

# *The North Fulton Marriage Newsletter*

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## **Build Intimacy with Conflict**

It will seem counter-intuitive but conflict in relationships can build intimacy, especially in your marriage. Couples will think that their marriage is flawed because they fight and argue. Could be or it could be that their marriage is flawed because they do not resolve fights and arguments (conflict). My wife and I argue. It's perfectly healthy if it does not get ugly or abusive. Marriage researcher and therapist John Gottman admits that he and his wife have arguments on the way to lead marital workshops. Think about that! They will actually process through their conflicts in front of workshop participants in an effort to model how to recover from a fight or argument. Recover or recovery is also a word you should learn within the context of your relationship. Some couples that I see for marriage counseling will initially report that they don't express their feelings to each other at all, unless it is in the form of an argument. Then, after the argument, they will let the resentment and anger fester by not speaking to each other for hours or sometimes days. Not good. I challenge these couples (and you) to work at expressing your feelings on a minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour basis. Get it out! My dad used to tell my mom "I don't want to read about it in the newspaper." In other words, tell me how you feel instead of me having to figure out how you feel in some other indirect way. If you can do this—express your feelings consistently—you will probably find that your balloon does not burst as often. It is really simple physics; your body and spirit only has the capacity to handle a finite amount of resentment or angst. Get it out a little bit at a time.

The deeper point here is that if you can successfully resolve small conflicts with your spouse on a daily basis, then this will build intimacy on a daily basis. Allow the conflict or tension to become an opportunity to work through something difficult with your spouse. Then, once resolved, you can look back on the recovery from this conflict as something the two of you worked through together. Allow yourself to become closer to your spouse through conflict instead of becoming more distant. Folks that successfully recover from addiction problems will tell you that at the beginning of everyday they have to tell themselves "I'm not going to drink today," or something along those lines. For couples struggling with marriage problems, it is really no different. You have to be able to say to yourself every day, "Today, I will not let my feelings fester and I will work on my marriage." Really, whether we have marital problems or not, we should all do this, make a conscious effort to work on our relationship daily. I mentioned this newsletter topic to a client of mine, and the client's response was: (paraphrasing) "Well, yeah, conflict should be a virtual breeding ground for opportunities to build intimacy." And that it should be.

One of the basic intake questions I will ask clients is "are your parents still married?" As you would expect, quite often the answer is no. The follow up question is usually "when did they divorce and what happened?" Without fail a VERY common answer is "they just grew apart." They just grew apart. What does that mean? I really could not tell you, but I would bet it has a lot to do with how they resolved conflict. As you move forward with your marriage, see to it that conflicts will allow you and your spouse to grow together, not apart. Then maybe your children can answer "yes" when asked if their parents are still married.

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