

## **Self-Esteem: The Root of (Almost) All Conflict**

Are you ending your marriage? Have you been fighting with your spouse about money and time with the kids? Are you upset about how poorly you've been treated by the person who used to be your best friend and lover? Are you tired of the conflict? Do you want to find another way to end your relationship? Then this article is for you.

Divorce is often a time of high conflict between two people who have loved each other deeply and have often been each other's closest confidante. In the past, they have supported each other, looked out for each other, helped take care of each other's needs, and professed neverending love. And then something changed.

Instead of feeling comfortable, safe, and secure with each other, divorcing spouses look at each other with mistrust and anger. The person who was once a strong ally has become an enemy. How does this happen? Perhaps looking at a typical case would help.

Jack and Jill are getting a divorce because of incompatibility. Their different ways of looking at life has left them pursuing parallel paths and has created increasing distance between them. Their needs have not been met, they feel unloved, and they see no way to fix the problem. They conclude that they can no longer continue the painful and unsatisfying course that they have taken, and mutually agree to end their marriage.

Jack and Jill have simply fallen down the hill too many times and don't want to be hurt any more. Jack blames Jill for tripping him. Jill blames Jack for knocking her down and causing them to fall. Neither take responsibility for the tumbles they've taken together.

Jack doesn't want to take responsibility because he has always portrayed himself as a highly respectable man with a good job and a good marriage. He doesn't want to be seen by his peers as someone with faults. To protect his public image, Jack blames Jill for the demise of their relationship, and tells their family members and friends about it.

Jill, on the other hand, has portrayed herself as happy in her marriage to a wonderful man, hiding their difficulties from everyone. She fears that the divorce will make her seem like a failure for not holding the family together. In an effort to protect her self-esteem, Jill blames Jack for their break-up and casts herself as a victim. She looks back on their relationship to find what he has done to hurt her.

Jill knows that she has never been able to count on Jack, not really. He wasn't there for her when she needed him most because he was working. Jill decides to tell other people that he has yelled at her for being a lousy wife and on one occasion pushed her onto their bed out of anger. She decides not to mention that she has also yelled at him and slapped his face.

To Jill's way of thinking, Jack's selfishness and "abuse" are acceptable reasons for filing for divorce. To bolster her public image, she decides to punish Jack for his carelessness

and irresponsibility. Jill launches an assault in court to show the judge that she is faultless and that she has good reason to get rid of an abusive, neglectful man like Jack.

Jack, feeling hurt and insulted, refuses to acknowledge his part in the fall. He is not going to put up with Jill's making false allegations against him and decides to make sure that everyone knows the "truth", including the judge. He brings in character witness after character witness to prove that he is a good man, all in an effort to repair the damage Jill has done to his self-esteem.

Jack and Jill are angered and repulsed by the other's behavior, and develop a strategy to defeat the other's agenda. They hire attorneys to represent them, and the fight is on.

In this case, the conflict between Jack and Jill is not about the children or their assets, but is about their sense of worth and value. They feel disappointed, injured, and hurt as a result of the other's behavior. They also feel ashamed that they have failed to sustain a marriage that has appeared perfect to other people. Their conflict is about self esteem.

Self-esteem is based most solidly on our individual abilities to master situations as they arise. It is mastery that makes us feel good about ourselves from the inside out. It is mastery that allows us to feel good about ourselves even when we are not fed good feelings by other people. It is mastery that gives us the kind of self-esteem that allows us to endure difficult times even when we feel that we have failed. And it is mastery that gives us the self-confidence that we need to admit our mistakes and learn from them.

But there is another source of self-esteem, namely the good feelings about oneself that derive from the praise, or lack thereof, given by others. This source of self-esteem is particularly important to children who readily observe that they have a lot to master compared to people older than themselves. But it is also important to adults.

People who fear the negative reactions of others often rely on external praise. The more that self-esteem is based on what others think, the more likely it is that a person will experience narcissistic injury, i.e. a wound to one's self-esteem. The deeper the wound, the more likely it is that that person will strike out to feel better about him or herself. The more that spouses strike out at each other, the more likely it is that conflict will develop. The more often that one person attacks the self-esteem of another person, the more likely it is that the conflict will become chronic, a pattern of interaction that can be difficult to change.

By the time of divorce, it is all too often the case that spouses have called each other names and belittled each other out of frustration, anger, and disappointment. When the cuts are deep and salt has continued to be poured into the wounds, they do not heal, making each person more vulnerable to criticism the next time around. A small level of conflict becomes a bigger level of conflict which can spiral out of control and result in a malignant tearing apart of whatever feelings of love, trust, and cooperation that remain.

Divorce is an experience that makes most people feel bad about themselves. For most people, it is a sign of failure and inadequacy. When a person is left, it is common for that person to wonder why the person who previously cared about and admired him or her has come to conclusion that he or she is no longer desirable. Or wonders why he or she has become so repugnant that the person they love can no longer stand to live under the same roof.

When there is a high degree of conflict in a divorce, or a marriage for that matter, it is almost always the result of damaged self-esteem, usually to both people. The adversarial nature of the legal system may add to the intensity of the conflict especially when one or both people use the legal process as a club to ventilate anger and regain self-esteem. The more contentious the divorce, the more likely it is that permanent damage will be done to the future relationship of the divorcing parties, especially problematic when there are children involved.

When faced with the prospect of a divorce, you have a choice to make. You can choose to use the legal system to exact yet another pound of flesh from the person who has hurt you, or you can move beyond the current state of affairs to a better place.

But how do you do that? What does it take to avoid unnecessary conflict? What does it take to prevent a state of chronic conflict? How do two people move from hating each other to feeling neutral and no longer troubled by the past? The answer is easy even though making it happen is difficult.

Since high conflict between two people is based on injury to self-esteem, the first step is to stop the bleeding by 1) not damaging the other person's self-esteem and 2) restoring one's own in a manner that does not fan the fires. That means not attacking the other person's self esteem, not calling that person names, not insulting him or her, and not making the other person feel small. It means being respectful, managing one's emotions in a mature manner, giving credit where credit is due, and apologizing for hurt unjustly inflicted. It means being fair, honest, and considerate, and thinking before you speak.

It also means managing the process of divorce appropriately, taking responsibility for one's part in the demise of the marriage, learning from one's mistakes, and adjusting to being single again in a manner that promotes growth and allows healing to take place. It means coming out on the other side of the divorce process with self-respect and the feeling that one has done it well.

Self-esteem that lasts is based on mastery. Mastering the end of a relationship and learning from the experience promotes a healthy self-esteem and minimizes the odds that conflict will continue beyond the divorce. Do it for yourself. And if you have children, most certainly do it for them.