

Change Your Mind About Conflict

Jill Savage: We had our very first, big conflict on our honeymoon.

Mark Savage: Yep.

[laughter]

MS: I remember it.

JS: Very well. We were in the Rocky Mountains.

MS: Camping.

JS: We were camping, it was raining.

MS: Yep.

JS: And it was ripe for conflict. I mean, just think about this. We're camping, it's raining, yeah, it's not easy.

MS: It wasn't.

JS: I don't even remember what happened, but I took off.

MS: I remember that.

JS: I can remember I was going uphill, and I'm just ticked. I'm just walking away.

MS: And I'm ticked, and I'm like, "Good. I'm glad you're gone. I can get this tent put up."

[laughter]

JS: And it took me just a little while before I realized he was not chasing me. I mean, that's what they do in the movies, right?

MS: Yeah.

JS: They have a conflict, she runs off, and then he chases her, and it wasn't happening that way.

MS: No.

[laughter]

JS: And I remember, I finally turned around and came back, and I even showed up in the tent. Here it is, raining...

MS: You're drenched, and you're like...

JS: I go, "You didn't chase me."

[laughter]

MS: And I think I was like, "Was I supposed to chase you? I got the tent up!"

[laughter]

JS: Oh, my goodness. So, we're talking about changing our thinking and changing our marriage. Changing our *mind* and changing our marriage. But we're looking at different areas of life that we need to change our thinking about, and one of them is conflict. We need to change what we think about conflict, because most of us are looking at conflict through the lens of our family of origin, right? That is what is directing the dialogue in our head. So, if conflict was a part of that, but it was very icky, it was very loud, it maybe even was abusive, then we're going to look at conflict through that lens.

MS: Yeah, and in fear.

JS: Yes.

MS: And actually, that was the way that conflict was handled in my family of origin. It was loud, it was abusive, and it was aggressive. Even though my real father had a family elsewhere, because he had left my family and divorced my mom, he was very similar to how he treated my half-brothers.

JS: And for me, we didn't experience a lot of conflict in the home I grew up in. We just kind of swept in under a rug. We didn't deal with it. I was looking at conflict through a lens as well. The movies I'd seen, the romance novels I'd read, all of that was influencing my thoughts about conflict. But we really need to change our mind about conflict for three particular reasons. One is that we need to understand that conflict is natural, and it is healthy.

MS: And conflict is actually growth trying to happen, and that's huge. That's been a huge change for me.

JS: And then conflict deepens our intimacy. I know that sounds crazy. If we don't understand this though, we will rob our relationship of intimacy. Now, the truth is...we're not saying that any conflict is good. We're saying that healthy conflict does those things, okay? It's natural, and it needs to be part of a relationship. It is growth trying to happen, and it deepens our intimacy, but we have to know how to make that happen. We have to know how to disagree in a respectful, kind way. We need to know how to make proposals back and forth to each other when we disagree until we can come to some agreement in some way. Or just determine who's going to make a decision that maybe doesn't need compromise.

MS: Sure.

JS: So, one of the things that we have found so helpful, a counselor shared this with us years ago, is a concept called the tunnel of chaos. I think this illustrates why it's important for us to understand

that conflict can be healthy, and it can be a part of intimacy. So, let's just pretend there's a tunnel here, and we have conflict. We're moving forward in marriage, and we're in the tunnel of chaos. It's dark, and it's icky. Conflict doesn't feel good most of the time. So, we're in there, and that tunnel is difficult to navigate. If we don't navigate it well, we back out of the tunnel, and we do not make progress. But if we will learn how to navigate that and move to the other side, we'll experience a deeper intimacy on the other side. That is when growth is actually able to happen.

MS: Yeah.

JS: And that's why we want to change our thinking about conflict, because whether you came from a home where conflict was dangerous, or you came from a home where conflict was non-existent because you didn't deal with it, neither one of those are healthy. What we have to find is an ability to handle and respond to conflict in a way that will make a big difference in your relationship. So, we're going to refer to some other resources that we have that will help you to do that, but today, we want to help you begin to think about some ways that you can evaluate your thoughts about conflict which will move into your feelings about conflict which will cause your actions to be one way or another, that will cause the results in your marriage to end up where you want them to, or maybe where you don't want them to. So, this month, we want to look at four specific steps that we can take.

MS: Step number one is to adjust your thinking about conflict. Going back to one of the three truths that we stated earlier about conflict is that conflict is growth trying to happen. Conflict is natural and can be healthy. Conflict deepens our intimacy. So, we want to adjust our thinking about conflict, to the truths of what conflict is.

JS: So, what we want to do is shift the inner dialogue to not be taking conflict personally. A lot of times, that's what happens. We take conflict personally. Yep, I screwed up again, it's about me. We make the conflict about us. Your spouse may even be saying it's about you, but you're the only one who can choose to either accept or reject what they're saying. I'll give you an example of this in our relationship. During our dark season, Mark was lobbing a lot of bombs at me. Like I was the reason that he was leaving, and I was too strong, and I was too this, and too that. Now, are there parts of me that I needed to look at? Absolutely! But I also knew that there was this inner turmoil going on inside of him, and I chose not to fight back. I chose not to lob the ball back. Instead, I chose to not engage that conflict, and to go, "This really isn't about me. What parts are about me that I need to know and that I need to look at?" I was able to pull those out and start working on those, instead of taking the whole thing personally. Even though I did feel rejected, I knew that this was far more about the turmoil going on inside of Mark than it was about us.

MS: Right.

JS: So, adjust your thinking. Shift that negative dialogue from personalized thoughts like, "It's all about me," to more relational thoughts like, "The way my spouse just communicated to me had a lot of energy in it, but that probably has far more to do about the stress that he's under than it does about me." So, we're learning to give each other a little bit of grace space. And again, it's not that we don't address these things, but we do recognize what we are saying to ourselves. So, if you communicate to me in a harsh way and then I go, "I'm a screw up," then that fuels my emotions that I can never get it right. It makes me feel...

MS: It fuels the shame.

JS: Shame or overwhelm, which causes me to shut down (that would be the actions), which causes us to disconnect.

MS: Right.

JS: Or if I think, "Man, Mark has a lot on his mind, and I know that he just communicated to me in a harsh way, but I also know that his heart is in the right place." So, then I choose to think about it through a grace-filled perspective. So, I'm now feeling grace-filled and compassionate, which is going to then inform my actions, which are going to be grace-filled and compassionate actions. And then we're going to have different results, because we're not going to have conflict that could have happened in that moment.

MS: Yeah.

JS: So, this is actually the opposite of how most of us relate in life. I want to read this, because I like the way that we wrote this down. We either blame others for our pain or blame ourselves for other's pain. I want to say that again. We either blame others for our pain or we blame ourselves for other's pain. Instead of looking at things from a blaming mindset and throwing blame, we should be just looking at situations as they are, not trying to assign blame to them.

JS: Alright, number two: We need to welcome conflict.

MS: Recognize that all relationships have conflict and that conflict is going to show up.

JS: Yeah.

MS: So, it's like when conflict happens, have that mindset that says, "Of course conflict is here."

[laughter]

MS: Conflict is normal, conflict is natural, and conflict can be healthy.

JS: Yes, push your thoughts in those directions. And you might even say to your spouse, particularly if you're both engaging in this, "Okay, I know that we're in a disagreement, but this is an opportunity for growth. We're in the tunnel of chaos, but we can move forward, and we can grow deeper if we will learn to handle this well."

MS: Yeah. Number three is to approach conflict with safe conversations. Jill and I have talked to this a great deal. In fact, in one of our...

JS: Yeah, our videos. We'll put a link to that down in the notes for this video.

MS: Yes, we've actually talked about how to have safe conversations, so that would be important dialogue.

JS: Exactly. And that's part of learning how to handle conflict in an honoring way.

MS: Yeah.

JS: And then finally, determine to believe the best in your spouse. Oftentimes when we get in conflict, we start believing the worst.

MS: It's so easy to go there.

JS: It is. That's where our thoughts are fueling wrong feelings. Our spouse is not our enemy. We really have to recognize the thoughts there, and then we have to replace those thoughts so that we can believe the best in our spouse. We can go through that process and come out with the results of believing the best in our spouse.

MS: Yeah.

JS: So, hopefully this has been helpful to you. We are taking a look at how, when we change our mind, it changes our feelings, and then that changes our actions, and that produces certain results. And so, as it relates to conflict, where do you need to change your thinking? Where do you need to change your mind so that as you interact with conflict, you are pushing your emotions in a different way? I mean, literally you could be moving them from fear, like I'm afraid of conflict, into gratefulness like, I'm grateful for conflicts. That allows us to go, "Okay, I'm going to have some courage." And then, that is going to produce maybe some conversations we've never had before, and then that will produce some results that we've also longed for.

JS: So, this is Mark and Jill Savage signing off with a reminder that a real marriage isn't perfect, a real marriage is two people being perfected. And if you will change your mind...

Unison: You can change your marriage.

[music]