

Last time we discussed resentment. It's one of the two major bogymen that cause most of your ineffective couple's communications. The other is fear. When you are feeling fearful or highly anxious in a contentious discussion, you are most likely to regress into being one very ineffective communicator. Remember "The Five Demons?" They are *withdrawal, blaming, whining, resentful compliance and confusion*

Fear is a primary instinctive reaction to a threat. Anger is a secondary emotion that gets expressed after we feel the fear. Here's what I mean.

If someone recklessly cuts you off when driving, your quick outward reaction may be one of anger, "You #\$!\*%\*%%#." But you felt fear before you expressed your anger.

The same is true when you get mad at your partner or vice versa. Each of you just sees the end result (the big five) from feeling that fear or emotional pain.

What is the fear you feel in a contentious discussion? Actually it is pretty universal for humans. We are afraid of rejection, being dismissed, loss of close connections, and loss of potential support, loving attention, acknowledgment or acceptance. So in addition to fearing these losses, we feel emotional pain about them.

But this fear of loss is not what gets expressed.

What comes out is defensiveness, blame, withdrawal, resentful compliance or so much confusion we can't think straight.

The amount of fear and pain you feel depends on your own life experiences and the meaning you made of those experiences. So everyone reacts differently in heated discussions. But one thing is true for all of us-when we exceed our fear threshold, we will regress to The Five Demons of ineffective communication patterns.

When you are in a very intense contentious discussion, your reflex self-protective brain screams one thing, "Stop the fear and pain."

A heap of pain in a contentious, sensitive discussion is like a five alarm fire. Your protective reflex has only one goal, "stop the pain/fear" At that point, your brain isn't concerned with your happiness, spiritual development or any other enlightened aim. You instinctively fight back or withdraw.

When you're in a discussion and you feel a single alarm going off, you can think more rationally. Be the first to listen actively and see the problem from your partner's perspective. Keep reminding yourself that collaboration is better than first forcing your own perspective. Constructive disagreements can lead to innovative resolutions, and you're in a better position to do this by listening actively.

The problem is compounded when something sets off a single alarm for one person, and that same comment provokes a four or five alarm reaction in the other person. Each one believes that the other person "just doesn't get it." Remember, almost all alarms are driven by some kind of fear.

When you are in a difficult dialogue with your partner, do you have any idea of how many alarms the topic represents for you and for the other person?

*Would you be able to discuss this concept with them?*

*Would you be able to discuss the fear or anxiety that creates The Five Demon response?*

*If you trigger a five alarm fire, take a time out to regroup to have a more friendly discussion.*

And remember that during the holidays high expectations, difficult family histories, complicated relationships and busy schedules can conspire for some highly charged moments. Take a deep

breath and consider how many alarms are going off for your partner before resorting to those old ineffective responses.

To comment, go to the title at the top of this posting and look for the comment link on the right side just below the title. I look forward to your replies.

Until next time,

Pete

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