

## It's Hard to Sleep on Rocks

by Bruce R. Johns, Ph.D.

I'm a reasonably assertive guy. If someone's figuratively or literally standing on my toes, he's likely to hear from me. When I get a call from someone with a thick accent, claiming he's from Microsoft and telling me there's something wrong with my computer, I'm going to tell him that we are an Apple computer household, that Microsoft has a "call us cause we're not calling you" policy, and he ought to feel ashamed for trying to defraud people like this.

But being assertive with my wife isn't as easy for several reasons. Ann, being bright and expressive, can run verbal circles around me. She's usually not looking for an argument, but if one arises between us, she's definitely not backing down. And if we wade into a contentious issue, her boiling point is lower than mine.

Which is why I was hiding in the basement. There's no other way to say it. I was working on a project secretly. Why? Because I didn't agree with Ann's assessment and I didn't want to argue with her about it. She had carefully, even gently, offered her opinion that perhaps an undertaking I'd been working on was beyond my current skill level—that maybe it would be less frustrating for me if I put it aside. But what I heard was, "You're wasting your time and effort. Give it up!" Either way, I wasn't ready to hear that advice. Yes, it was going slowly but, in my mind, I was still making headway. How could she suggest it was time to move on?

Did I say any of that? No. I said nothing because I didn't want to discuss the matter. I knew I wasn't about to accept her suggestion, but I also didn't want to argue over it. Disagreeing with what she said could lead to the kind of exchange which might leave a sudden chill in the house. So, I did what any reasonable guy would do—I went into hiding.

But you can't hide forever. One day Ann asked, "So what have you been up to?" I had been working on my now secret enterprise. But having discovered from previous experience that withholding information isn't a good thing, I answered, "Working on that project you thought I should abandon." Maybe it was my imagination, but suddenly the temperature dropped a few degrees. The conversation went like this.

"Why are you hiding it?"

"I'm not hiding. I'm just working on it away from you."

"You're hiding. Why are you hiding?"

"I didn't want to argue about it."

"Why didn't you just tell me you disagreed with me and you were going to continue to work on it?"

"Because you sometimes get frustrated when I don't accept your advice and I don't like what it feels like when you're mad at me."

"And what made you conclude I would get mad?"

There were so many land mines in that question. We've been married 40 years. There's a lot of water under our bridge and dredging up something from the river bottoms usually isn't a good thing. This discussion seemed headed for trouble. But there was no getting around it. Ann was asking direct, uncomfortable questions. I was going to have to give some direct, uncomfortable answers. She had already called me on hiding and nailed me on the fact that I had both anticipated her response and acted as though my suppositions were accurate, before she'd even discovered there was a disagreement.

The next half hour was tense. Thankfully, Ann and I have worked through enough disputes that we've gotten fairly good at them. But they're never fun, and there's a good chance one or both of us will be forced to face uncomfortable realizations. On this occasion, we talked about the fact that I had read more into this than Ann had intended. We acknowledged the reality that, even when both of us are trying to be careful, there are risks that tempers may flare and resulting collisions may be painful. We had to talk about whether being forthright, open, and honest with each other is worth the potential costs of working through sticky disagreements.

I remember, not long ago, explaining the importance of openness to a couple I was working with. Now, with full therapeutic hypocrisy, my words were coming home to roost. I hold that honesty and openness are the basis of trust in intimate relationships. How close can we really be if we're withholding information from one another? But openness means some of our differences, instead of being swept under the rug, are going to not only surface but clash. It's going to require that both sides step out in the open where we may feel most vulnerable.

Not every disagreement needs to be deconstructed. In fact, a large dose of mutual tolerance is sufficient salve for many differences. But tolerance won't cover everything. Some issues must be hashed out. Pushing them underground rather than at least acknowledging the disparity and agreeing to disagree, is a landmine waiting to erupt. Sometimes it's better to slog through a mucky issue rather than sweep it under the rug.

There are a few things we've found that have made our own slogging less difficult. First, we try to get ourselves into a decent mindset regarding the other spouse. This requires that we see each other as helpmates, not adversaries—not barriers to be removed or worked around. When our mindsets are properly aligned, our words, tones, and facial expressions better reflect our respect and caring for one another, even when we're disagreeing. With the proper mindset, we'll naturally be less defensive, more open, and more understanding. If, on the other hand, we cast each other as the problem, our words, tones, and expressions will all find a way to communicate exactly that. Secondly, we both have to be prepared for the possibility that there may be truths coming our way that could be painful which we, nevertheless, would need to be able to hear and understand. Finally, we need to replace our natural desires to be right or win with the worthier goals of improving the relationship, understanding ourselves better, and seeking solutions that work for both of us.

Avoiding conflict can lead to a host of problems. Despite the discomfort, the advantages of tense and frank discussions can far outweigh the disadvantages, if both are trying to be honest,

fair, and respectful. Withholding information or ignoring issues that need to be resolved is like putting rocks under your mattress. You may be able to tolerate them for a while, but sleeping without them is going to feel a lot better in the long run.