

HEALTHY ARGUING

by Paul Meier, M.D.

I remember one couple, Bob and Mary, in their early 50's, who came to see me for a psychiatric evaluation. They were both very polite and somewhat mechanical in their speech and mannerisms. He was a successful accountant and she was a surgical nurse. They had been married for 30 years and had no children. When I asked them why they came to see me, they said they had both lived with depression for 30 years, even though they loved each other and were committed to each other for life.

I asked them lots of medical questions to rule out genetic depressions. They had no relatives with a history of depression, and both of them were relatively happy until they got married. Also, neither had a depression-causing disease such as hypothyroidism.

Since Mary was an R.N., I explained to them exactly what I was thinking, "This is a puzzle to me. It sounds like the depression must be related to your marriage, but you say you love each other and get along quite well."

"That is correct," Bob asserted.

"Well, you both have low brain levels of serotonin, because for the past 30 years you have experienced insomnia, low energy, some trouble concentrating in comparison to your youth, and almost constant sadness. But you don't seem to have inherited this condition -- it started for both of you within a few months after you got married. Probably 90% of the situational depressions I see are caused by repressed anger at others (bitterness) or toward one's self (true or false guilt). Have either of you done things that you feel guilty about still?"

"No," Bob replied. "We are committed Christians, active in our church, and have tried to always do what's right."

"Well," I replied, "then logically there's a good chance you are both angry at each other deep down inside your souls. When is the last time you got angry at each other and what types of things do you argue about?"

To my astonishment they both said that they had NEVER been angry at each other in 30 years of marriage and had NEVER had an argument. To their astonishment, rather than praising them for their self-control, I replied, "I feel very sad right now about what you just told me because if you never argue with each other and never get angry at each other, one of you isn't necessary! One of you put your brain on a shelf the day you got married and let the other one do all the thinking!"

After all three of us recovered from our mutual shock and discussed their marriage further, we discovered that Bob was the one who made all of their decisions. Mary misunderstood the mutual submission applications in Ephesians and thought it was her spiritual duty to do whatever her husband said, without question, without argument, and without even wondering if he was being selfish in his choices.

Marriages like this don't work. In a healthy marriage the husband values the wife and her entire personality and what she has to offer, and is willing to sacrifice his life for hers, like Christ and His church (His bride). In a healthy marriage, both partners "speak the truth in love." Neither Bob nor Mary understood the truth about their own feelings and certainly didn't speak about their anger when it was truly being experienced.

Solomon said in Proverbs that friends should sharpen each other like iron sharpens iron.

When iron sharpens iron, sometimes sparks fly. It implies having healthy friction.

Bob and Mary came to see me every week for about nine months. I didn't do much talking during that time. As soon as they came in my office for each session, I said, "What's the last thing either of you felt emotional about, in a good way or an angry way?" Then I persuaded them not to tell me about it, but look each other in the eyes and say something like, "Bob, I felt angry at you when you chose where we would go on vacation and didn't even ask me where I would like go to."

The basic rules of communication I taught them were:

- (1) Speak the truth (even the truth about feeling angry) in a loving manner.
- (2) No shoulds or shouldn'ts are allowed in your talk to each other, because the partner using them is being the other one's parent instead of the other one's mate.
- (3) Use "I feel" messages—talk about your emotions as much as about the facts.
- (4) Don't jump to conclusions about what your mate is thinking or feeling. If you want to know, ask him. If you want to be sure he understood, ask him to repeat back to you what you just told him. (You'd be surprised by how much things get twisted in our own minds!)
- (5) You share feelings of love and anger with each other to become more intimate, not further apart. You process your reactions. You grow more Christ-like from this process. You understand each other better. You both serve the other. You are on the same team, not competing with each other for control or "most wins" in arguments. You see polite arguing as a good thing, helping you both see the truth better.

After nine months of marriage counseling, Bob and Mary had practiced enough in front of me to do it on their own. They loved each other on a much deeper level, experienced true sexual intimacy for the first time, and were both relieved to be over 30 years of depression due to "stuffing" their emotions.

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Dr. Meier received his Masters of Science degree in Cardiovascular Physiology from Michigan State University, his Medical Degree (M.D.) from the University of Arkansas College of Medicine, and completed his psychiatric residency at Duke University. Dr. Meier attended graduate courses at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, in 1975-76 while as a full-time faculty member. He also holds a Master of Arts degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, where he served as a full-time faculty member in pastoral counseling for 12 years.

In 1999, Dr. Meier was honored by the American Association of Christian Counselors with a Lifetime Achievement Award at their Worldwide Conference. In 2006, Dr. Meier was named as a Physician of the Year by The National Republican Congressional Committee and honored at a reception by the President of the United States and Congress in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Meier has been a guest on numerous radio and television programs throughout his professional career, including Oprah Winfrey, The Tom Snyder Show, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, Joyce Meyer, Paula White, and Radio Free Europe. He has been honored to teach and speak at many universities and seminaries throughout the world, often lecturing on insight-oriented therapy and other related topics. Dr. Meier has authored or co-authored over 80 books and written numerous articles for magazines and other publications.