

## **Responding Rather Than Reacting – Feb. 2024**

LWCC Marriage Ministries Email For February 2024

Greetings again, from the Marriage Ministries team. We've had some interesting feedback to last month's Marriage email, so I thought I'd follow on the theme this month by digging a little deeper into the key issue of that email: being Reactive or Responsive.

It has been said that, how you and your spouse interact with one another, largely determines the health of your marriage. I think our emails over the last 15 months or so, would reflect our belief that that interaction is not just limited to moments of conflict. Our belief is that all interaction, from the time we get up in the morning till we turn the light out at night, and how intentional we are as we engage with one another throughout that day, contributes to the health of our marriage. However, the situation that led to last month's topic, had, for one couple, one important ingredient that contributed to the tension they were facing; self-awareness. Whether you're resolving conflict or simply engaging in regular interaction or communication, it is so important for each of us to pay close attention to how our words or actions affect each other. Knowing the affect your words, or certain tones of voice, or different postures have on your spouse, is so important. After all, we're all only human; we will have conflict; the key to a healthy marriage is when conflict arises, do we 'fuel it' (react), or do we internally press the pause button and make a conscious effort to respond in such a way that defuses the situation, yet still deals with that core issue that caused the tension/conflict in the first place.

In communication in general, and in times of tension or conflict, your self-awareness can help you understand whether you're often more responsive or reactive when you communicate, and help you in arresting the negative/reactive response, and pause to consider a more conciliatory response. Responding well to your spouse, rather than reacting to them, can make all the difference in your daily interactions, and especially during conflict resolution. For most of us, it doesn't come easily. It takes some degree of effort, but in terms of the end goal - a healthy marriage - it is well worth that effort.

So, let's break down some key differences between being responsive versus reactive, and in the process, I think you'll see why this matters, and contributes to, a healthy marriage.

### **Being REACTIVE:**

In being Reactive, the first issue we must realise is that it usually leads to high emotion and tension. Also, when we are reactive we are usually listening to what our spouse is saying, readying ourselves to reply with our opposing point of view, rather than listening to understand them. Then, what usually happens is that our reactivity starts a conflict, or escalates an existing one.

At its core, reactivity makes empathy difficult. That's because we're turning our thoughts and feelings inward. Therefore, our reactions are more centred around how we feel, rather than how our spouse might be feeling; around our being unsettled or upset by our spouse's view-point. When that happens, it's much harder to see their point of view, or understand where they are coming from.

Being reactive can look like:

- Snapping or being short with your spouse

- Raising your voice
- Shouting or screaming
- Interrupting or talking over one another
- Criticizing
- Stonewalling (becoming distant)
- An inability to have a rational discussion.

Reactivity often escalates the situation, making it more difficult to solve. You might find that the original issue now becomes multifaceted, or becomes much more complicated than when it started.

### **Being RESPONSIVE:**

On the other hand, being responsive in your actions and communication indicates that you have a calmer state of mind. Your approach to conflict resolution is more measured. You're able to take time to truly hear your spouse before offering a response. And believe me they will not only notice, but appreciate the difference!!!

Choosing to be responsive isn't always the easiest path, and it doesn't always feel natural. We naturally want to get our point across, and we want our spouse to understand how we feel. Reactivity is a quick way to get momentary results, but it's not the most constructive, simply because a). as mentioned, it introduces emotion, and b). it doesn't allow you to really hear what your spouse is saying, and consider if it is appropriate, or if it is a reasonable viewpoint, even though it doesn't line up with what you believe or feel.

Responsiveness must be practised, and some people will embrace it more easily than others. Being responsive requires a high level of clarity, self control, and emotional intelligence. It's far more productive to thoughtfully respond to one another, than it is to be reactive. One practical way to respond, that gives you time to gather your emotions, and gain clarity, as we mentioned last month, is to repeat back to your spouse what you think you heard them say, and then ask if you understand them correctly. Once you have gone through this process, emotions in check, you have earned the right to present your thoughts, or stance on the matter.

When we take the time to respond well, rather than jump in straight away with our opposing point of view, we're better able to process the situation, which in turn also allows us to empathize with our spouse and consider their point of view before speaking or acting. When we do reply, it's more likely to be thorough, measured, and well thought-out.

### **RESPONSIVENESS VS. REACTIVITY IMPACTS YOUR MARITAL HEALTH**

Ultimately, the choice to be constructive (responsive) or destructive (reactive) will impact your marital health. How you navigate conflict resolution has a lasting effect on your communication. There's no doubt about it, your communication can be either nurturing or detrimental to your marriage, and working at being responsive can, and does have, a huge positive impact on your relationship. If you have already learned this lesson well, we congratulate you. If you've read this, knowing it has not been a strong point for you and your marriage, why not Give it a Go, and see if, with a little bit of practise, you can make some significant contribution to a healthier relationship going forward. Believe me, it will have a significant impact, and your spouse WILL appreciate your efforts. Perhaps, as we've said a few times in these emails, why not sit down together and go through the material above, and discuss how you each line up in handling the out-there comments or opinions

your spouse makes. Ask each other how they feel you handle those moments, and what you might do to handle them better going forward.

Blessings form the team - Stan & Ronnie, John & Karen

PS. Please keep your feedback coming. We appreciate it.

(Content adapted from Dr's. Les Leslie Parrott)