

*How to Help Couples Resolve Conflict and
Heal Soul Wounds in Their Relationships*

By Beverly Rodgers PhD, and Tom Rodgers PhD

Every marriage has conflict. In fact, famous marital researcher, Dr. John Gottman, (1999) says good marriages that last the test of time are not void of conflict. Healthy couples just know how to resolve these inevitable disagreements. It has been our experience as marital therapists for the last 25 years that most couples fight about silly, surface issues, and often miss the real reasons that lie beneath their anger. The chronic conflict over your husband not cleaning up his crumbs from the counter may not really be about crumbs at all. There could be a deeper root. Finding the deeper root can help couples resolve conflict and even bring healing to each other.

In the Soul Healing Love Model we help couples determine that deeper root by looking at their soul wounds. We define a soul wound as a need from childhood that was not met (Rodgers and Rodgers, 1998). All of us have soul wounds of one type or another. There is no perfect family, life, or situation. Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (NIV). But it is important to note that the purpose of recognizing your soul wounds is not to play the “blame game.” The reason we look at childhood is that the wounds that occurred early in our development can cause the deepest emotional scars. These childhood soul wounds are also easily triggered in adult relationships, and can bring about a great deal of pain and emotion.

When these soul wounds are triggered in marriage (and they will be), couples often become reactive, giving a current situation more emotional energy than it deserves. This

is called---Reactivity (Hendrix, 1992; Baucom, 1996). When one mate over reacts, it typically triggers reactivity in the other mate and they are both over reacting at the same time. We call this phenomenon –Interactivity (Rodgers and Rodgers, p. 1999).

When couples are in a state of interactivity, neither is being rational. You can easily see how marital conflict can get out to hand, and even become violent. This is not what the Lord had in mind when he created for Adam, “a helper suitable.” The Lord wants us to live in peace. Proverbs 14: 29, says, “A wise man controls his temper. He knows it causes mistakes” (TLB). It is hard to control your temper when soul wounds are being triggered. Because of this we have developed two communication techniques that help couples determine the root of their anger and stop unhealthy reactivity and interactivity.

Technique 1: The GIFT Exercise

Anger theorists teach that anger is not a primary emotion (Lerner, 1985). It is a secondary response to four primary feelings which are: Guilt, Inferiority, Fear, and pain (Trauma). Since this list is hard to remember in the “heat of battle,” we developed an acronym to help couples remember it. It is the word—GIFT.

Guilt
Inferiority
Fear
Trauma

This process becomes a *gift* to the couple, enabling them to communicate through the impasse of conflict by recognizing the root of their rage. The GIFT Exercise also helps couples guard their words more carefully so that destructive, unhealthy anger is less likely to occur.

Technique 2: The Digging Deeper Exercise

The Digging Deeper Exercise is a spin-off of the GIFT Exercise. This technique allows the couple to dig deeper into their psyche to determine their soul wounds so that they can understand their reactivity. It then helps them to separate emotion that belongs in the past from emotion that belongs in the present. This develops what is known as *Intentionality*, which is giving a situation only the emotion and energy that it deserves. Intentionality is *acting* in a healing way no matter how you *feel* (Hendrix, 1992; Rodgers and Rodgers, 1998).

Learning intentionality stops the over reacting in marital conflicts that is so harmful. In order to practice intentionality, couples must actively live out Romans 12:2, which encourages Christians, to “not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is” (NIV).

The Digging Deeper Exercise provides a way for couples to be intentional and “renew their minds.” The exercise consists of five steps. In order to follow the steps, couples need to answer the following questions.

1. What is the behavior that my mate does that triggers my anger? Complete this sentence, “When my mate does (this)...., I feel (this)....”
2. Identify the root of this anger using The GIFT Exercise. Is it Guilt, Inferiority, Fear, or Trauma?
3. Ask yourself, “When have I ever felt this feeling before?” Look in childhood for a soul wound that may be triggered. (If you have trouble with this, as many people do, pray that the Lord will show you. Trust Him to do so).
4. What do I do when feel I this feeling? What is my behavior?
5. What do I really NEED? (This is not the surface need, but the deeper need in your soul).

We encourage couples to write down their answers to these questions and share them with each other. The Digging Deeper Exercise organizes the healing process in such a way that couples can plainly see what their deeper issues are and what they need to do to bring about healing and change.

These two communication techniques in the Soul Healing Love arsenal are helpful for couples because they incorporate three key ingredients that researchers Gottman, Natarius, Gonso, & Markman (1976), found in successful, happy married couples. These are:

- 1. Validation or active listening*
- 2. Leveling or expressing real feelings and emotions*
- 3. Editing which is finding non-defensive ways to express oneself.*

Finally, these techniques help couples understand themselves and each other. Knowing why you and your spouse are so emotional or reactive can help you see yourself and your spouse through God's eyes, and love him or her as God does, unconditionally. It is the unconditional love of the Lord Jesus Christ that heals our childhood wounds (Jeremiah 30:17). With the tools of the Soul Healing Love Model you can better receive the Lord's healing and give that healing to your spouse. You can be like Christ---a healing agent to each other and fulfill the mandate to love one another as Christ loves us. To quote one couple that uses the model regularly, "These tools gave me a practical way to be Jesus-with-skin-on to my wife." After all isn't that what we are all striving for?