

9 | AGREE

One of the most important things I have learned in working with marriages or significant relationships is the power of agreeing. When a couple agrees on a system or way of thinking, or doing life together, there is more harmony in the relationship.

This can be true of agreeing on small things: who takes out the garbage, who pays the bills, how much to put in savings each week, what is worthy of going into debt for, spirituality, how often we date, and more. When both partners agree, there are no battles in the agreed upon areas anymore, and there is peace in the land (so to speak).

If you are married or in a long-term committed relationship, you have traveled the road of discovering—and hopefully resolving—areas of disagreement. In the next few pages, I want to walk you through a familiar, but often an unlanguageed process couples go through to get into agreement in an area.

I feel this discussion is particularly helpful before we explore the potentially loaded subject of sex. When you understand the process a couple goes through when moving from disagreement to agreement, you will be better able to monitor your progress as you move through any possible sexual disagreements to sexual agreement.

Sexual agreement means a couple agrees on the frequency and kind of sexuality, and (as we will explore in the next chapter) what is agreeable to the couple, sexually. This sexual agreement is very peaceful and sexually relaxing to both partners in the relationship.

1. Discovery

Discovering conflict inside a relationship is absolutely normal, healthy, and going to occur no matter how long the partners know each other. Discovering conflict rarely happens in a predictable or scheduled manner. It's like scheduling a cold or a car accident—it just happens.

Things might well be going along with you two pretty well when “it” happens. You know what I mean by “it.” It is that almost magical moment when you suddenly find yourself in a topic for discussion you didn't foresee or plan and – whammo – you realize you disagree slightly...or horrifically.

You could be talking about one of the children, a neighbor, a political or spiritual subject, or that in-law experiencing challenges in life. You or they make a less-than-thought-through statement and—whammo—it could be hours before you both recover from the difference between you that you've discovered.

Don't worry, life is set up in such a way that this will most likely happen until “death do us part.” You both come from a different family of origin, system, and life experience. You have different types of relationships with friends and family. You may or may not have to deal with different values, spiritual experiences, sexual encounters, or previous relationships or marriages. Then you both bring to the table inherent differences due to culture, being male or female, and birth order.

If all that isn't enough to interact with, you have money, politics, and neighbors as well. Then when you think things are calm, life itself throws changes at you to help expose your personal uniqueness, differences you have with each other, and emotions that go with those differences. Some of these have to do with children, adolescent changes of life, hormones, moving your household, job changes and issues, death of people you care about, and many others.

2. Paradigms

There is an interesting dynamic that occurs when a couple has a disagreement. When disagreement occurs, the paradigm each places on couple conflict can itself become the problem and limit the couple from expediting or moving toward agreement.

A paradigm is simply the way we look at something. In this case, it is how each partner looks at couple conflict. Sometimes these paradigms are “shoulds” each believes, sometimes emotionally charged ideas, and sometimes ideas each has carefully thought through. (Caution: Your paradigm for conflict in other relationships may or may not vary from your paradigm for people who are married or in a long-term committed relationship.)

“ A paradigm is simply the way we look at something. ”

I want to start with just a random list of paradigms I have been exposed to as I have worked with couples for over a quarter of a century. Here are some of those paradigms:

- Perfect couples don't have conflict.
- If you loved me you wouldn't disagree.
- This means we are unraveling as a couple.
- Conflict means you're mad at me.
- Conflict means you reject me.

- Conflict means I am stupid.
- Conflict means I am not enough.
- Conflict means I am worthless.
- Conflict means somebody is wrong.
- Conflict means somebody is right.
- Conflict means we are not happy.
- Conflict means we can't be happy.
- Conflict means our children will be screwed up.
- Conflict means you're going to get out of control.
- Conflict means I won't be heard.
- Conflict means I won't be validated.
- Conflict means I won't be understood.
- Conflict means it's all over.
- Conflict means we are never going to get along.
- I must capitulate to show I love or respect my partner.
- It's better to lie and just pretend you agree.
- It's not important enough so just let them have their opinion about that.
- I don't want to ever argue.
- This could lead to a bigger fight.
- If I am quiet he/she won't know I disagree.
- I must win (they must lose).
- There are no rules to conflict. Game on!

I could write pages more about the interesting things some people almost reflexively believe or feel about conflict, or equally interesting ways they respond to it. Of course, not everyone has what I call an interesting perspective about conflict. Others, through their family of origin, personality, conflict training at work, or counseling, have a more helpful way to look at conflict:

- This is normal.
- The quicker we get to why we disagree the better.
- We are going to learn something about each other.
- Of course, we are different.
- Seeing things differently brings balance or wisdom.

- I can understand and validate a view even if I myself don't hold it.
- I can experience my feelings and have conflict without being manipulative.
- I am on a journey to learn about my partner.
- Learning is the purpose of disagreement.
- We will be stronger than before this discussion.
- Being respectful is really more important than being right.
- No conflict justifies rudeness, ugliness, or name-calling.
- I just need to state what I am feeling, thinking, or believing, and not change the other person.
- I am not perfect in my beliefs, so I can change them without shame.
- There are some guidelines for conflict, and if I disrespect them or the other person I will apologize without being asked.

Again, I could write much more about the beliefs people have about conflict. In the space below, write out some ideas you currently hold about conflict, and have your partner write out his or her ideas as well. Then, be honest. Look at your behavior during conflict to help you assess what you actually believe, not what you wish you believed.

Person 1's Ideas	Person 2's Ideas
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Now write down ideas you'd like to follow during conflict.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

If conflict is a challenge for your relationship, I recommend you read the “Fighting Fair” chapter in my book, *The 10-Minute Marriage*.

3. Repeat Conflict

I wish this really wasn't the process, but in reality, many couples disagree again and again on exactly the same issue (topic, person, or circumstance) for days, weeks, years, or decades. The couple is not able to go deeper into conflict on the issue. The couple might choose not to discuss it, but it still comes up. They might not be skilled enough to resolve the conflict by themselves, so they don't reach out for help from others to resolve

it. Finally, life keeps giving the opportunity for this issue to reappear, so the couple keeps having the same conflict conversation.

4. Getting to the Origins

If a couple wants to not repeat a conflict, it is best that they resolve it. However, to resolve the disagreement, they are going to have to find out where the opinions of both people come from by making themselves students of one another. Disagreements might be based in long held beliefs partners have that were never challenged before the relationship. Also it could come from an unchallenged family belief system, tradition, or spiritual community.

You might also discover the reason for the conflict is totally emotional and spring from feeling fear, rejection, like not enough, unworthy, or others. If a person has primitive emotional skills this could stay locked until he or she gets better at expressing and processing emotions. I would highly recommend my book, *Emotional Fitness*, to break through conflicts based on emotion.

“ Emotions can be huge players when a couple is stuck in a repeat conflict. ”

When it comes to sex or initiating sex, more than one of my clients has said they felt emotionally shut down, and for a variety of reasons. They wanted to be more sexual, but could not seem to break through. After even just one session doing exercises from my book, *Emotional Fitness*, they were able to feel, manage, and switch their emotions, and have the sex they had always longed for that night and thereafter.

Emotions can be huge players when a couple is stuck in a repeat conflict. When the couple probes more deeply into a conflict, it can expose each partner's erroneous ideas or clear misunderstandings. Getting to know the origin can take a while, but it is time well spent. Discovering the origins can be very illuminating.

I remember early in our marriage when Lisa and I had a conflict over garbage. That's right, garbage. As we discussed it we learned we had two different garbage experiences. Lisa saw her mother walk quite a bit of garbage down the driveway to the curb, but remembers always thinking that if her dad "loved" her mom, he would do it. So, to Lisa, taking out the garbage meant I loved her. I grew up in a totally equalitarian garbage family, in which everyone walked the garbage to the curb. In our family, we stacked the garbage as high as we could in the containers. If you were there when it fell over, you took it outside. Once we got to the origins of our conflict we could get through the garbage disagreement and come to our own agreement. We have not disagreed about the garbage for over twenty-nine years.

5. Get to the Beliefs

Once Lisa and I got to our origins on the garbage issue, we could get to the beliefs. Lisa's beliefs created as a child were:

- Men should take out the garbage.
- Taking out the garbage means the man loves you.

My beliefs about garbage were quite different:

- Garbage is an equal opportunity.
- Garbage is not a gender specific job.
- Garbage has nothing to do with my love for anyone.

I know the garbage illustration might seem trite, but it's a good one. Now I'll share a whole list of core beliefs men and women have about sex. Partners' varying core beliefs can make any conversation about sex quite challenging for couples.

- Sex is bad.
- Sex is dirty.
- Sex is one position.
- Creativity in sex is perverted.
- All men want is sex.

- Sex solves all problems.
- Sex is love.
- Sex is really important.
- Sex is not important.
- The man should initiate sex.
- Sex is to make the man happy, not me.
- If I enjoy sex I am a slut.
- Sex is for reward.
- Controlling the other person sexually is my job.
- I have to want sex to be sexual.
- Only _____ sex is acceptable.
- I am abused, damaged.
- All sex is humiliating.
- I can't get enough sex.
- It must always be different.
- I have to have you do _____ to be happy.
- I can't be enough sexually, so why try?
- You are not enough sexually, so try harder.
- I can only have sex at a certain time or place.
- She must have an orgasm for it to be good sex.
- Sex is beautiful.
- Sex is fun.
- Sex is creative.
- Sex is a way to get to know you.
- I want to please you, sexually.
- Sexual experimentation is acceptable.

I think now you probably see why I spent some time on the process of moving from disagreement to agreement. If you have strongly held thoughts about sex, they will come out as you try to agree on sexuality.

6. Resolve, Compromise, or Accept

Once a couple moves through their origins and beliefs about a conflict, they are ready to move toward agreement. As a counselor, I have seen agreement wear three different hats.

The first is the agreed-upon position hat. Wearing this, the couple actually resolves the issue and creates an agreed-upon position on it, even if they previously disagreed. When this occurs, both people usually have a good feeling about it, so future discussions do not reactivate the disagreement. A re-occurrence of the issue only reinforces their mutual agreement.

The second is the compromise hat of agreement. Truly, sometimes this is the best hat or the only hat a couple can live with and stay harmonious. In some situations, each partner is on the opposite end of a continuum. I'll use the issue of giving teenagers money as an example. One parent might say, "Give the child \$50 a week to spend." But his or her partner's position is: "We give no money to teens. They must work or figure out how to make money." The compromise could be: "We will pay for chores that are above and beyond keeping their bedrooms clean and tidy. They can determine the amount of money they earn based on how much work they do around the house." This is an example of a compromise. It honors former positions held by each partner and offers a solution both can support and agree on.

The last hat of agreement is one of excepting the differences. In some cases, differences cause what feels like a stalemate. In some cases, a couple must simply agree to disagree—to disagree respectfully—not with resentment or ill feeling, just a recognition of disagreement on one issue. If each partner can accept the other's position, and that each is a different person with different feelings and thoughts, this too is a form of agreement.

Sex

Let's talk about agreeing in sex. If you find yourself in this stage of disagreement, decide your next step. However, I find couples that actually agree on sex have a more relaxed and enjoyable relationship than those with strife in this very important aspect of marriage or relationship.

In the next few pages, I want you to agree on two important aspects of your sex life. In the next chapter you will decide on the "agreedents" of your sex life. Let's get this agreeing started.

Frequency

I remember sitting in a hotel in downtown New York City after a marriage conference. In that conference we discussed frequency of sexuality. At the end of that segment we held a question and answer session. Participants submitted their questions anonymously on pieces of paper. Many of the questions had to do with men and women asking about their partners' lower sexual desire. This question of frequency is almost always asked at these types of conferences.

The frequency question hits at the core of each partner's sexual beliefs. Is sex one person's domain or a mutual domain? What I mean is, if one person only wants sex one time a week or less, is this a unilateral decision for both people, or is it up for mutual discussion? In a healthy relationship frequency of sex, like many other areas and issues, is a mutual decision.

I must stop here and mention that sexual bullying is so common in relationships it is scary. Sexual tyranny or monarchy in a relationship or marriage can be very challenging, but keep in mind the bully needs his or her partner's cooperation to have all the sexual power. Also, if one partner in a couple struggles with intimacy anorexia, the discussion of sexual frequency can bring sexual tyranny to the front burner as well.

I will presuppose that you have a healthy relationship, and are able to come to a mutually agreed upon decision with your partner about the frequency of sex. If this is not true of you and your partner, you might want to get this squared away (with professional help if need be) to have a shot at a healthy mutual sexuality.

As you think of sexual frequency I want you to consider your stage of life, age, health, and schedule so you can be realistic when considering what is realistic. For example, a woman might want sex four to five times a week, but she is a pilot and realistically, home only three days or less in a given week. So your sexual frequency should not be a wish for how often you want sex as if you had nothing else in the world to do. In discussion on sexual frequency, look for doable sexuality that is realistic given your current lifestyle.

“ As you think of sexual frequency I want you to consider your stage of life, age, health, and schedule so you can be realistic when considering what is realistic. ”

Each partner should write down on a separate piece of paper how often he or she would like to come together sexually in a given week. Both of you has a number in mind. If that number is the same, congratulations, you are in the minority that has either already negotiated well, or married someone with a very similar sexual appetite. However, most couples need to negotiate on the sexual frequency issue.

As I see it, most couples tend to navigate this negotiation in one of two ways. In the first, negotiation is fairly straightforward. If one person desires sex four times a week and the other, two times a week, each person moves toward the middle and both agree to compromise and make love three times a week. In the second, couples negotiate frequency by rotation. This simply

means that one week, they have sex four times a week, and the next week they have sex two times a week. If both agree, this also seems to have the fragrance of fairness, so both are content with this negotiation.

Management

Sadly, one lesson of life is that much of it needs to be managed to be successful. Look at areas of your life like time, money, friendship, work, spirituality, exercise and health, and more.

In the pages that follow, I will share some options couples have created together for managing their sexual lives. As you read these, you will probably find one that makes sense for both of you. Implement it to gain deeper sexual understanding.

Option 1: Pick Days

This option is very straightforward. You already have your frequency established. So you need only pick the days of the week you want to come together for sex.

If you have chosen a frequency of sex twice a week, you could decide : one time on Tuesday and one time on Friday. A three times a week schedule might be Monday, Thursday, and Saturday.

Option 2: Split the Week

In this option, the couple divides the week into sections. They assign who will initiate sex within a certain range of days. For example, if a couple wants sex two times a week, one partner might get to initiate sex Sunday through Tuesday. The other partner might initiate sex Thursday through Saturday. If they want sex 2-3 times a week, they might agree that either can initiate on Wednesday.

Option 3: Rotate Weeks

This is also a straightforward solution for some couples. Basically, each person is given a whole week to initiate at the agreed upon frequency. One week, one partner initiates sex. The next week, the other partner initiates sex. The couple just keeps rotating the week, and each partner knows whose week it is to initiate sex.

Option 4: Rotating Days

Couples that want a fluid number for their sexual encounters in a given week often choose this option. In this option, each person is given a total of three days to initiate sex. When one person initiates and the couple comes together for sex, the next day begins the other person's three-day turn to initiate sex. In this option, a couple could have sex every day or 2-3 times a week.

Whether you pick days, split the week, rotate weeks, or find some other idea—whatever works for you is great. Once you actually agree on frequency and manage that frequency successfully, you are on your way to enjoying your sex language on a known basis.