

It Takes Two to Fight and One to Fix
Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

K and D (not their real initials) were almost hugging opposite ends of the couch when they first met with a counselor. Their body language was anything but subtle. The distance reflected the pain and exasperation they felt.

Asked why they had come, they each launched into a lengthy explanation of how they were being mistreated and neglected. They weren't sure they still loved each other and both questioned whether there was anything worth salvaging.

Their relationship had begun with fireworks. Their courtship blossomed quickly. Their decision to marry was fueled by passion and unbridled optimism. They enjoyed their first two years together, but then children came along, and life got crazy busy. D was in graduate school and worked half-time. K was home with the children and had little time for herself. Both of them were exhausted at the end of most days. As spare time became scarce, courtship dwindled. Communication focused on schedules and getting tasks done. They devoted themselves to taking care of kids and advancing a career. Each began to feel neglected by the other. K felt D's only interest in her was sexual. D felt he was last on K's list of priorities. When they tried to talk about it, their discussions quickly devolved into arguments that went nowhere.

Before long it was obvious they were both unhappy. They were more serious, less playful, and less likely to use humor around each other. Interchanges became more sarcastic and cutting. Physical touch all but vanished. They began avoiding being in the same room. Their disagreements and criticisms took center stage. Aspersions cropped up in their vocabularies—words like “selfish,” “inconsiderate,” and “ignorant.” Predictably, these resulted in deeper wounds, stronger defenses, and ultimately, silence and withdrawal. When, during an argument, K said, “Maybe we should just get a divorce!” D shot back, “That might not be such a bad idea!” Both staggered away from that argument, shocked to realize it had come to this.

Usually couples in therapy spend tremendous energy defending themselves while blaming their partners, despite the fact that identifying who's wrong and who's right is usually simplistic and counterproductive. That's what made K and D unusual. When the counselor suggested they look at what they were each contributing positively and negatively, they both honestly tried to see it. Once they accepted their own negative contributions, the battle was half won. Yet another obstacle stood in their way.

K wanted D to fix his part before she made any moves. D saw it the other way and insisted that K make the first move. It was a classic standoff. For a while, no one blinked. Had they both maintained their positions, no progress would have been made. K went home and thought about it. She decided they had too much riding on their marriage to let a pointless power struggle derail their family.

That's when K proved that, while it takes two to fight, it takes one to fix. Putting her feelings of hurt aside, K took the initiative. First she determined to stop her demeaning, critical comments, even if D didn't. It wasn't easy, but she found a way. And D noticed. However, not trusting K's ability to maintain this, D changed nothing. But when K didn't respond in kind and even attempted to do nice things for D, he recognized how foolish he would be to not try to meet her halfway. He, too, started curbing his tongue and even found some ways to payback K's kindnesses.

To say their progress was a straight upward line from there would be misleading. They still ran into each others' elbows occasionally—less often and less intentionally. Apologies, which had been rare, became more common. Instead of cataloging each other's deficiencies, they started mentioning that which they appreciated. They even began dating again, which allowed them to close the emotional and physical distance between them. They were on their way.

Michelle Weiner Davis, a favorite author of mine, says it takes one to tango. Even when the downward spiral has been steep, if one person is willing to take responsibility for his or her part of the problem, a downward spiral can be halted and an upward spiral begun that can elicit a partner's cooperation, bringing a couple out of their marital doldrums and raising them to new heights of intimacy, especially if understanding and meeting their spouses' desires has become a high priority.