflict resolution which they named “Interest Based Negotiation.” This alternative method of bargaining focuses on satisfying both parties’ interests and is a problem-solving process to reach a mutually acceptable solution. The characteristics of “Interest Based Bargaining” include 1) separating the problem from the person; 2) seeing the negotiators as cooperative problem-solvers, rather than opponents; and 3) focusing on interests instead of positions. This breakthrough research revolutionized the way businesses negotiated with each other. However, counseling theory and practice has been slow to incorporate it into work with intimate relationships.

Their methodology has been adapted by mediation theorists and is extremely successful in helping couples learn new methods of resolving conflict that does not destroy their existing relationship. How? Interest Based Bargaining separates the problem from the person, and the “blaming” between couples stops. Encountering a problem does not mean the parties’ union is in peril. The problem is NOT the other person. This realization minimizes the fear that the problem will destroy the relationship, encouraging couples to discuss it openly and explore possible solutions to the problem. The introduction of Interest Based Negotiation to therapy opens doors that the couple never knew existed.

B. Best Practices to help couples maintain an intimate relationship without either partner losing their sense of self.

A common way to attempt to prevent the distancing that disagreement often creates for couples is for one side to give in or to compromise their beliefs. Interest Based Bargaining offers an alternative. First, remember to separate the problem from the person. Next, with both parties clarifying their interests/needs, instead of sticking to a position, couples are able express their deepest beliefs, needs, and concerns without criticism of the other. This act actually bolsters the sense of self. Understanding the partner’s core set of beliefs and how those are manifested in actions helps make specific acts seem less personal. By just listening to the partner’s rationale without judging it, one may feel closer to the partner and feel less attacked. Another

encouraging result of this method is that it opens up dialogue between couples in which they can explain how they meant their actions to be perceived, thus easing the disconnect that began when their actions were perceived as threatening instead of loving.

C. Conscious awareness of putting the common goal of preserving the welfare of their union (relationship) ahead of either party’s personal goals.

Americans live in a culture of competition, inequality, and pressure to conform to certain standards. Surviving in this culture encourages actions of self-preservation at all costs, thoughts of “better than,” and selfishness. When these principles carry over to intimate relationships, well, they are doomed from the beginning. Becoming aware of when such beliefs are impacting a relationship unnecessarily can go a long way toward reducing conflict. One does not always need to be on the offensive and ready for fight or flight. There are “safe places,” and being with a partner is, hopefully, one of them. One can then consciously let go of the defensiveness many feel on a daily basis and slip into the warmth of a safe relationship. While in this frame of mind one finally has the opportunity to prioritize personal goals along with relationship goals and can make better choices when such goals conflict. By defining and prioritizing interests, one is less likely to endanger the long-term interest of the intimate relationship in exchange for a personal choice that is less than a top priority.

You now have a new tool to use with clients: the “ABCs” of Resolving Relational Conflict with couples. Introducing new methodologies into your practice can be as exciting as it is successful. As one who has seen amazing results from implementing these Interest Based concepts into my practice, I wish you the same success.