

Conflict: Helpful or Harmful

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Containing Marital Forest Fires

You may have heard about the raging forest fires in Australia three years ago. At the time, I was actually living in Sydney. Though I was never directly affected by the flames, the smoke was bad enough that it sometimes limited visibility and made it hard to breathe properly.

It got me thinking about all the fires which take place here in Utah every summer. I remember first becoming aware of these fires when I was about 11 or 12 years old. After that recognition, it seemed that was the only thing I heard about during those summer months: how bad the fires were. As I got older, I learned that these forest fires were a natural phenomenon. So, I began to wonder: if these fires are normal, why do we talk about them so much? It seemed like most fires were not harming people, but we still talked nonstop about them.

Now, here I am studying family life. And it seems there is an analogy here for our marriages: conflict is normal, but, yes, sometimes the conflict gets out of hand and harmful. We can find ourselves talking nonstop and “fanning the flames,” so to speak. Or maybe we are on high alert scanning the horizon for any sign of conflict sparks and hotspots. So, when a conflict is *starting* to get out of hand – or when it is *already* out of hand – what can you do?

Couple counseling may be a helpful solution for your relationship if the fire is threatening to do some damage.

Let’s consider together Taylor’s and Brian’s relationship. They seem to get frustrated with each other over irritating habits (which are very common according to a recent BYU study of newlywed couples^[1]). Taylor prefers her clothing to be hung a certain way in the closet, and when Brian’s side of the closet does not look as organized as hers, she lectures him. This then starts an argument where Brian brings up the way Taylor loads the dishwasher. These arguments grow quickly from hotspots to a raging fire. And conflicts like this occur four or more times a week. If Taylor and Brian’s relationship sounds like yours, counseling may be the right solution for you.

Taylor is most likely to initiate the idea. For couples who seek counseling, women usually broach the idea of [therapy](#) and may be more enthusiastic about it. But this initial difference may turn up the heat because Brian may see the problem as *her* problem, not his. So, the first step to making couples counseling work is to get on the same page. [Research](#) suggests that couples who approach therapy with similar expectations and goals are more likely to experience an increase in their relationship commitment and sexual satisfaction. However, couples who initially start out with different expectations and goals for therapy can benefit too – if they stick with it – because over time, with the help of a good counselor, they become more aligned.

Just like a fire can be contained and extinguished, so can relationship conflict. It’s normal to experience differences and so-called incompatibilities. Yet recognizing when you need to call in extra forces to douse the flames is a strong sign that you care about each other and your marriage.

Clara Scoresby is the primary author of this blog.

[1] Yorgason, J. B., James, S. L., Holmes, E. K., Busby, D. M., Duncan, S. F., Hill, E. J., ... & Bradford, B. D. (2017). Couple relationships and transition experiences (CREATE) codebook (wave 1). #Provo, UT: School of Family Life, Brigham Young University.

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