

By Marie Armenia

Emotional Warfare

The old sticks-and-stones cliché is wrong: Words do wound, especially potshots fired by your spouse.

“Your hair looks like you combed it with a hand grenade!” Marcy, 41, said to her husband Todd, 44, as he came to the breakfast table during a couples retreat. We all laughed because, well, Marcy is a really funny woman and because Todd’s hair was styled in that up-down-all-around look that requires lots of extra-hold hair gel. Todd just shrugged his shoulders and sat down. Marcy continued speaking as if her husband wasn’t present: “It’s fun being married to a 40-something teenager!” and rolled her eyes. Todd helped himself to some pancakes. “Can you pass me the butter?” Marcy corrected him, “It’s margarine, Todd, and did you mean to say, ‘Will you pass me the margarine, please?’” Todd didn’t say a word, but those of us close to him could see that he was clenching his teeth.

Marcy’s verbal potshots continued all weekend long. Proverbs 14:1 seems to have been written for her, “The wise woman builds her house, but with her own hands the foolish

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one tears hers down" (NIV). Marcy was tearing down her marriage every time her words tore down Todd.

For those of us who cringe because we recognize ourselves in Marcy, the good news is that she changed — and we can, too. Here's how.

1. Own up to your potshots. "Better to live on the corner of a roof than in a house shared with a nagging wife" (Prov. 25:24).

Believe it or not, Marcy didn't realize she was taking so many potshots at Todd. Licensed counselor Pamela Williams isn't surprised. "I believe it's absolutely possible for someone who is being disrespectful to a spouse not to realize how he or she sounds when angry or frustrated. They somehow find themselves OK with hurting their spouse to relieve personal frustration."

When Marcy became aware of the way she spoke to Todd, it was the first step toward understanding the damage she was doing to her marriage.

2. Curb the disrespect. "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Prov. 12:18, NIV).

"When I observe disrespectful behavior in counseling, lots of red flags go up," Williams says. "There's a general lack of real intimacy and respect between the couple. Anytime we disrespect our spouse it's like hammering a nail into a piece of wood. Apologies can always be made and the nail can be removed, but the scar remains — doing permanent damage to the foundation of the relationship."

According to Williams, the damage of disrespect includes "a general undermining of the initial trust in the relationship," and that opens the door to insecurity and mistrust. "How good can we feel about ourselves if our life mate doesn't value us?"

3. Get to the heart of the matter. "The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart" (Matt. 12:34b).

Marcy had to understand that what was coming out of her mouth was a reflection of what was in her heart, and

her heart was wounded. Williams sees this in many couples. "I see [people] who find themselves in this situation because they feel 'unheard' or 'unimportant' in the relationship. One partner is constantly vying for attention, while the other is clueless, distant, and unaware of the neediness of the other. The unheard spouse may feel he or she has to be rude in order to be heard."

Marcy did feel somewhat unimportant to Todd, but two wrongs don't make a right.

4. Commit to change. "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth (Ps. 39:1, NIV). Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (Jas. 1:19, NIV).

Marcy couldn't change her own heart, or Todd's, but she knew that God could. She also knew that unless God healed what was in her heart, she wouldn't be able to speak words of healing to her husband. Her focus became less on how Todd hurt her and more on how she had hurt Todd. Seems simple, but she asked God to forgive her, and then she asked Todd. He was wary at first, but as he noticed a real change in Marcy's words, the trust between them began to be restored. He wasn't as defensive because she wasn't as offensive.

Williams notes, "Most couples who fight enter the arena as adversaries, trying to prove they are right and the other is wrong; rather than as partners working toward problem resolution for the purpose of bettering their lives together."

5. Work to make it last. "A word spoken at the right time is like golden apples on a silver tray" (Prov. 25:11).

Marcy didn't stop speaking to Todd; she just let the Lord teach her what to say and when to say it. She also stopped talking about Todd to friends and family. It didn't happen overnight, and there were some setbacks along the way. But eventually they came to the place where grace, mercy, and forgiveness were more important than anger, control, and unforgiveness.

Williams acknowledges, "Change is hard work; lasting change is even harder work." Todd and Marcy were willing to spend the time and effort required because of their love for each other and their commitment to their marriage and to Christ. Marcy taped Psalm 90:17 to the refrigerator door to help her and Todd through the difficult moments: "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us — yes, establish the work of our hands" (NIV).

And He did. □



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Are You Underhanded?

How do you communicate to others about your spouse? "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph. 4:29, NIV). The way you speak about your spouse to others is something that matters — to your spouse, to your friends, and to God. Using Ephesians 4:29 as a guide, ask yourself these questions when your spouse is the topic of conversation:

- ▶ Was what I just said about my spouse good?
- ▶ How will those who heard what I said be helped by what I shared?
- ▶ How will they be encouraged by what I said?
- ▶ If what I just said about my spouse wasn't good, didn't help, and didn't encourage the hearers, why did I say it?