

Chapter 1

The Causes of Marital Conflict in Retirement

I said for better or worse...but I never said for lunch.

— *Night Fall*, Nelson DeMille

Marriage between two people is so complex that it is almost impossible to completely understand the broad array of human variables entwined within the relationship. For example, a few major areas in which partners differ are early family influences, psychological health, and most importantly, personality type. Let's not forget the multifaceted differences that exist between the sexes. These distinguishing features are dynamic in nature and serve as major influences throughout our lives. They differentiate us as individuals and naturally serve, together, as the signature for our identities. As we go through life they represent a commingled expression of all that we are as human beings. They function as vertexes of our identities; however, they also represent areas of potential conflict within our marriages. In fact, if each of us could identify and chart our own unique life configuration and then compare and contrast it with that of our partner prior to our nuptials, no one would ever get married. Most of us would run for the hills because we would see no way to overcome the large disparities caused by diverging interests, aptitudes, ambitions and personal histories. Fortunately none of us enter marriage with such an elaborate comparison because, at the time, we are operating under the intoxicating influence of the heart.

Of course, there are structural causes of marital conflict, such as financial crisis, health problems or family strife. These types of problems can place great

stress on a marriage because they may appear insurmountable, at least in the short term, and may require life-changing adaptation that can be very painful. Since these causes do not have to do with personal differences, we are going to omit them from our discussion.

Retirement

When I retired at the age of 63 I thought I was well prepared for this new stage of life. I sold the company I had founded and managed for 25 years, and at long last achieved financial security. But it came as a shock to me when I discovered I was not really prepared for my retirement on an emotional level. It should not have come as a surprise, considering I lived my life in a very intense and structured way for 35 years, and then one day all that familiar structure and mental stimulation were gone. As a result I began experiencing intense irritability and emotional stress. I also noticed more annoyance and frustration in the relationship with my wife. Over time the situation did not improve and I decided I needed to take action as quickly as possible.

Why didn't anyone warn me that retirement often demands a major psychological adjustment, on the same level as that required following the death of a loved one or a bitter divorce? When I began asking friends and acquaintances if they had experienced this problem, I learned to my great surprise that many of them had suffered through a very difficult and painful period after retirement, particularly if the termination of their employment had not been of their own choosing but that of their employer. I also learned that most were embarrassed to talk about it because, in many people's minds, retirement is supposed to be a glorious time of freedom from stress and the normal demands of life.

This can be an especially dangerous time for recent retirees who are susceptible to making life-altering mistakes in an effort to alleviate the emotional tension they are experiencing, such as selling one's house and moving to a new location, buying a second home, making poor investments, divorcing, or self medicating with alcohol or drugs.

As I continued to search for the source of my problem I began talking to more and more people about how they experienced the transition to retirement. I discovered most of those who encountered the greatest difficulty had enjoyed very successful careers and suffered from achievement addiction. During their careers they received a great deal of positive rewards (monetary and emotional) because they were very good at their jobs. Over the years they began to need this positive feedback as an essential aspect of their existence. In effect, a large part of their identities were job-related. They defined themselves by what they did, not who they were as people. So for them, retirement represented a subconscious loss of their sense of self.

I immediately realized this was the primary cause of my emotional distress. A very large part of my identity was being the CEO and chairman of the company I founded. I saw everything through the prism of the business, and what I needed to do to ensure its success. Over time my very identity became infused with the role I played running the business. I did not see myself as a person independent from what I did for a living — it had defined me.

I noticed that during my own faltering attempts to adjust to retirement, many of the newly experienced marital irritations and frustrations I experienced were caused by a condition I call "marital compression". This is a situation whereby two married people who were accustomed to spending ten to twelve hours a day apart, five days a week for many years, suddenly find themselves thrust together each and every day. As we will learn later in the book, this sudden increase in togetherness often intensifies the irritation and annoyance caused by personality type conflicts, thus highlighting and aggravating areas of incompatibility that were lying dormant for years. It's one thing to argue with your spouse while cooking Sunday dinner, but try working in the kitchen together every day. Sunday may be manageable because tomorrow you go back to work, but how do you escape the source of the conflict if it presents itself multiple times a day, or several times a week?

Early Family Influences

Let's examine a few additional sources of conflict, beginning with early family influences. Our first example is the life orientation of a child raised within a large and loving family where unconditional positive regard was the order of the day. Holidays were festive occasions filled with good cheer, laughter, play and positive energy. As a result the child grows up to view family and holidays as wonderfully positive experiences that offer love, good will and emotional support. Let's call this person Mr. or Ms. Lucky. Then along comes Mr. or Ms. Right and a strong bond is established.

But Right did not experience the same type of upbringing. This individual was raised by a family that was much more austere, distant and ambivalent toward the child. Most of the time this person was more or less ignored during family gatherings and the atmosphere was poisoned by arguments, criticisms and negative energy. As an adult Right, at best, establishes a neutral opinion regarding family gatherings, though most likely these occasions do not engender positive emotions, but rather they understandably raise anxiety and defensive behavior. Right and Lucky go on to marry, and Lucky wants to live close to the warm and loving family that offered such positive experiences while growing up. Uh oh! While Lucky loves to be close to family members, Right wants nothing to do with them. When Right is dragged kicking and screaming to family gatherings, anger, resentment and feelings of alienation may result.

Financial resources are another early family difference that often cause conflict. Imagine a spouse who was raised with a mindset that money would always be more than sufficient to meet life's requirements coupled with one who was raised in a family that struggled to make ends meet. One partner believes money is an abundant resource, while the other thinks it is elusive, difficult to obtain and must be hoarded to ensure security. One spouse has an expansive view of money while the other sees it more as a scarcity. Unless resolved, these differences in perspective can be a constant source of irritation and disagreement within the marriage.

There are many other potential conflicts caused by early family influences; the important point is that these beliefs and tendencies are rooted deeply within us. They are difficult to modify because they are essential aspects of early childhood experience, and thus strong elements of core belief systems in adulthood.

Repressed Emotions

Another source of potential conflict is repressed emotion. Few of us were raised in an idyllic setting where mother catered to our every physical and emotional need. Rather, we came into the world and had many of our early needs met, but most likely many were not. If we were fortunate enough to be born into a loving and caring family with attentive parents we grew into healthy adults possessing few deep-seated emotional conflicts; however, if we were less fortunate we entered into a more tumultuous environment where our trust in the benevolent flow of life was damaged in some way.

Effective parenting is challenging because adults carry within them the psychological pain they incurred during childhood and inflict it, for better or worse, onto their children. They usually aren't aware of the damaging nature of their parenting because they are simply functioning in accordance with the psychological pattern embedded within them. Parents with acute emotional issues lose some of their capacity to feel in general and can therefore become insensitive to the emotional needs of their children, particularly when it comes to providing desperately needed love and nurturance. The product of this type of parenting is usually a child who enters adulthood with more than a few emotional contradictions.

We can see the emotional pain we carry with us from childhood is deeply buried in our subconscious, and can result in hidden land mines in our relationships. Life will be proceeding normally when all of a sudden, an emotional flare up that defies logic occurs.

Norma was raised in a family of three; she was the middle child with a sweet disposition and a reserved personality. During her childhood she felt overlooked and discounted and was not given as much consideration from her father and classmates as she needed. At times she was made to feel transparent and irrelevant. She felt as though her wants and desires did not matter. This happened repeatedly throughout her childhood.

Time passed; she married and one lovely summer evening there was a family gathering at her home. After dinner she decided dessert was needed and left for the supermarket. During her absence the group appeared to be getting restless and her husband decided to start a game of charades that had been planned for the evening's entertainment, not considering that it would be a problem for his wife. When she returned and saw the game had begun without her, she flew into a rage and began screaming at her husband in front of all in attendance, completely embarrassing him. This was totally out of character for her, but symptomatic of what happens when a specific and unique set of circumstances trigger deep-seated emotional pain: loss of control and a reaction far in excess of the circumstances that caused it.

In marriages these emotional trigger points may lie dormant, unleashed only when the right set of circumstances arises. Once activated, an excessive emotional reaction usually occurs. If you have ever said things to your spouse like, "You're acting like a maniac," "Get a hold of yourself," "What the hell is wrong with you?" — and my favorite — "You need to see a shrink!" you have most likely experienced one or more of these episodes. Raymond Hull sums up the problem with the observation, "All marriages are happy. It's the living together afterward that causes all the trouble."¹

The better a person's mental health, the fewer of these trigger points are embedded in the psyche. An individual may have a few large areas of encapsulated pain possessing high amounts of compressed energy, or several smaller pressure point areas. However, the psychological dynamics at play between partners have great bearing and influence on the overall happiness of the marriage and can become a major source of repressed anger and resentment.

Body Dominant Versus Brain Dominant

People don't all share the same way of being in the world. I am not talking about personality type, but about how one is anchored, or the manner in which

¹ ThinkExist.com, 2010

one prefers to experience life. Some people like to accomplish things with their bodies, such as exercising, golf, tennis, fishing, swimming, running, hiking and biking. These people are body dominant types who feel centered and refreshed whenever they use their bodies in a highly physical way. Given their preferences, they would rather be involved in some type of physical activity than engage in more sedentary pursuits. They enjoy the challenge of sports because it infuses energy and enjoyment into their lives and brings them together with others who share their body orientation. The 'Over 60' marathons are a good example of body dominant people who endorse this lifestyle well into their later years. Of course, body dominant people may enjoy reading and thinking as well, but these are not their predominant ways of being, or preferred sources of satisfaction.

It is easy to mislabel this type because body dominant types often experience physical activity vicariously. If you watch them carefully, you'll find they enjoy following a wide variety of sports on TV. I am not talking about merely following a favorite team; I mean most all sports draw their attention. Also, you will notice they enjoy action-adventure movies that provide a simulated physical experience. Many of these types participated in, and often excelled at, sports when they were young.

An alternative human orientation is one of brain dominance. These people would rather be reading, thinking, analyzing or learning than participating in activities of a physical nature. You will find them in libraries, book clubs, science fairs, chess clubs, computer groups, writers' workshops and on the Internet. When the opportunity for strenuous exercise arises they think, "What's the point?"

Whenever brain dominant people use their minds vigorously, it is relaxing and pleasurable for them. They would rather work a crossword puzzle or engage in a stimulating discussion than go hiking, jogging or biking. Thinking is a primary source of pleasure for them and they can spend endless hours in a bookstore just anticipating all the adventures waiting to be experienced inside the covers

of each book. These people may enjoy physical activities as well, but such are not their preferential or primary ways of functioning.

If partners in a marriage share a similar orientation, they enjoy doing the same things together. There is less friction associated with their choice of activities, exemplified in the example of a spouse stating, “Honey, let’s go on a five-mile hike through the Great Gorge Nature Preserve this weekend,” and receiving the response, “Great, let’s do it!” Can you imagine, however, what will happen if a body dominant spouse makes the very same statement to a brain dominant partner? The answer would most likely be, “Are you crazy?! Why in the world would I want to do that?”

When you imagine a good day in your life, what are you doing: using your brain or your body? Would your spouse experience the same level of joy from the activities you selected? If not, your partner could often be involved in activities that are not as enjoyable or enriching as they are for you. I often think the reason that watching movies is so enjoyable to many partners with different orientations is that movies provide both a simulated physical experience and mental stimulation, thus providing something enjoyable for all.

I recently spoke to a retired couple that possessed dissimilar orientations and had been married for forty-five years. The husband was body dominant and the wife was brain dominant. When I asked them to describe a typical day I learned they spent a great deal of time apart, he exercising at the club, biking and being outdoors while she stayed home and read books, perused the Internet and watched cooking shows on TV. Each made accommodations for the interests of the other, but there was acknowledgement that conflict and tensions occasionally arose when planning shared activities.

By identifying body/brain preferences in your marriage, you can take steps to avoid any stress caused by dominance disparities.

Personality Type

By far the largest ongoing source of conflict within a marriage is the interaction between distinct personality types. The personality represents a full expression of a person's identity. Unlike family influences and mental health, which are variables that could be managed by taking explicit actions and making specific compromises, the personality type is all-encompassing in a relationship. It touches every point of contact between spouses at all times. It represents a clear and direct expression of the enduring qualities, or essence, of each person. Except in jest, seldom do you hear someone say, "You should change your personality." The reason is that it is not possible. The best one can hope for is progress in the attainment of greater health within the confines of one's existing personality.

Personality type conflicts can be extremely frustrating in a marriage; there seems to be no way to effectively deal with them because they are created by two people expressing their own unique qualities. Many people try to resolve these exasperating clashes by creating distance from the spouse, thinking that if they limit the time spent together the opportunity for conflict to erupt will be reduced. This is usually not a good long-term solution; creating distance solves nothing and often leaves a marriage anemic and much less satisfying.

I once had a recent retiree tell me she understood what an oyster felt like. When I asked her what she meant she said, "One grain of sand can create a lot of irritation and it takes a very long time for it to turn into a pearl." I have known couples who have suffered recurring conflicts over the same issues for decades simply because they had no way of resolving their differences. Over time these couples resign themselves to the inevitability of periodic anger and frustration and try to manage their lives around it – but it never goes away. Neither partner has the insight or personal power to alter the conflicted nature of the relationship because its origins stem from the intrinsic nature of their personalities and the innate expression of their identities. I believe this is one of

the reasons for Thoreau's statement, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."²

These conflicts are often supercharged when one partner possesses a more forceful personality and uses anger and confrontation to dominate the relationship. The issue of dominance and control is an age-old problem, and is the focal point of Woody Allen's humorous statement, "In my house I am boss. My wife is just the decision-maker."³

In high conflict situations, the less dominant spouse usually responds in one of the following ways: (1) relents and goes along, feeling resentment; (2) relents and then responds with passive aggression; (3) creates as much distance from the dominant partner as possible. None of these responses are healthy for the relationship over the long term. Options 1 and 2 are self-esteem killers and Option 3 is merely an act of self-preservation.

Now that we have explored some of the common sources of conflict in relationships, let's learn about the unexpected role the heart plays in our love relationships.

² *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, Boston, Beacon Press, Chapter 1: Economy, pg. 6, 2004

³ InnocentEnglish.com