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FIX-IT TALK

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Nighttime is a hard time for Joanne Jennings, a Denver mother of a three year old and a six month old baby. Joanne works part-time as a librarian while raising her children. Her husband Todd, an insurance broker, comes home from long days at the office and disappears into his bedroom, leaving Joanne to man the fort alone. "I really resent that Todd doesn't think he needs to lift a finger at home. We both come home from work exhausted, and he just expects me to cook dinner, entertain the kids and then put them to bed by myself as well." For a long time, Joanne never said anything to Todd. After burning dinner three nights in a row because she was with the baby, she realized that something had to be done. "Unfortunately, every time I broached the problem, he'd either snap defensively or blow up. Neither of us know how to talk about problems without anger, resentment or hurt."

### **The Many Colors of Conflict**

Conflicts come in all shapes and sizes. Even in the healthiest of marriages, spouses occasionally annoy, frustrate, and anger each other. What does your spouse do that bothers you, and you wish you could change? Maybe you'd like your husband to be more open with you about finances, so you can make important decisions about how to spend money together. Maybe you feel sick of his little digs about how you still haven't lost that extra weight since the baby. Or maybe you're tired of your spouse's complaints about your paltry salary, especially now that there's a family to care for. However you wish your

spouse would change, the way you present the problem will have a big affect on how it is resolved.

Every couple forges its own strategy for coping with the challenges of living in tandem. Are you quick to anger? Do you jump to the defensive, no matter what the comment? Is your spouse reluctant to acknowledge that something is bothering her? Couples devise patterns of interaction based partly on how their parents' behaved and partly on the chemistry of their unique personalities.

In an ideal world, each of us would know how to make problem-solving painless and even fun. However, a lot of the young parents I see in my practice come from single-parent or broken homes, so they've had limited exposure to positive marital problem-solving in action. And without a model, many young parents instead fall into what I call "toxic talk," that is, ways of solving problems that cause more harm than good. Toxic talk includes demands, threats, and guilt-based manipulations. While these modes of discussion can be effective in the short-term, they create environments rife with hostility that in the long run injure both partners.

### **Why Toxic Talk Doesn't Work**

"All I want is some peace and quiet, and a dinner that is baked, not scorched," said Todd, as the kids were both screaming and Joanne pulled a blackened chicken out of the oven.

"So how come you never pitch in?" Joanne shouted, exasperated. "Why don't you ever cook or even feed the baby? All you ever think about is yourself." Todd, furious, stormed out of the room.

Joanne and Todd's dialogue failed them on two fronts. First, it didn't solve the problem: Todd continued to want to relax and then eat dinner in a peaceful environment; Joanne continued to feel overwhelmed and resentful of Todd's behavior.

Second, the toxic talk ruined the rest of their evening. They hardly spoke at dinner. Joanne yelled at her three-year old Adam for staying up past his bedtime, and Todd went to bed without a word. Not only was the whole night wrecked, Joanne and Todd lost an opportunity to grow and better understand each other.

### **How to Do Fix-It Talk**

Fortunately, there are techniques for turning grapes of wrath into a wine that pleases you both. I call this process Fix-It Talk. Fix-It Talk is a set of learnable skills, so even if you and your spouse cringe at criticism now, don't despair. Fix-It Talk is a five step process. Like any new skill, Fix-It Talk takes practice. With time, however, you and your spouse will be able to feel the satisfaction and joy of working through even your stickiest conflicts together.

**1. Admit that Something is Wrong.** The first step of Fix-It Talk a Fix-It thought--listen to the voice that tells you something is bothering you. Many people stifle such voices, hoping to avoid conflict. Unfortunately, if problems are not addressed they tend to magnify rather than disappear. Like untreated wounds, conflicts get infected if left untended. "For a long time I never admitted how much it annoyed me that Todd didn't help with the kids while I made dinner, and then he also expected me to put them to bed," said Joanne. "One night while we were stacking the dishwasher I screamed at him for not getting all the food off a plate. I suddenly realized that I held him responsible for the fact that I felt perpetually overwhelmed." For Joanne, the realization that yelling at Todd over a dirty plate indicated she was harboring a deeper anger was the first step in her Fix-It Talk.

How do you react when something bothers you? Do you deny the situation, and try to nurture yourself through television, food, or alcohol? Do you take it out on other people, and find yourself being short-tempered and irritable with someone who has done

nothing wrong? Such behaviors are your emotional thermometer letting you know that everything is not okay. If you feel irritated but aren't sure why, take a time-out. Find a quiet time and place, and ask yourself (as you would your child) "Why do I feel this way? Who said or did something that upset me? What do I want?" The more specific the questions you ask yourself, the easier time you'll have pinpointing the source of your frustration.

**2. Describe the Dilemma.** Once you've identified the problem in your own head, the next step is to present the problem to your spouse in a way that maximizes your effectiveness by minimizing your spouse's defensiveness. But how?

First, focus on the facts. When we're upset, it's easy to make generalizations and criticisms of the person rather than the situation which has hurt us. "Todd is so lazy and self-absorbed," Joanne found herself thinking. When she took a walk to try to figure out exactly what was wrong, she realized that the fact that Todd chose to retreat to his room rather than help her play with the kids and cook dinner made her perceive him as lazy and self-absorbed. By making a distinction between his personality and his actions, Joanne could understand the conflict in a more objective light.

Next, make yourself the subject. Try to describe your feelings in the first person. A sentence that starts with the word "I" avoids placing all the blame on your spouse. For example, instead of saying "You're so unhelpful when you come home from work," try "I feel overwhelmed when I'm trying to cook and stop the kids from fighting all at the same time."

By describing the situation as **you** perceive it and keeping the focus on how **you** feel, you'll enable your spouse to see the situation from your shoes, rather than jumping to the defensive because he feels incriminated or accused. When Joanne explained to Todd how she felt, he responded by taking her cue. "I'm just so exhausted from being on my feet at work all day," he explained. "I need some time to lie down, relax, and read or I'll be

cranky for the rest of the evening. But I had no idea you resented putting Adam to bed. I always thought that was your special time, just like you said your mom used to have with you."

**3. Make a Request.** Your choice of words and the tone of your voice play a large role in determining the success of your request. If you yell at your spouse in an angry, accusatory voice and demand that he change, chances are you'll be less effective than if you try to suggest to him in a normal tone of voice some ideas for rectifying a troubling situation. Joanne was tempted to say, "Why don't you get off of your rear, pitch in and give a little to this family besides your income?"

Instead she said, "I'm feeling overwhelmed and under appreciated. I'd be much happier if we could figure out a way to divvy up the evening responsibilities so we both spend time with the kids and have some time by ourselves." In making her request, Joanne realized that the two things she really wanted were time by herself and time alone with Todd. The way things were going, she was so tired by the time the kids went to bed that she'd finish the dishes and then collapse into bed, alone.

In making your request, remember to stick to the facts---the more tangible your suggestions the better---and talk about what *you* want. By saying "I want to have some time away from the kids at night?" rather than "You should play with the kids more," Joanne enables Todd to hear her frustrations without feeling ordered to change.

At this point, you may be tempted to slip into toxic talk by peppering your request with such forceful terms as "I insist that..." or "You should...". Instead, try utilizing more polite clauses such as "would you mind...", "might it be possible..." or "could we maybe..". These indicate that you understand and respect that your spouse may have priorities that, although different than yours, are still valid. Remember that a request (the word comes from the Latin meaning to seek or search for again,) implies a question. It

should help you and your spouse solve your problem together, not as adversaries but as a team.

**4. Respect the Response.** Most likely, your spouse's behavior makes sense to him.

Listen to his reactions, and take the concerns he raises seriously. "I really need to have some time to relax before dinner," insisted Todd. "If I'm in the same room as the kids that'll be impossible. But I'd love to help put them to bed. It bothers me too that I rarely get to spend quality time with them. And you know what else? I miss you when you're so exhausted. You've been flying off the handle so much these days, I didn't want to bring it up because I thought you'd take it the wrong way or something. But honey, I do miss spending time together, just the two of us." In hearing Todd's response, Joanne finally understood that Todd's pre-dinner time alone wasn't as selfish a move as she read it to be. In addition, she realized that his lack of time with the kids troubled him as well, and that he genuinely wanted to have more time with her.

If your spouse knows that you're honestly trying to understand the situation from his side then he'll probably feel more comfortable explaining his position and exploring the conflict, rather than drawing battle lines for a war with no winners. everybody wants to feel like they're being understood. Just remember, everyone likes to feel like his concerns are being listened to and his position understood.

**5. Seek a Solution.** Once both of your concerns are out on the table, it'll be much easier to brainstorm a solution that pleases you both.

Sometimes the best solutions come out of an idea that might seem absurd or impractical at first, so be creative. Don't be afraid to voice as many potential solutions as you can think of. Knowing that every problem has countless solutions will help both of you feel less frustrated or trapped in conflicts that are beyond your control..

While brainstorming, try to speak for yourself. You come up with new ways you can improve the situation, and let your spouse come up with ways that he can do the same. While this need not be set in stone--sometimes offering your spouse suggestions may be appreciated, especially if they involve change on both people's parts-- it is a good rule of thumb. If each person decides what to change about himself, chances are the changes will be easier and more enduring than if each of you focuses on the other.

After some initial unease, Joanne and Todd began putting out ideas. Joanne suggested ordering take-out some nights so she wouldn't have to cook; Todd suggested hiring a baby-sitter, and putting the kids to bed earlier. As they talked about it, Joanne and Todd found themselves laughing more and more, something they hadn't done in a long time. Eventually, Todd offered to take the kids to the park before dinner; they could play on the playground while he read and watched them. That way, Joanne had time to herself while she cooked, and Todd could relax and have more time with the kids without feeling overwhelmed by them. Joanne was so pleased with the idea that she went out and bought Todd a lawn chaise to take to the park with him. Although he looked a little funny sunbathing in December, Todd felt as comfortable as if he were in his own bed. Both were delighted with the new system, as both of their needs had been met.

Inspired by their changes, they agreed to prioritize setting aside time together in the evenings. Todd made sure Adam washed his face and brushed his teeth. Joanne devised an incentive system for Adam to go to sleep earlier; he got a sticker every time he was in bed before eight, and when he collected five stickers Joanne or Todd read him an extra story. The bedtime process went quicker, and left more time for Joanne and Todd to savor quiet evenings together.

Conflict is inherent in any relationship, the challenge is how we deal with it. By following the five steps of Fix-It talk, you and your spouse can work through conflicts as they arise. Joanne and Todd did it, and now so can you. Fix-It Talk prevents angry fights and drawn-out grudges. Just as your kids are growing and learning each day, Fix-It Talk

enables you and your spouse to grow and learn in response to each new challenge. Get fixin'!

*Dr. Susan Heitler is a clinical psychologist in Denver, Colorado, and the author of "From Conflict to Resolution" (Norton). Her latest book, a guidebook for marriage tentatively titled "To Have and to Hold: A Short Guide to a Long Relationship" is due out in 1997. Sara Heitler, Dr. Heitler's daughter, is a freelance writer.*