

Fire and Ice Both Toxic for Marital Relationships

“Turning a cold shoulder can be just as corrosive to marriage as open hostility,” according to Dr. Linda J. Roberts, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. In a journal article on a longitudinal study of 97 couples who were followed into their third year of marriage, Dr. Roberts reported that “ice, not just fire, matters in marriage.”

The study examined the effects communication styles on marital satisfaction. Communication behaviors that were linked with decreased marital satisfaction included not only conflict and hostility, but also and withdrawal behaviors – retreating from a partner’s disclosure of personal, heartfelt feelings.

Three types of withdrawal behaviors were identified. *Angry withdrawal* occurred in response to perceived negative behavior of a partner and involved actions such as stomping out of the room, pouting, or giving the silent treatment. *Conflict avoidance* occurred in response to a conflict or potential conflict, and involved actions such as changing the subject, making a joke, or lack of interest in a discussion. *Intimacy avoidance* occurred in response to a partner’s self-revealing disclosures of feelings and vulnerabilities, and involved behaviors such as ignoring, showing a lack of interest, or not listening.

Dr. Roberts also reported that the effects of hostility or withdrawal were different, on average, for men than they were for women. Husbands’ hostile negativity was particularly important in predicting wives’ marital distress. Husbands’ conflict avoidance seemed to be positive for wives when the alternative was hostile responsiveness from husbands, but had a negative impact for wives who did not perceive that their husbands were likely to blow up and be hostile in response to conflict. It seemed to be particularly important to wives that negative feelings were aired and conflicts resolved in a safe and constructive context.

Wives’ withdrawal was particularly important in predicting husbands’ marital distress. Husbands who saw their wives as withdrawing were the most unhappy, even more discontent than husbands who saw their wives as hostile and critical. “Overall, the results send a strong message about the importance of staying involved with your spouse, listening to his or her concerns, and responding in a non-hostile and caring way,” says Roberts. “Spouses shouldn’t fight fire with fire or with ice.”

Source: Roberts, L. J. (2000). Fire and ice in marital communication: Hostile and distancing behaviors as predictors of marital distress. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62, 693-707.

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