



The COVID-19 pandemic has unexpectedly placed couples in unprecedented proximity. Whether sheltering in place together has been challenging or delightful for you and your spouse, let this time be an opportunity to renew your love. Learn how to do so in *5 Simple Ways to Strengthen Your Marriage... When You're Stuck at Home Together*.

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CALL A TRUCE ON THROWING VERBAL BOMBS

The old saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is totally false. Words have great power to hurt. The truth is found in an ancient Hebrew proverb: “The tongue has the power of life and death.”¹ You can kill your relationship or give it life by the way you talk. Everything we say is either a bomb or a balm. Bombs destroy. Balm is an aromatic oil or ointment that is soothing and healing. Harsh, cruel, condemning words are like bombs exploding in the heart

of the recipient. Kind, loving, affirming words are like an ointment of healing to the heart of the one who receives them.

Unfortunately, all of us sometimes throw verbal bombs at our spouse. Such words are often spoken in anger. We say things like: “I can’t count on you for anything.” “You are just like your father/mother—totally irresponsible.” “Would you put that phone down and listen to me?” “When you take a walk, why don’t you take Johnny with you? He likes to get outside, and I need a little relief.” “I don’t think you would ever touch me if I didn’t initiate it.” “You know I don’t like salmon. So why did you fix it?” “You are driving me crazy playing video games all day.” I could go on, but you get the picture.

These verbal bombs are coming out of our anger. Anger is the emotion we feel when we believe we have been treated unfairly. Often our anger is legitimate; we have been mistreated. Such anger should lead to lovingly confronting our spouse and seeking reconciliation. (We will talk about this in chapter 2.) However, much of our anger is distorted. Our spouse did not mistreat us; they simply did not do what we thought they should have done. Or they did not do it the way we wanted it done. For exam-

ple, I remember getting angry with my wife about the way she loaded a dishwasher. I am an organized person, and I load a dishwasher in an organized manner. Thus, nothing gets broken and everything gets clean. Karolyn loads a dishwasher like she was playing Frisbee. So, in anger, I gave her a harsh lecture. Did that help our marriage? No! She got angry at me for the way I talked to her. A verbal bomb usually stimulates a retaliation. I bomb her and she bombs me and we are destroying what we wanted most: a loving marriage.

When we are thrown together 24/7, personality differences may surface more often and more intensely. The question is how will we deal with these irritations? By nature, some people lash out in anger with harsh, hurtful words. Others clam up and give their spouse the “silent treatment.” Neither of these enhance the relationship. Life-giving words are a much better choice. What if I had said to Karolyn, “Honey, I really appreciate the fact that you load the dishwasher. Is that something you enjoy doing, or would you rather have me load it? I’m open to that if it would help you.” Can you feel the soothing, healing balm of those words?

I can hear someone saying, “That is just not natural.

No one talks like that when they are upset.” It is true that when we are feeling angry, our natural response is to lob a verbal bomb. But doing what “comes natural” does not enhance a marriage. Learning to control our anger and not let anger control us is a huge lesson in having a healthy marriage. Once you throw the bomb, it explodes. Such verbal explosions never move us in the right direction. That is why I am suggesting: *call a truce on throwing verbal bombs*. Whether throwing verbal bombs is a “way of life” in your marriage or only an “occasional” event, would you consider “calling a truce”? Now that many of us are spending more time in the same geographical space, we have a wonderful opportunity to initiate a truce.

A truce is an agreement that we will halt the bombing and create an atmosphere in which we can talk about our relationship and seek to make it what we both desire—a place of peace and not warfare. Throughout history, a number of international conflicts have been solved when each party was willing to call a truce and negotiate. I believe that many marriages could also find peace, but first we must stop the bombing.

What if you are reading this book alone and your spouse is not willing to join you? All is not hopeless! If

you decide that you want to change the atmosphere in your marriage and are willing to make an agreement with yourself to stop throwing bombs from your side, at least there would be fewer bombs exploding in your house. When you don't retaliate to your spouse's bombs, he or she may run out of ammunition. It is hard to keep shooting when no one is returning fire.

Now comes the second step. What if during this truce you begin to replace verbal bombs with verbal balms? What if you seek to replace complaining with gratitude? What if you start looking for things you appreciate about your spouse? I believe if you "look," you will likely "find"! Now I did have one lady say to me, "I know it would be good if I could give my husband some positive words, but to be honest with you, I can't think of anything good to say about him." I thought a moment and said, "Well, does he ever take a shower?" To which she responded, "Well yes." "How often?" I asked. "Well, every day," she replied. I said, "If I were you, I would start there. Imagine saying to him, 'Honey, I don't think I have ever told you this, but I appreciate the fact that you take a shower every day. I understand that there are men who don't, and I really appreciate that about you.'" I have never met a man or

a woman that I could not find something about them for which to give thanks. I'm sure that your spouse is no exception.

For some of us, speaking words of gratitude comes easy. We received affirming words growing up, and we learned as a child to say "thank you" when someone did something for us. We seldom left the table without saying, "Thank you Mom/Dad for lunch." If this was our childhood experience, then verbally expressing gratitude to our spouse probably comes rather natural for us. However, there are others who seldom heard affirming words growing up, and as adults, we do not naturally speak words of gratitude. Whether easy or difficult, all of us can learn to express gratitude.

A husband once told me he did not know how to express thanks to his wife. "It just doesn't seem natural to me," he said. "I can understand that," I said. I knew he was an avid golfer. So I said to him, "I expect when you first started playing golf it did not seem natural to you. Am I right?" "You are right about that. I was the worst beginner you could ever imagine. I lost dozens of golf balls in the lake." "So how did you learn to play golf?" I asked. "Little by little," he said. "I just kept trying, and of course

I had a good coach.” “Then I will be your coach if you are willing to try,” I said. “Little by little it will begin to feel more natural, but you have to keep trying.” He agreed, and eventually he became an award-winning husband.

One of the things I suggested to this husband was to get a “gratitude” notebook. On the first page, he wrote: Things I Appreciate About My Wife. I asked him to write three things on page one this week and bring them back to me next week. Admittedly, from my perspective, they were pretty generic.

1. She is a good cook.
2. She is a good mother.
3. She is a good school teacher.

But we started where he was. I wrote the following in his gratitude notebook beside each of his statements:

1. Honey, I know I haven’t told you this very often, but you are an excellent cook, and I really appreciate all the meals you prepare.

2. Mary (his wife’s name), I’ve been thinking about what a wonderful mother you are to our children, and

I want to thank you for all you do for them.

3. How did your teaching go this week? I bet the parents of your students really appreciate you. From all I hear, you are a great teacher.

Then I asked him to read each of these aloud to me. He read rather haltingly, but he read them. “Now this week, I want you to stand in front of a mirror and read each of these statements aloud at least twice a day,” I said. “That’s all?” he asked. “That’s all for this week,” I said.

The next week I asked him to share each of these statements without looking at his notebook. He did fairly well. “Okay, now here is your assignment for the next three weeks,” I said. “I want you to share with Mary one of these statements each week. You choose the time and place, but each week you express your gratitude to her for one of these three things.” “This is going to be hard,” he said. “I know, but a good golfer like you can do it,” I said. We both laughed as he said, “I’ll try it.” “That’s all it takes,” I said as he walked out of my office.

Three weeks later he walked into my office with a smile on his face. “How did it go?” I asked. “Last week, when I made my third statement, she said to me, ‘What’s go-

ing on with you? I've never heard you give me so many compliments.” “And what did you say?” I asked. “I told her that I was just trying to learn how to express to her how much I appreciate her.” She said, “That is so sweet of you. I love you so much.” “She had not said that in a long time,” he said. “It felt good.” Again, I was reminded of the power of speaking words of gratitude.

From there we moved on to broaden the scope of speaking positive words to his wife. We focused on things he liked about her personality. He came up with a pretty good list. Then he started thanking her for the things she did for him, things he had just taken for granted. He started noticing her clothes and telling her how nice she looked. He thanked her for putting up with his obsession with golf and not making him feel guilty when he went to the club. Within nine months he was an all-star husband in Mary's eyes.

So maybe expressing appreciation to your spouse comes easy for you. Or maybe it is extremely difficult for you. If so, I hope this story will encourage you to get started. Don't allow your past experience to destroy your present reality. Now that you are spending more time together, let's learn to create a more positive relationship

by learning to replace verbal bombs with verbal balms.

MAKING IT PRACTICAL

1. If both of you are willing, sign a truce. If only one of you is willing, then commit yourself and sign the truce.

Put the following words on a sheet of paper, which each of you can sign and date:

We know that harsh, critical words are hurtful to our relationship. Therefore, we commit ourselves to calling a truce on such words. We will not only seek to stop throwing verbal bombs at each other, but we will seek to replace negative words with positive words of appreciation.

2. Start your own “gratitude” notebook.

This week, list three things you appreciate about your spouse.

Add two additional things each week for six weeks.

3. Seek to verbally express appreciation to your spouse at least once a week.

4. When you fail and speak harshly or critically to your spouse, first calm down, and then come back and apologize. (More about this in chapter 2.)

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