

He  
WINS,  
She  
WINS

Learning the Art of Marital Negotiation

Willard F. Harley, Jr.



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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# Contents

Introduction 7

## **Part 1 The Art of Marital Negotiation 9**

1. Identifying the Problem 11
2. Men and Women Need Each Other 19
3. Why Win-Lose Doesn't Work 25
4. Keeping Romantic Love in Mind 39
5. A Win-Win Strategy 47
6. Negotiators, Take Your Places 55
7. Exceptions to the Rule 67

## **Part 2 Resolving Common Marital Conflicts with Negotiation 75**

8. Conflicts over Friends and Relatives 77
9. Conflicts over Career Requirements  
and Time Management 89
10. Conflicts over Financial Management 99
11. Conflicts over Children 107
12. Conflicts over Sex 115

<b>Part 3 Common Problems with Marital Conflict Resolution</b>	<b>127</b>
13. How to Negotiate When You Are Emotional	129
14. How to Negotiate When No One Wants to Raise the Issue	135
15. How to Negotiate When You Are Indecisive	141
16. How to Negotiate When Doing Nothing Is What One Spouse Wants	145
17. How to Negotiate When You're Not Enthusiastic about Much	149
18. Putting Your Skills to Work	155
Appendix A: Marital Negotiation Worksheet	159
Appendix B: Emotional Needs Questionnaire	163
Appendix C: Love Busters Questionnaire	175

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## Introduction

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Conflicts between spouses are inevitable. My wife, Joyce, and I face at least one every hour we're together. Our perspectives on how a problem should be solved are often entirely different. But in spite of those differences, we've become experts at resolving conflicts almost as soon as they arrive. And the skills we've developed in handling disagreements quickly and effectively have helped make our marriage everything we'd hoped it would be.

But what if we didn't know how to do that? What if our conflicts remained unresolved? What if we fought with each other or stonewalled each other instead of finding solutions? Conflicts would then pile up over the years. And by now, after fifty years of marriage, we would be drowning in unresolved conflicts. We wouldn't be able to tolerate living with each other.

When I was young, it was the norm for couples to marry, have kids, and raise those children together. Today, by contrast, the majority of adults are single, over 40 percent of children are raised by a never-married parent, and the percentage of adults choosing to marry is still dropping steadily. Those who do marry face the very real possibility of divorcing at some point.

In this book, I will focus attention on *one* of the reasons for this sea change in our culture—failure to negotiate successfully. When faced with conflicts, most couples do not know how to resolve them to their mutual satisfaction.

This is nothing new, of course. Marital therapists have been aware of this problem since the rate of divorce took off in the 1960s, and many books have been written to help couples communicate, understand, listen, and respect each other more effectively. So what can I offer that has not already been said?

What's different about my approach to resolving marital conflict is its ultimate goal: for a couple to be in love with each other. While most therapists view the resolution of marital conflict to be an end in itself, I view it as a means to an end. If a resolution builds your feeling of love for each other, I approve of it—it's been done the right way. If it fails to build that love, however, I believe you've made a mistake.

Throughout my counseling career, I've seen many couples who have no difficulty communicating with respect yet want to divorce because they have lost their love for each other. But I've never witnessed a couple who is in love *and* wants to divorce.

By reading this book, and applying its lessons to the way you handle conflicts, you will learn how to communicate effectively and resolve your conflicts—guaranteed. But you will learn something else that is far more important. You will learn how to do it in a way that will sustain your love for each other.

## The Art of Marital Negotiation

**I**n the first section of this book, I'll focus on giving you the skills you need to become an artful negotiator. It won't be easy at first, but with time and practice you'll find that artful negotiation becomes a way of life for you and your spouse.



# 1

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## Identifying the Problem

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It had been a rough night. Little Emily, the newest addition to the Kramer family, didn't feel like sleeping. She felt like screaming. Her father, Tony, had buyers from China to entertain the next day at work, and he had to be at the top of his game. So each time Emily started crying, Tony would roll over and cover his head to block out the noise, figuring that his wife, Jodi, would get up to calm their distraught child.

Jodi, however, was quickly growing tired of being the one to get up to tend to the baby. She thought that she and Tony should take turns calming Emily down. After all, she was his daughter, too. And Jodi also needed her sleep—she had a busy day ahead of her as well.

So the third time Emily started to wail, Jodi decided it was Tony's turn to quiet her, and she tried to wake him up by poking him. When that didn't work she pushed him with her feet until

finally he fell out of bed. When Tony cleared his head and realized what had happened to him, he flew into a rage.

“What’s wrong with you?” he yelled.

“I’m sorry,” Jodi explained. “But I couldn’t wake you up and it’s your turn to take care of Emily!”

Jodi and Tony understood their conflict over Emily’s nighttime care. And they each had solutions to the problem that they felt were fair. Jodi proposed an equal division of responsibility—Tony would take care of the baby one time, and she would take care of her the next. Jodi would even have agreed to the two of them taking alternating days of the week—or even weeks of the month—just so the care would be equal.

Tony, however, felt that his alertness at work was too important to allow him to be wakened at night. Since he felt that Jodi’s job did not require the same degree of vigilance that his did, he decided that she should be the only one to have her sleep interrupted.

This wasn’t the first time Jodi and Tony had struggled with the issue of who would get up with the baby at night. In fact, the same problem had come up shortly after their first child, Robbie, was born. But they never resolved that difference of opinion and here they were again, another child later, still arguing about the same issue.

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As I acknowledged in the introduction, conflicts between spouses are inevitable. Joyce and I face numerous conflicts in our marriage every day. We’ve learned how to resolve those conflicts the right way, and our marriage is strong as a result.

But what if, like Jodi and Tony, we found ourselves stuck in a pattern of conflict and were unable to resolve our issues? It wouldn’t be long before we couldn’t stand to be around each other.

### **A Shift toward Equality**

Historically, a husband has had the decisive edge when it came to resolving marital conflict. He simply made the decision and his wife dutifully submitted to it. In the past, most cultures and religions encouraged this. Husbands were to lead and wives were to follow. Marriage was often seen as a microcosm of the religious and political order where authority started at the top (God) and worked its way down. Men of greater rank had authority over men of lesser rank, and within a family, a husband had authority over his wife, children, servants, and slaves. Men dominated the world.

But in the United States the American Revolution began to turn that tradition on its head. The Declaration of Independence stated that everyone had an equal right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In practice, of course, those rights were not given to everyone overnight. It took almost a hundred years, but eventually slaves were freed, given citizenship, and African American males received the right to vote. Then, over fifty years later, women were finally included when they were given the right to vote and hold public office.

Today, in America and in most other democratic cultures, it’s assumed that women should have the same basic rights as men. In marriage, that transformation has come to mean that women are to be equal partners with their husbands. It’s no longer assumed that a husband has the right to dominate and control his wife.

Unfortunately, it’s also no longer assumed that marriages will last a lifetime for couples. Prior to the 1960s, divorce rates were no higher than 10 percent, yet by 1980 they had soared to over 50 percent. Today, they have settled in at about 45 percent, but the percentage of couples marrying each year has been steadily dropping.

So what’s the problem? Shouldn’t marriages be happier today with both spouses working together rather than one being controlled by the other? It would seem so on the surface. But the trick, of course, is that men and women don’t always see life the same way, and a cultural shift toward equality didn’t magically equip them with the skills they need to face problems and make decisions jointly.

In many ways, marital decision-making would be less complicated for Joyce and me if we had lived a hundred years ago. Whenever we would have had a conflict, she would have been expected to submit to my way of doing things. As a caring husband, I might have listened to her point of view. But in the end, I would have made the final decision, which she would have had to accept.

When Joyce and I were married, it was still common to hear wives promising to “love, honor, and obey until death do us part,” and Joyce dutifully recited that vow. Of course, like most men at that time, I didn’t make the same commitment. I merely promised to “love and cherish” her.

But in spite of that wording in our vows, we both understood that we would be equal partners, gaining from each other’s wisdom. Joyce would not simply *obey* me and I would not expect it of her. Instead, we would both love and cherish each other. And that meant making decisions jointly so that we would both be happy with them.

We didn’t realize it at the time, but our decision to make our marriage a joint effort, with neither spouse having control over the other, was a radical departure from the way most marriages had functioned for thousands of years. And making joint decisions wasn’t easy. It was far more difficult than it would have been if Joyce had simply obeyed me.

My experience as a marriage counselor has taught me that in today’s marriages, negotiation is an essential skill for couples but one that is very difficult to learn. That’s not to say that spouses don’t know how to negotiate. In fact, many of the husbands and wives I’ve counseled are expert negotiators—outside of their marriage. But when it comes to negotiating with their spouses, they seem to ignore everything they know about the art of coming to an agreement.

This disconnect between our knowledge of negotiating and the way we actually negotiate in marriage probably has something to do with attitudes and instincts that have formed throughout human history with husbands dominating wives. Even though we live in a culture that gives women equal rights with men, many husbands still tend to approach conflicts as if their wives are still expected to “obey.” And many wives, realizing the power that equality brings, use it to try to control their husbands.

When a conflict is not easily resolved, all too often a husband and wife both try to force each other to do what they want. And when that doesn’t work, they try to go it alone, making unilateral decisions. The problem, of course, is that spouses don’t want to be told what to do, and they also don’t want their mate to make decisions that ignore their feelings and interests. Neither “short-cut” to conflict resolution solves the problem. And as with Tony and Jodi’s childcare issues, these unresolved conflicts pile up, eventually overwhelming a couple with hopelessness.

Without a doubt, it’s more complicated when a husband and wife make joint decisions rather than telling each other what to do or making unilateral decisions. But if a husband and wife are truly equal and want to resolve their conflicts once and for all, joint agreement is their only reasonable choice.

## **A Common Goal**

The place to start in any negotiation is to agree on the goal. And the goal I encourage couples to use when negotiating is to find a resolution that makes both of them happy—to find a win-win outcome. But as I mentioned earlier, it isn’t easy to do. While most spouses would agree with me that win-win outcomes are the most desirable in marriage, many would argue

that they're almost impossible to find. So, they would say, if a couple is to move on in life and make necessary decisions to keep functioning, compromise is inevitable. And by "compromise," they usually mean that the decisions should be somewhat less than win-win.

Charlie Weaver, former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty's chief of staff, has been a highly respected political negotiator. Throughout his boss's term as governor, he did a very admirable job of keeping highly contentious political foes in line by using his negotiating skill. He attributes his success to this goal: "Each party has to come away a little bit happy and a little bit mad."\*

That goal might work for Mr. Weaver in politics, but it doesn't work very well in marriage. Spouses who try to resolve their conflicts with that goal in mind find that they almost immediately forget about the fact that the resolution made them "a little bit happy" and tend to remember forever how it made them "a little bit mad." Long-term resentment is a problem that almost every married couple experiences when conflicts are not resolved the right way—with both spouses happy with the outcome.

In politics, we can't expect everyone to be happy with a decision. There are just too many conflicting interests to accommodate. Besides, opposing parties have never promised to care for each other. Their goal is to defeat each other. But in marriage, only two people's interest must be taken into account when making a decision. And those two people should not be in competition with each other. In fact, they have made a unique and comprehensive commitment to care for each other. So it would make sense for them to strive for win-win outcomes whenever they face a conflict. And it's been my experience in my own marriage, and in

\*Baird Helgeson, "Outline of budget deal at Capitol?" *Star Tribune*, April 23, 2011, <http://www.startribune.com/printarticle/?id=120546354>.

helping thousands of couples with their marriages, that this can be achieved by almost any couple.

I've written this book to help you get what you need from each other by becoming skilled marital negotiators. By the time you have finished reading it, and have applied what you've learned to the conflicts you face, you will be amazed at how successful you will have become at eliminating the conflicts that you may have been facing for years. And in the process of resolving all of your conflicts the right way, with win-win solutions, you will also find yourselves with something else—you'll be in love.



## 2

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# Men and Women Need Each Other

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**B**ack in the days when I was a college professor, I taught neuropsychology. My students learned how the various parts of the brain control human behavior. I would begin the course by holding up an adult male brain and an adult female brain and ask the class if they noticed any differences. There was always overwhelming agreement that the brains didn't look at all the same. The male brain was bigger and lumpier than the female brain.

Then, as I dissected the two brains, I would show the class that they were not only different on the surface, but they were also different inside. The corpus callosum, a band of fibers that connects the two hemispheres, is much larger in the female brain, even though the brain itself is smaller. This greater interconnection between hemispheres may explain why women tend to take more information into account when making decisions than men do.

The inferior-parietal lobule is proportionately larger in the male brain, especially on the left hemisphere. This area of the brain was found to be abnormally large in Albert Einstein's brain and is associated with mathematical ability. Is this why more men than women tend to excel in mathematics?

Two language-associated structures, the superior temporal gyrus and the inferior frontal gyrus, are proportionately larger in the female brain. Is there any question that women tend to communicate more effectively than men?

The parietal region of the brain is thicker in the female brain. It's been suggested that such thickness inhibits a woman's ability to mentally rotate objects, thus giving men an advantage in understanding spatial relationships.

Beyond this host of visually identifiable differences, there are even more biochemical differences. For example, consider the contrasting ways in which estrogen in a female brain and testosterone in a male brain affect the hormone oxytocin, which has a calming influence and is released during stress. Estrogen enhances oxytocin's effect while testosterone reduces its effect. It's been suggested that this difference causes women to take care of themselves and their children under stress while men tend to have a fight or flight response.

How all these differences in the brains of men and woman actually affect behavior is still controversial. But the fact that there are important differences is clear. The overall physical differences that we all see in female and male bodies are also found in their brains—and in the way they think.

Years of counseling experience has led me to believe that those differences help men and women make the wisest decisions in life when they respect those differences. When those differences are not respected, they create conflict and turmoil.

## **Men and Women Need Each Other's Perspective**

The differences in the structure and internal chemistry of human male and female brains affect the way they think. So it should be no surprise to anyone that men and women come to different conclusions about a wide variety of issues.

Throughout recorded history, because men are physically stronger than women and therefore have been able to dominate them, a man's perspective has been regarded as correct (by men) and a woman's perspective as inferior. Until recently, even most women have accepted that interpretation of their judgment.

Just think about it for a moment. Why were women not allowed to vote or hold public office here in America until 1920? It's because the men who were in charge didn't think that women had sufficient wisdom. Their evidence was that women often didn't agree with their conclusions. And at the time, most women didn't seem to object to that characterization.

But that's no longer the case. We now know with certainty that women, on average, are just as smart as men. The two simply have somewhat different perspectives. In marriage, those differing perspectives often lead to conflict. And if a couple doesn't know how to come to an agreement with each other without one running over the other, conflicts lead to fights rather than to resolution. The result has been that spouses in most marriages grow apart, lose their romantic love for each other, and either live independently of each other or divorce.

It doesn't have to turn out that way, though. Husbands and wives can resolve conflicts the right way—with enthusiastic agreement. And the solutions they find as a result are far wiser than those originally considered by either spouse alone. Their differences in perspective complement each other to create a more complete

understanding of the problems we all face in life. In other words, their joint agreement is the best resolution to their conflicts.

But there is an important caveat—they must hold each other’s perspective in the highest regard. They must each assume that they don’t have all of the answers and that their individual perspective may be somewhat flawed. They must value each other’s point of view as an essential piece of the puzzle. They must understand that mutual enthusiastic agreement is the only goal to conflict resolution that makes sense in marriage.

It’s the differences in the way men and women think that make them perfect partners in life. They need each other’s brains. The biggest mistake a couple can make is to view their differing perspectives with contempt and condescension. To joke about the way men and women view life differently is to ignore their most valuable asset—their differences. And it’s equally important for a couple to avoid the temptation to ignore their own perspective for the sake of the other.

### Why Giving In Isn’t the Best Way to Care for Each Other

Most men and women know that they need each other in a host of ways: physically, emotionally, and intellectually. That dependence helps create an instinctive willingness to care for and protect each other that goes far beyond the way they treat same-sex relationships.

After speaking to a group of young mothers recently, I was asked this question: *My husband frequently “gives in” and lets me have my way, but I know that he’s not really on board with it. I like when I get my way, but don’t always feel good about it afterward. How do I get him to open up to me more about how he really feels?*

This woman’s husband may have agreed to do what made her happy because he cared about her and wanted her to be happy.

She probably does the same for him every once in a while. They both had an instinct to care for each other at all costs, even if the cost is their own happiness.

But she was aware of a problem that this mutual care created for them. She liked to have her way, but deep down she knew that was not how they should be resolving conflicts.

Notice how she expressed her concern: she wanted him to “open up” so she could “know more about how he really feels.” In other words, their discussions never really got down to their differences in perspective. Instead, she’d express what she wanted and he’d either deny her request or go along with it. What she really wanted, though, was a meeting of the minds—two entirely different minds.

When a choice is to be made in my marriage, my instinct often tells me, *If I really care about Joyce, I’ll give her whatever she wants. And the more I’m willing to sacrifice my own pleasure for hers, the more caring I am.* And yet, I know that the wisest choices we can make are those that take both of our perspectives into account. They are equally valuable. So if I deny Joyce my perspective, I’m limiting our joint wisdom.

By simply giving his wife what she wanted without expressing his opinion, the husband of this young mother was depriving her of valuable information, and that made her feel very uncomfortable. It was more important to her to understand her husband than it was to get her way.

In marriage, a man and a woman should become a new entity, functioning not as two individuals but as a team. They should learn to plan together and to carry out that plan together. Having a cooperative and caring life partner gives us a great advantage over anything we could have been as an individual. And we’re much wiser than we could have ever been on our own. But it takes skill to work as a team—negotiating skill.