

Helping a Spouse Who Moves Against during Marital Conflict



by AARON SIRONI and LAUREN WHITMAN —

Couples develop patterns in the way they interact during conflict. Some spouses tend to withdraw. They move *away* during conflict. Others tend to ramp up. They move and speak *against* the other person. All of us struggle to engage one another in ways that create peace. In our first article on marital conflict,¹ we sought to help the withdrawers, and to provide counselors with methods to help a couple when one or both spouses tend to withdraw from each other in conflict. In this article, our attention will be on those who act against their spouses in conflict. What does this movement look like? And how can counselors intervene? To illustrate the process, we will pick up with Jake and Allison from our first article. There we focused on how to help Jake, a withdrawer. Now we will focus on Allison, a classic “fighter.”

To equip counselors and pastors, we will capture the dynamic of *moving and speaking against* from a biblical perspective, and show how Scripture helps us understand its detriment to a marriage. Then we will describe the counseling process to help a spouse like Allison.

¹ “Helping a Spouse Who Withdraws during Conflict,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 32:1 (2018): 10-32.

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We want to make one other comment up front. What are we talking about when we use the words *moving against*? Moving and speaking against someone in conflict means: blaming, accusing, attacking, demanding, complaining, and criticizing. These are sinful behaviors, of course, ones that need to be repented of. And repentance is one critical aspect of how spouses can grow when their conflict is chronically destructive. We have spouses in view who both desire to grow and who are willing to be honest and transparent. We are not talking about spouses who are physically or sexually violent, emotionally or spiritually oppressive, or who display a pervasive pattern of intimidation and domination. If you are in need of resources to help abusers or their victims, see the footnote below.²

Let's now seek to biblically understand why and how moving against behaviors are contrary to God's purposes for Christian marriage.

Understanding the Hostile Spouse Biblically

Scripture introduces us to conflict in Genesis 3. It has all the elements of a typical fight. Adam and Eve have sinned and eaten the forbidden fruit. They now know that they are naked and cover their nakedness with leaves. Soon after, we see the two basic movements in destructive conflict—hiding and blaming. They withdraw from God and each other out of guilt, shame, and fear. They pull back and hide. This is moving away. When God questions them about what they've done, Adam and Eve blame and attack each other—and God. They balk at personal responsibility and point to others. Adam blames God and his wife; Eve blames the serpent. This is moving against. It's the tendency to blame, attack, make demands, and criticize—an inheritance that characterizes the human race! But God desires so much more for us.

God designed marriage to make Christ's union with his people and our union with him visible (Eph 5:31–32). This mysterious insight could not have been perceived by human effort or intellect, but only through divine revelation. Because marriage is meant to imitate and reflect our loving union with Christ, how a husband and wife think about, speak to, and move in

² Here are two recommended resources on the subject of domestic violence: (1) Darby Strickland, "Counseling in the Brambles: How to Help Oppressive Marriages," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 30:3 (2016): 24–46. (2) Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014).

relation to one another, especially during conflict, is vitally significant. It will lead either to health or to injury, to building up or to tearing down, to constructive or destructive conversations. This is what Paul captures in Ephesians as he describes the type of speaking that builds each other up.

Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouths, but whatever is beneficial for the building up of that which is lacking, in order that it might give grace to those who hear. (Eph 4:29)

This is more than utilizing communication skills. It is an attitude and disposition toward one another that is not instinctive or natural to us. It's a fruit of the Spirit that has to be intentionally cultivated.

We are fallen people. In marriage, we have ample opportunities to bump

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into each other's deficiencies, failings, fears, and desires. This often triggers conflict. A hostile spouse is tempted to anger and contempt and not only speaks against, but also stands *over* the other spouse by talking down to him or her with an air of superiority and judgment. The aggressor values his or her own will, desires, opinions, experience, and feelings over the call to love. The tone, countenance, and words all express self-righteousness. So speaking against your spouse is not only a breach of the call to truth and love, but also a failure of humility. When a spouse lacks humility, then all words, efforts, and actions will be hurtful and corrosive. When you speak against your spouse, you are speaking against God and his holy law (James 4:11–12). His law commands you to love your neighbor as yourself, but in pride we become a law unto ourselves.

In marriage, your spouse is your nearest neighbor. We all have many needs, struggles, temptations, and vulnerabilities. In these places, God desires

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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