



Love and respect in marriage Emerson Eggerichs

Have you ever had a discussion with a spouse when suddenly their spirit deflated? Did you recognize at that instance that the issue that you were talking about was no longer the issue?

Have you ever asked this question: What is the issue when the issue isn't the issue?

The diet book

For example, a wife has been complaining about the fact that she is ten pounds overweight. The next day, her husband is at a bookstore and sees a book entitled *Dieting for Today's Busy Woman*. He buys the book and brings it home. As he hands her the book she reads the title. He sees her face going into shock and observes her spirit deflate. He notices her standing there in utter disbelief. He asks, "What's wrong?" She yells, "You men have two brains. One is lost and the other is out looking for it."

Why did she react in this manner? The issue is no longer about the diet book. Instead, she hears another message that has nothing to do with dieting: "I do not accept you, I do not approve of you, and I do not love who you are unless you look like a Dallas Cowboy football cheerleader."

Interestingly, if the roles were reversed and she purchased him a diet book he would reply as she hands it to him, "Hey, thanks. By the way, what's for dinner?" He does not go ballistic.

Why the different response based on gender? Research has been done on body image issues. They have noted that even a female model who is almost perfect in physique still will look at herself in a floor-length mirror and see all of her flaws and take part in self-deprecation. Whereas a man who has a forty-pound spread in the front and a forty-pound spread in the back looks at himself in a floor-length mirror and still sees Atlas inside.

What also fascinates me is that if this wife's best girlfriend purchased a diet book for her she would reply, "Oh, you're so sweet for thinking of me. Hey, should we do the diet together? Do you want to start today?" She does not go ballistic.

The third marriage book

Or consider another married couple. They have been married for two years, and this last year she purchased two marriage books for them to read. Today she bought the third marriage book and brought it home.

She leaves it on the stand next to his recliner and when he comes home he sees the third marriage book sitting there. His spirit deflates. He says to himself, "Great, just great. Another marriage book!" He puts it in the drawer. He refuses to even acknowledge that she bought it. Why? He hears this message: "I do not accept you, I do not approve of you, and I do not respect who you are unless you change and become more loving like me."



Interestingly, if he were to buy a third marriage book for her she would be elated. She would be on the phone with her girlfriends bragging, "He bought us a marriage book. We are connecting. We are soulmates."

The marriage book energizes her whereas it de-energizes him.

What is going on with the diet and the marriage book?

At a certain point it was no longer about the diet book or the marriage book. The root issue was that she was feeling very unloved and he was feeling very disrespected.

Here is my thesis: during marital conflict when the issue is no longer the issue, most wives feel unloved and most husbands feel disrespected.

True need versus felt need

Am I arguing that wives do not need respect and husbands do not need love? Not at all. In fact, all of us need love and respect equally. However, during conflicts the felt need differs among males and females.

We have asked seven thousand people this question: When you're in a conflict with your spouse, do you feel unloved at that moment or disrespected? Eighty-three percent of the men say they feel disrespected. Seventy-two percent of the women say they feel unloved. That is as different as night is from day, as pink is from blue, as man is from woman.

Let me insert, love and respect are not synonymous. A mother can love her teenage boy but not feel respect for him due to his misbehavior. Or, we can respect our boss without feeling any love for him. Many wives have candidly stated, "I love my husband, I really do, but I struggle with respecting him." Upon reflection, all of us know that love and respect differ.

Author and researcher Shaunti Feldhan surveyed four hundred American men, asking, "Would you rather be left alone and unloved in the world or be viewed as inadequate and disrespected by everyone?" Over 74 percent of the men said they would rather be left alone and unloved. In other words, most men cannot handle the feeling that you view them as inadequate and don't respect them because of it.

Again, though, women need respect and men need love. We might put it this way: the best way to respect a wife is to meet her felt need for love, especially during marital tension. The best way to love a husband is to meet his felt need for respect, especially during conflict.

Narcissistic males?

Does this felt need for respect make the husband narcissistic? After all, most women would see respect as a marginal issue. To most wives, "if we love each other that's all that matters!" Yes, a man could be narcissistic just as a woman can be a prima donna for wanting to be the special object of love, but most folks should not be profiled in such a manner. Most often they only appear this way. We will see in a moment that many of the negative reactions in marriage result from an honest misunderstanding of male and female.



In the defense of the male, he is hardwired this way. Research has found that even in teenage boys there's a hardwiring to feel respected. It has been reported that "Males and females become reactive to different kinds of stress... Relationship conflict is what drives a teen girl's stress system wild. She needs to be liked and socially connected; a teen boy needs to be respected" (Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* [New York: Broadway Books, 2006], 34–35).

Mantra

Regardless, some wives react to the idea of putting on respect toward a man.

Women have said to me things like:

- "Dr. Emerson, I have to be honest with you. I don't feel respect for him and it would be hypocritical for me to show respect when I don't feel it, and I know you don't want me to be a hypocrite."
- "The dictionary definition of showing respect is to one's superiors and I am not inferior to him. I will not be treated like a doormat. We are equal."
- "Everyone knows respect must be earned. He has not earned my respect and does not deserve my respect."
- "I certainly am not going to give him license to do what he wants to do, and respecting him would be saying to him, 'I respect the bad things you are doing.'"
- "My suspicion is that you have a hidden agenda of returning to male patriarchy and want women to fear male dominance. But I am not going there. That would set back the feminist team by fifty years."
- "Respecting a man leads to emotional abuse and I am not going to subject myself to emotional abuse."
- "But other than these things, I am open to what you have to say about respect."

When I share these things at our conferences, the crowd bursts into laughter. These are the sentiments of most wives. They are the land mines we step on when espousing the idea of putting on respect toward the spirit of the male.

Sadly, we have missed the heart of most men. Men serve and die for honor. One man said to his wife, "I love you so much I would die for you." She replied, "Oh, Harry, you keep saying that but you never do." Humor aside, this is how men feel about issues of honor and respect. Men are highly motivated by respecting each other whereas some women say, "Gag me!"

Here's an important axiom: the key to motivating another person is to meet that person's felt need, especially during conflict. When a husband appears loving during a marital conflict, his wife will remain soft in her response. When a wife appears respectful in how she talks during a major disagreement with her husband, he will remain soft in spirit and connected to her emotionally.

Why love and respect?

Why the two variables of love and respect?

The University of Washington studied two thousand couples in a laboratory setting for twenty years. They recorded everything ranging from conversations to blood pressure. During that time, they



discovered the key to why marriages succeed or fail. They reported that the two key ingredients are love and respect.

In the book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, we read Professor John Gottman's words, ". . . most couples I've worked with over the years, really wanted just two things from their marriage—love and respect" (p. 18). He says elsewhere, "In our study of long-term marriages we recruited couples from a wide range of backgrounds who had been married twenty to forty years to the same partner. Despite the wide differences in occupations, lifestyles, and the details of their day-to-day lives, I sense a remarkable similarity in the tone of their conversations. No matter what style of marriage they have adopted, their discussions, for the most part, are carried along by a strong undercurrent of two basic ingredients: love and respect" (p. 61).

Gender differences

A powerful revelation is that the researchers found statistically significant male and female differences that caused the women to feel unloved and the men to feel disrespected.

For example, 85 percent of those who stonewall and withdraw during marital conflict is the man. This is a colossal male and female difference. What they found also is that during these conflicted moments, the heart beats per minute (BPM) of the men would reach 99, which is referred to as warrior mode. For these husbands there must either be fight or flight. Because the husband does not want to escalate the conflict into an out-of-control fight, he pulls away. He might say, "Drop it. Forget it. Let's move on. I don't want to talk about it."

In a man's world, it is the honorable thing to withdraw and calm down. It is not honorable to allow a conflict to escalate out of control.

When the researchers asked the women what they felt during that withdrawal, the ladies reported that they could not imagine shutting down over such a minor criticism. They said that it felt like an act of hostility.

In other words, it felt very unloving. The lack of love!

On the other hand, it was statistically significant that during conflict women by and large criticized and complained. Typically, they would move toward the man and express some criticism or complaint.

In a woman's world, it is the loving thing to move toward the husband to confront the issue, resolve the conflict, reconcile heart to heart, and feel connected. It is not loving to allow a conflict to remain unresolved between two people who care for each other. Two people must talk about what they are feeling.

When the researchers asked the men how they felt about the wives' aggressive approach, the men replied that ongoing criticism felt like contempt for who they were as human beings.

Not a few men felt that she was using the topic as another opportunity to send the message that she did not like who he was as a person. She found him inadequate and did not respect him. The lack of respect!



Who is right?

When a wife moves toward her husband to criticize and complain, she is actually seeking to confront him because she cares. She does not confront to control him but to help him and their marriage. She longs to be one with him.

To her the criticism is an act of care. However, to him the criticism is an act of contempt.

Who is right? Yes. It just depends on whether or not you're recording in pink or in blue.

On the other side of the equation, when a husband withdraws from his wife to calm down and to prevent the conflict from escalating, he is actually seeking to do the honorable thing. He goes quiet and drops the matter to keep their relationship on good terms. He does not have a need to talk about it but to move on. Many of the issues are no big deal.

However, to her the stonewalling and withdrawing is an act of hostility. Whereas to him his withdrawal is an act of honor.

Who is right? Yes. It just depends on whether not you're recording in pink or in blue.

Why his focus on respect?

One reason that men focus on respect during conflict is that he is already assured of his wife's love for him. Within the nature of most women is a desire to nurture and love. Women love to love at the level of intimacy. Therefore, during squabbles he rarely doubts her love for him. After a marital argument, ask George if his wife loves him and he will say "yes!" On the other hand, ask George if his wife likes him and he will reply, "No, not today." Most husbands feel loved but do not always feel respected, and feeling respected for who he is deep within himself is a big deal to men.

During conflicts, many wives will say to their husbands, "I love you. That's why I'm bringing this criticism." He retorts, "I know that you love me but I don't feel that you respect me. I feel like I can never be good enough."

I have had husbands ask me, "Is there something wrong with me because I'd rather live with a woman who respected me but did not love me than with a woman who loved me but did not respect me?"

Why her focus on love?

Because it is within her nature to nurture and because she loves to love, many wives wonder if their husbands love them as much as she loves him. During serious conflicts, not a few wives tend to doubt their husbands' love. "If he loves me why is he so harsh and angry?" Thus, she yearns for reassurance. She will ask, "Do you love me? Tell me that you love me."

The card industry figured this out. There's not one card from a husband to a wife that says, "Baby, I really respect you." All the cards declare, "I love you!"

Yes, a wife also feels disrespected. However, if a husband keeps showing disrespect week after week she will eventually say, "How can you treat me disrespectfully and say that you love me?" She lands on love. On the other hand, treat a husband disrespectfully and he is unlikely to say, "How can you treat me disrespectfully and say that you love me?" He knows she loves him. Instead he says, "I don't



deserve this disrespect. Everybody respects me but you." We hear this line in a movie: "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy asking him to love her." We never hear, "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy asking him to respect her." And at the end of a movie the male hero embraces the damsel, declaring, "I will love you the rest of my life," not "I will respect you the rest of my life."

She focuses on love. He focuses on respect. But all is not lost, for I discovered there is a connection between love and respect.

The crazy cycle

When a wife feels unloved she tends to react in a way that feels disrespectful to her husband. She's not trying to be disrespectful but that's how she appears. In receiving the diet book, she feels unloved but when she calls her husband a brainless idiot for buying the diet book, she appears disrespectful.

When a husband feels disrespected he tends to react in a way that feels unloving to his wife. He's not trying to be unloving but that's how he appears. In receiving the third marriage book, he feels disrespected but when he withdraws into silence, refusing to read the marriage book, he appears unloving.

In these situations, couples go round and round. I call this the Crazy Cycle: Without love a wife reacts without respect. Without respect a husband reacts without respect. Each feels de-energized and deflates when feeling unloved and disrespected. Each's defensive reaction appears offensive.

Air hoses

An image that helps couples is that of the Love Tank and the Respect Tank. She has a Love Tank connected by an air hose. When he steps on her air hose, she negatively reacts. She pushes him off her air hose and inadvertently stands on his air hose. He has a Respect Tank connected by an air hose. When she steps on his air hose, he negatively reacts. He pushes her off his air hose but inadvertently steps on her air hose. Some couples go back and forth this way for years.

Why do couples keep spinning on the crazy cycle?

Couples keep spinning on the Crazy Cycle because they truly believe the negative reaction will motivate the other to awaken to their lack of love and respect. "Get off my air hose. You hurt and offend me!"

When wives do not feel loved after receiving the diet book, they react in ways that feel disrespectful to their husbands in order to motivate the men to change and recommit to loving them no matter what. Of course, that rarely works. In the face of her name-calling, usually a husband does not awaken to her message, "Please tell me that you love me no matter what." Instead, he deflates over what feels like a disrespectful reaction when she labels him as brainless for buying the diet book.

Her goal is to do the loving thing in helping him see that he was unloving, but he only sees her as disrespectful. They keep spinning.

When husbands do not feel respected after receiving the third marriage book, they react in ways that feel unloving to their wives in order to motivate the women to show them more respect. Of course, that rarely works. In the face of his stonewalling, usually a wife does not awaken to his message, "Please



treat me with more respect.” Instead, she deflates over what feels like an unloving reaction when he ignores her request to read the marriage book.

His goal is to do the honorable thing in helping her see that she was disrespectful, but she only sees him as unloving. They keep spinning.

One cannot deprive another of their basic need for love and respect as a way of motivating the other to meet one’s need for love and respect.

How can we help such couples?

As professionals, how can we help couples get off the Crazy Cycle? We must instill in them these six helps. You can coach them to do the following:

1. Decode the goodwill in your spouse.

A wife is not trying to be disrespectful when criticizing and complaining but actually trying to do the loving thing on the heels of feeling unloved. In her heart, this is not an act of contempt but an act of care. A husband must give her the benefit of the doubt.

A husband is not trying to be unloving when withdrawing and stonewalling but actually trying to do the respectful thing on the heels of feeling disrespected. In his heart, this is not an act of hostility but an act of honor. A wife must give him the benefit of the doubt.

Both must avoid the conclusion that the other lacks goodwill. But it won’t be easy. After all, she does not withdraw and stonewall, so why does he keep doing this unless he lacked goodwill and felt that she did not matter to her because he really didn’t love her? From his view, he does not keep criticizing and complaining week after week, so why does she keep doing this unless she did not have goodwill and did not appreciate and respect him as a person?

I share a story that helps couples applying decoding. I tell them to imagine traveling on a bus of forty people who intend to travel all night to Texas. The bus does not leave right away since the driver was waiting for four more. Finally, they arrive. A dad with his three kids. As the bus takes off, the father sits in front of you and stares out the window. However, the kids start running up and down the aisle out of control. The dad ignores them. You begin to fume as do the others. How could this dad be so permissive and uncaring and these kids be so disrespectful?

In anger, you tap the dad on the shoulder and tell him to have the kids sit down. He turns from a dazed look and says, “Oh, I am really sorry. Please forgive me. We just came from the hospital. My wife and their mother just died.” He then turns and stares out the window.

I ask, “Where did your emotions go?” In a nano-second they went from anger to empathy and compassion. With a small piece of information, you decoded. You thought the father was a permissive, uncaring person, but he was in shock. He was in personal pain. The kids were not rebellious but had just lost their mommy and were acting out.

I share that as a married couple they are on a marital bus ride. One is emotionally acting out while the other is stonewalling. However, though a wife appears disrespectful and emotional, is she hurting and



crying out for love? Though a husband appears unloving and heartless, is he hurting and sending the message, "I need you to respect who I am apart from my performance?"

Decoding turns hurt and anger into empathy. When we decode, we stop the Crazy Cycle.

As professionals, we must challenge couples to assume their spouse has goodwill but that their gender causes them to react in ways that do not feel like they have goodwill.

2. Humbly tell your spouse what you need instead of appearing unloving and disrespectful.

When we misrepresent ourselves, we will be misinterpreted.

When a wife appears disrespectful when criticizing and complaining, her husband will find it hard to hear the deeper cry of her heart, "Love me." It is crucial that she say to him, "I am not trying to be disrespectful or to dishonor you. Instead, I need your strength and reassurance that you love me. I want to resolve issues because when I feel things are not good between us, I feel fear and unloved."

When a husband appears unloving when withdrawing and stonewalling, his wife will find it difficult to hear his request, "Please show me more respect." It is necessary to say to her, "I am pulling back to calm down. I am trying to do the honorable thing even though it feels unloving to you. My heart beats are at ninety-nine. I am not trying to be unloving. I want things between us to be okay and friendly. Give me twenty minutes to calm down and then let's talk about the main thing for fifteen more minutes. Let's come up with one plan of action."

3. Understand the difference between vulnerability and childishness in your spouse

Because a wife cannot imagine withdrawing and stonewalling on the heels of minor criticisms and complaints that are rooted in her caring and loving nature does not mean her husband is childish for not grasping this like she does. Instead, she needs to recognize that he has a vulnerability where she has a natural strength. He hears criticisms as contempt for who he is as a man in a way that she cannot picture. For this reason she must judge him but empathize with him as she lets him know she moves toward him for reassurance of his love and not because she intends to "diss" him.

Because a husband cannot imagine criticizing and complaining someone who withdrew and stonewalled out of an honorable desire to calm down and keep things from getting out of control does not mean his wife is childish for not understanding this like he does. Instead, he needs to acknowledge that she has a vulnerability where he has a natural strength. She responds to withdrawing and stonewalling as a statement that says, "I do not care to connect with you because I do not feel any love for you right now." For this reason, he must not judge her but empathize with her as he lets her know that he pulls back to prevent himself from escalating the argument. He does this to protect her because of his sense of honor, not because he wishes to treat her unlovingly. Even so, he will seek to stay more engaged with her as an act of love.

4. When things heat up, ask yourself the most fundamental question of all.

A couple stays off the Crazy Cycle when a husband asks himself, "Is that which I am about to say going to sound loving or unloving to my wife?"



She can slow down the Crazy Cycle when she asks herself, "Is what I am about to say going to sound respectful or disrespectful to him?"

5. Always recognize your personal bias in favor of your own felt needs for love and respect with the result that you overlook your spouse's felt need during conflicts.

A wife more naturally focuses on love and unintentionally overlooks a husband's focus on respect. In other words, a wife filters her marriage through pink sunglasses, and this colors what she sees. She can see his lack of love when he doesn't. He sees her reaction not as rooted in the feeling she's being unloved but as disrespectful. Of course, that isn't her intent; even so, he reacts in a way that feels even more unloving! The Crazy Cycle!

A husband more naturally focuses on respect and unintentionally overlooks a wife's focus on love. In other words, a husband filters his marriage through blue sunglasses, and this colors what he sees. He can see her lack of respect when she doesn't. She sees his reaction not as rooted in the feeling she's being disrespectful but as unloving. Of course, he isn't trying to be unloving. He would literally die for her if she doesn't kill him first! Even so, she reacts in a way that feels even more disrespectful. The Crazy Cycle!

6. You can do this!

Some couples say, "I cannot do this!" But I reply, suppose you are having a huge fight with your spouse with yelling and screaming. Suppose you feel they are driving you mad and you're losing emotional control because of them. Just then the phone rings. When you answer it, are you cool, calm, and collected? Yes. All of us have the ability to stop our "out of control" moment. We fool ourselves into thinking otherwise.

Or look at it another way. Suppose a camera crew followed you around for six weeks filming all that you did in your marriage. If at the end of six weeks you never got angry at each other, they would reward you with \$10,000,000 tax free. Would you get angry over that six-week period of time? No.

Here's the truth. You can do this. You just aren't sure you're getting paid enough.

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