

Book Excerpt

Negative All or Nothing Thinking

A marriage void of any positive elements would be very unusual. Yet, when some couples come for counseling, they are so focused on the defeatist problems and discontent that seldom can they step back enough to objectively remember the positive and promising things they have going for them.

I'm reminded of a couple who came to my office for counseling who were both very unhappy in their marriage. They each blamed the other for their conflict. The husband was extremely angry and withdrawn. His routine was to walk in the door of their beautiful, well-furnished home and retreat to the basement only surfacing for meals or to help tend to their infant twin boys. The wife was angry because of his emotional shut-down and felt she could not trust him.

Both provided me with a litany of complaints about each other. Nothing was right about their marriage to hear them tell it. They painted a picture of total hopelessness. Even I felt hopeless! As I listening to them, I'm thinking, Here is a very attractive couple who is talented, educated, and financially secure with healthy twin boys. Did they have problems? Yes. Do they communicate well? No, but based on what they described to me, they did love each other deeply when they married.

There were issues we had to work through, but the first step was to look at the whole picture, not just selective, negative problems. I encouraged the couple to identify and develop a list of positive things in their marriage and in their life. It wouldn't do any good for me to recite the positives I observed in their marriage; they had to internally acknowledge and identify the strengths and positives for themselves. By completing that simple exercise, the next session got off to a much better start. They had been engaging in a dangerous pattern of all-or-nothing, selective thinking about their marriage.

Few things in life, and especially in our thinking, fit into the category of "all or nothing." Remember, the whole picture will contain both positive and negative aspects. Consider these questions:

"Am I able to take a step back and look at the whole picture?"

"Do I selectively dwell on the most negative aspects of the relationship?"

"Are the words I'm repeating negative most of the time?"

"Do I ever dwell on the good things about my spouse?"

"Do I ever share out loud what I am thinking or feeling?"

"Would I be embarrassed to share out loud what I am thinking or feeling?"

"Is my spouse intentionally behaving this way to hurt me?"

A case study on forgiveness:

I remember counseling a young married man whose anger and rage against his father was spilling over into his marriage relationship. I'll refer to him as Tim. As soon as Tim walked through the door of my small office, his anger was palpable. His physical demeanor, tense body language, frowned face, hurried and loud speech clearly defined his anger. After he settled in a bit, Tim began to share with me how his father had physically and emotionally abused him when he was a teenager. Tim shared how he would cower in his dad's presence, never knowing when he would receive the next blow or unexpected insult.

Tim's emotionally detached and aloof father left him confused, angry, and with a low self-esteem. Now, as a grown man, he was projecting this confusion and anger onto his wife, which was destroying their fragile relationship. To numb the pain of his childhood memories, Tim often turned to alcohol, which only served to create more harm in the marriage.

After I listened for a long while, I asked Tim to tell me more about his father's background and family history. There was a brief, deafening silence. Gradually, Tim began to tear up as he pondered this question. His voice trembled. He slumped back into the chair. Just the thought of his father's nature and history, where he came from and where he grew up, caused Tim to feel emotions that confused him. As he remembered painful stories of his father's childhood and the journey of his father's personal life, Tim softened in a moment of present grief.

Why? Because Tim's father had also been a victim of an abusive, alcoholic, and emotionally detached father. This was a generational abuse that now attempted to repeat the vicious cycle in Tim. What softened Tim's demeanor from that of machismo anger and tense body language to shedding tears? What transpired? When Tim unknowingly began to reframe the wrongdoer in broader terms, he unexpectedly gained new insights into his father's life narrative. A sliver of empathy was formed.

"I remember my dad telling me one day that he was physically beaten by his father when he accidentally dropped and broke a power handsaw," Tim explained. It was one of those "aha moments" of new discovery for him. Up to this point in life, he had been so focused and stuck in his own emotional pain and wounds, he had never considered the plight of his abused and mistreated father. Forgiveness never crossed his mind.

Yes, Tim's father was wrong to abuse him. Yes, it was a sin, and yes, it was offensive and damaging. Tim was an innocent victim. None of those harmful effects changed, but for Tim to engage the internal process of forgiveness and receive inner and personal healing of this past pain, he must first begin by reframing the context of the wrongdoer's life events.

When we reframe the wrongdoer, we gain insight, empathy, and eventually compassion for the person who perpetrated harm. Of course, Tim's journey of inner healing was not immediate, but after that first session, he left my office slightly more relaxed, and with new insights that would serve him well over the next few months of therapy. A very tiny window had been opened in Tim's mind allowing him to peer into his father's own past childhood harm. Because he was able to view his father differently, Tim became less stuck in past hurts and was able to move forward toward forgiveness. These new insights into his anger, and his desire to forgive allowed Tim to treat his wife with more love, tenderness, and patience.