

# Appendix C

## Confronting Issues Respectfully

Much of the time, we raise issues in a manner the Millers call control talk. The goal of someone using control talk is to make the other person do or stop doing, feel or stop feeling, think or stop thinking, want or stop wanting. You get the idea. If the person speaking has authority over the recipient of the message, it may be appropriate for them to engage in this style, but hopefully they do it in a respectful manner. Sometimes in relationships between otherwise equal peers, one grants the other authority based on skill or a knowledge base. An example would be when my husband and I do remodeling projects together: he has a vast amount of experience and knowledge and so, by and large, I willingly let him use control talk to tell me what to do and how best to do it. If he tries that same style of communication in the kitchen where I have as much experience as he does, I'm likely to experience what the Millers call a *pinch* if he tells me what to do or how to do it.

People experience pinches when the pieces of their issue puzzle (see Appendix B) aren't fitting together smoothly: they perceive something with their senses (data) and interpret it (a thought) and if it doesn't fit with what they expected or wanted, they have a mild or major physiological reaction. Many people feel it in their stomachs, others in their necks or shoulders. You are probably very familiar with your own signal that you're not happy about what just happened.

Many relationship pinches happen when one person inappropriately tries to control the other, either through *fight talk* or *spite talk* (see note 1 in chapter 11). And remember that "talk" includes body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and even silence. (Ignored bids can cause a world of hurt and anger.)

*Fight talk* directly tries to push or pull another person and often prompts blocking or dragging in the recipient. *Spite talk* indirectly tries to use power from a one down position; perceiving oneself to be powerless, the intention is to thwart by non-compliance. In a sense, it's an attempt to control by refusing to be controlled.

Fight talk and spite talk are indications that mutuality is missing. The direct attempt to control inherent in fight talk does not take the other person into account appropriately and the indirect attempt to thwart that's inherent in spite talk contains the message that "I don't feel taken into account appropriately."

The intentions behind fight talks are to force others into doing things, justify oneself and intimidate through behaviors like demanding, scolding, name-calling, and putting the other person down. Spite talk, on the other hand, uses such tactics as sarcasm, pouting, procrastinating and whining to manipulate, trigger guilt, be pitied, and covertly fight back.

John Gottman found in his observational research on couples that he could predict divorce with an amazing degree of accuracy based simply on how they started up a fifteen-

minute conversation about something about which they disagreed. He distinguishes between complaining—which is about a person’s behavior—and criticizing—which attacks the person’s character, often with *always* or *never* generalizations. In addition to criticizing, if contempt enters the room (some version of the message that “You’re an inferior human being”), nothing good or useful is likely to come of the conversation. As you may have noticed, these are fight and spite talk messages and they cause major pinches in others.

If you know you are prone to contempt for others, love requires you to protect your loved ones from it. It’s probably rooted in early rapprochement period wounds so I suggest you reread Chapter 3. Discounting or dismissing those who wounded you may have been a way of comforting and protecting yourself--and it grew into a very unfortunate pre-emptive habit. After all, if others are inferior to you, their behaviors and opinions don’t matter. Sad to say, you probably have a significant dose of the arrogant type of narcissism in your make-up. Countless books have been written to help other people cope with you, but I haven’t found any books to help you change your outlook. That’s because relatively few narcissistic people recognize the need to change, so there’s no market for such a book. If you’re the exception, you may find that reading some of those books might increase your empathy for those who live with you and create enough humility to motivate you to change. I recommend *Children of the Self-Absorbed: A Grown-Up’s Guide to Getting Over Narcissistic Parents* by Nina Brown and *Disarming the Narcissist: Surviving and Thriving with the Self-Absorbed* by Wendy T. Behary as good places to begin.

The Gottmans teach couples to start their conversation gently with softened startup, that is, with a complaint describing their own experience of the situation they’d like to see changed. Describe it nonjudgmentally and then ask for what you need or want, explaining what makes that desirable for you. Give the other person a recipe for what would work for you.

This approach pairs nicely with what the Millers call bringing up the issue using *straight talk* instead of fight or spite talk. To do this effectively, you take the time to puzzle out in your own mind what makes this an issue for you, including what you want and the factors that make you want it. In straight talk, you simply reveal the information from your puzzle, making sure you screen out any fight or spite talk. I tell my clients to imagine a walk-through screening arch like the security arches in airports. The fight/spite arch sounds an alarm if the words you are about to say, your tone of voice, your facial expression or your body language are trying to directly or indirectly control the other person. To use the Fight and Spite Talk Detector to prevent yourself from causing a pinch, ask yourself “Would I speak to my boss or co-worker this way and expect to keep my job?” (Would I use these words? This tone of voice? This facial expression? This body language?) If not, change to straight talk before proceeding.



Respectfully confronting a loved one in my framework requires you to first do the work of puzzling out the issue for yourself. If you're struggling to hold yourself back from criticizing or attacking, your brain has probably shifted your body into fight or flight mode and your Militant Self or Body Guard self is now in the driver's seat. (For more on the idea of having a variety of parts of yourself, see Tom Holmes's *Parts Work: An Illustrated Guide to Your Inner Life*. Note 1 in Appendix B.) Your brain has *flooded* and in that condition, you're unable to listen well, think clearly, or remember you actually love and respect this other person. Try one or more of the self-soothing techniques in Appendix D to get your heart-rate down and put your Devoted Treasuring Self back in charge. At that point, try and find some empathy for the other person by puzzling out the issue from their point of view as best you can. (See Appendix B.) This may help you find your way to a softer, gentler start-up. If, on the other hand, you feel intimidated and are afraid to raise the issue (you're in your Frightened Child Self), thoroughly sorting out the data you're taking into account, what you think and want and the reasons behind those will help build your confidence to access your Adult Self and advocate for yourself.

After puzzling out the issue you want to address, remind yourself that you treasure this person and as you approach your loved one, express that treasuring directly in some way as part of raising it with softened startup. If you're using this book to help you get your marriage off to a good start, you'll begin this practice during dating and courtship. If you get married, you'll continue it throughout "the honeymoon phase" and the "practicing phase" I describe in chapter 3. It's true that over time when your partner begins a respectful confrontation with softened startup, you may start looking good naturedly for the punchline any time you receive a compliment, but that's okay. You can be pleasantly surprised each time no respectful confrontation follows! This ability to raise and discuss problems respectfully will become one of the greatest strengths of your relationship.

In conjunction with introducing the issue with softened startup, be sure to ask if your loved one has the energy, time, and willingness to discuss it or if you'd be more likely to have a more useful conversation at a later time. And if that's the case, let your devotion to each other motivate you to agree on a time together. The Millers call this "contracting" and it only makes sense: if either of you is rushed, weary, not feeling well, or just in a bad mood, it's not likely you'll be able to hear each other very well or empathize.

Use the guidelines in Appendix B for puzzling out an interpersonal issue to help you consider each other's viewpoints. The goal of mutuality is to take each other into account *in all things*. It's far easier said than done, but it is essential to loving well.