

The Policy of Joint Agreement

February 11, 2017

“Can two walk together except they be agreed?” Amos 3:3 This was Gods plea with a spouse who did not want to negotiate with Him. “Come Let us reason together..... Isaiah 1:18”

This set of principles are essential to a lasting enjoyment and peace in the marriage. Dig deep and apply these rules. You may not know it, but you could be cheating your spouse out of their right to enjoy you as their spouse by a dominant Taker position. Romans 13:8” Be Blessed PJ

When in the state of Intimacy, both spouses want the other to be happy, and neither spouse wants to see the other hurt. In the state of Conflict, both spouses want to be happy and neither wants to see themselves hurt. Actually, both objectives are important, and that's why I created a negotiating rule to achieve those important objectives regardless of the state of mind spouses happen to be in. I call it the Policy of Joint Agreement -- it takes the best from the advice of both our Giver and our Taker.

The Policy of Joint Agreement also avoids the worst advice of our Giver and Taker. In the state of Intimacy, (happy marriage) we are encouraged by our Giver to sacrifice our own happiness so that the other person can be happy. In the state of Conflict, (hostile marriage) we are encouraged by our Taker to let our spouses sacrifice so that we can be happy. Neither of these are worthy objectives because in both cases someone gets hurt.

In marriage, your interests and your spouse’s interests should be considered simultaneously. One of you should not suffer for the benefit of the other, even willingly, because when either of you suffer, one is gaining at the other's expense. If you both care about each other, you will not let the other suffer so that you can have what you want. When you are willing to let the other sacrifice for you, you are momentarily lapsing into a state of selfishness that must somehow be corrected before damage is done. The Policy of Joint Agreement provides that correction.

Before I tell you what the Policy of Joint Agreement is, I want to warn you that when you read it for the first time you may think I'm crazy to be suggesting such a rule. But the more you think about it, and the more you follow it in your marriage, the more you will recognize it as the breakthrough you need in the logjam that the Giver and Taker create in marriage.

The Policy of Joint Agreement

Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse. When you follow this policy, your Giver likes the part of it that requires your spouse to be in enthusiastic agreement about every decision you make, and your Taker likes the part that requires you to be in enthusiastic agreement. But the Giver will think that you're being selfish when you don't do whatever it takes to make your spouse happy, and your Taker will think you are just plain dumb to let your spouse's lack of "enthusiasm" prevent you from doing whatever makes you happy.

Yet, if you follow this rule, it will prevent you from giving so much that it hurts you, or taking so much that you hurt your spouse. It forces you into the balance you need in marriage to create and sustain a compatible lifestyle and the feeling of love. This rule teaches couples to become thoughtful and sensitive to each other's feelings when they don't feel like it. If both spouses follow this policy, they avoid all the Love Busters because they won't mutually agree to anything that hurts one of them.

The Policy of Joint Agreement (Cont'd)

Demands, disrespect and anger are eliminated because even negotiating strategy must be mutually agreed to, and no one likes to be the recipient of abuse. Annoying behavior is eliminated because if one spouse finds any behavior or activity of the other annoying, according to the policy, it cannot be done. It even eliminates dishonesty, because a lie is certainly not something that you would agree to enthusiastically. It helps plug up the holes in the sieve of the Love Bank that cause most couples to drift into loveless incompatibility.

It also forces couples to negotiate fairly. The Policy itself prevents either spouse from making unilateral decisions about anything, so they must discuss every decision they make before action can be taken. Demands are out of the question, because they are not made to create enthusiastic agreement -- they are made to force one spouse to lose so that the other can gain. The same can be said for Disrespectful Judgments and Angry Outbursts. What role do any of those Love Busters have in a discussion where the goal is enthusiastic agreement? In their place, each spouse learns to make requests and express opinions, showing respect for the other spouse's opinions. The sheer folly and stupidity of demands, disrespect and anger are vividly demonstrated when a mutually enthusiastic agreement is your goal.

Successful negotiation in marriage creates a solution to every problem that benefits both spouses and doesn't hurt either of them. The Policy of Joint Agreement forces a couple to find those solutions. None of the states of mind in marriage encourage them to do that, so they need this rule to override their instincts that prevent successful negotiation.

The Policy of Joint Agreement encourages couples to consider each other's happiness as equally important. They are a team and both should try to help each other and avoid hurting each other. It just makes good sense. Why should one spouse consider their own interests so important that he or she can run roughshod over the interests of the other? It's a formula for marital disaster, and yet some of the most well-intentioned couples do it from their honeymoon on.

When I first see a couple in marital crises they are usually very incompatible. They are living their lives as if the other hardly exists -- making thoughtless decisions regularly because they don't care how the other feels. As a result, when I introduce The Policy of Joint Agreement, it seems almost impossible to follow. They have created a way of life that is based on so many inconsiderate habits that it seems the policy would force them to stop all their activity -- so much of what they do is thoughtless and insensitive.

But once they start to follow the policy, it becomes easier and easier to come to an agreement. As they throw out their thoughtless habits and activities one by one, they replace them with habits and activities that take each other's feelings into account. That's what compatibility is all about -- building a way of life that is comfortable for both spouses. When they create a lifestyle that they each enjoy and appreciate, they build compatibility into their marriages. But the most powerful incentive for following this policy is that it helps sustain the feeling of love. Once the Policy of Joint Agreement is acted upon, it helps insulate a couple from many of the destructive forces that are ruining marriages.

The Policy of Joint Agreement (Cont'd)

But the most powerful incentive for following this policy is that it helps sustain the feeling of love. Once the Policy of Joint Agreement is acted upon, it helps insulate a couple from many of the destructive forces that are ruining marriages. And it helps couples learn to meet each other's needs in ways that are mutually fulfilling and enjoyable. Spouses that follow this policy and meet each other's needs fall in love and stay in love with each other.

As I already mentioned, negotiation is very tough in marriage because each state of mind, Intimacy, Conflict and Withdrawal, tends to discourage negotiation. But the Policy of Joint Agreement can help us override our instincts, and enable us to negotiate fairly regardless of our state of mind. That's because "enthusiastic" agreement is the goal, as opposed to "reluctant" agreement.

In the state of Intimacy, our Giver would agree to almost anything if it would make our spouse happy. But it would not be an enthusiastic agreement -- it would be a self-sacrificing, suffering-servant kind of agreement. Only our Taker is capable of "enthusiastic" agreements, because it's only enthusiastic about something that's in our own best interest. If you and your spouse are in enthusiastic agreement, it means that both of your Takers agree that the decision is in your best interests. Those are the agreements that are most likely to make you both happy.

But there are exceptions to this policy: If the health or safety of a spouse is at risk, it should not be followed. For example, if physical abuse takes place in marriage, it should be reported to authorities by the abused spouse even though the offending spouse would not agree. Exposing infidelity is another example of an exception because the emotional health of a betrayed spouse is at risk by keeping it to him or herself. Some spouses try to use this policy to keep the other spouse from having any normal contact with the outside world. Marriage should provide a safe and healthy environment for both spouses. So if you feel that your health or safety is at risk by following this policy, you should not follow it.

In this short introduction to the Policy of Joint Agreement, I have presented a broad panorama of what it is, why it's so important in marriage, and how you should apply it in your marriage. But there are many details I've left out of this introduction that I describe more completely in the Q&A section of this web site. To make it easier to find these columns and answer some of the questions you might have at this very moment, I will describe some of those that are most relevant to the subject, negotiating with the Policy of Joint Agreement.

All marital conflicts are opportunities to negotiate. And when done correctly, with the Policy of Joint Agreement, most marital problems are relatively easy to solve. But I have received many letters wondering if this policy is reasonable. Can a husband and wife be expected to agree on everything? And enthusiastically? So I posted the column.

Incompatibility is at the core of marital conflict. How to Survive Incompatibility is a Q&A column I've posted that introduces the problem of incompatibility, and offers the Policy of Joint Agreement as a general solution. The problem of incompatibility and the solution are readdressed in: Following the Policy of Joint Agreement When You're VERY Incompatible.

The Policy of Joint Agreement (Cont'd)

What happens when the Policy of Joint Agreement is not followed in marriage? Disaster! And the disaster is seen in many forms. One of its most common forms is a Love Buster I have already introduced to you, annoying behavior.

To refresh your memory, an annoying behavior is any habit or activity that one spouse does that bothers the other spouse. It may not seem like much of a disaster when annoying behavior is in its early stages, but there are many examples of it growing into ugly monsters. [How to Overcome Annoying Behavior](#) describes the seriousness of the problem and offers the Policy of Joint Agreement as the only reasonable solution.

One of annoying behavior's ugly monsters, drug and alcohol addiction, clearly creates marital disaster. If every couple followed the Policy of Joint Agreement, there would be very few alcoholic spouses. But without that rule, alcohol and drugs can sure wreck a marriage. [What to Do with an Alcoholic Spouse](#) is a column that addresses this common problem that has plagued marriages for thousands of years.

Negotiation assumes that two people are willing to resolve a conflict. But in many marriages, one spouse is not willing to negotiate, or follow the Policy of Joint Agreement, particularly when the marriage is in serious trouble. A commonly asked question is, how can one spouse negotiate when the other spouse is not interested? I have posted two Q&A columns on the subject: [Can a Marriage Be Saved by One Spouse \(Part 1\)](#), and [Can a Marriage Be Saved by One Spouse \(Part 2\)](#).

[Having Trouble with the Policy of Joint Agreement?](#) In this column I not only discuss the Policy of Joint Agreement, but I also describe Four Guidelines for Successful Negotiation, which is my 10th and final Basic Concept.

Four Guidelines for Successful Negotiation

Let's begin with the assumption that you and your spouse do not agree about something. It may be about how to meet an unmet need, or about overcoming a thoughtless habit that is bothering one of you. In fact, it may be about anything that has become a conflict.

Chances are that you have been responding to this issue in one of three ways: 1) ignoring your own feelings and doing it your spouse's way, 2) ignoring your spouse's feelings and doing it your way, or 3) ignoring the problem entirely.

Negotiation, however, requires something very different--taking your feelings and the feelings of your spouse into account simultaneously. The following guidelines will help you achieve that very important objective:

Guideline 1: Set ground rules to make negotiation pleasant and safe

Most couples view negotiation as a trip to the torture chamber. That's because their efforts are usually fruitless, and they come away from the experience battered and bruised. Who wants to negotiate when you have nothing but disappointment and pain to look forward to? So before you begin to negotiate, set some basic ground rules to make sure that you both enjoy the experience.

Guideline 1: Set ground rules to make negotiation pleasant and safe (Cont'd)

So before you begin to negotiate, set some basic ground rules to make sure that you both enjoy the experience. Why? Because you repeat activities that you like, and avoid those you don't like. Since you should negotiate as often as a conflict arises, it should always be an enjoyable experience so you make it a regular part of your married life.

To be certain that you will have a pleasant and safe negotiating environment, I suggest three ground rules.

Ground Rule # 1:

Try to be pleasant and cheerful throughout negotiations it's fairly easy to start discussing an issue while in a good mood. But negotiations can open a can of worms, so be prepared for negative emotional reactions. Your spouse may begin to feel uncomfortable about something you say. In fact, out of the clear blue, he or she may inform you that there will be no further discussion.

I know how upset and defensive couples can become when they first tell each other how they feel about the way they have been treated by each other. That's why I first coach them individually to prepare them for negative comments. I simply tell them what I am telling you--try to be as positive and cheerful as you can be, especially if your spouse says something that offends you.

Ground Rule # 2:

Put safety first--do not make demands, show disrespect, or become angry when you negotiate, even if your spouse makes demands, shows disrespect, or becomes angry with you. Once the cat is out of the bag and you have told each other what is bothering you or what you want, you have entered one of the most dangerous phases of negotiation. If your feelings have been hurt, you are tempted to retaliate. Your Taker is very persuasive at this point, and unless you make a special effort to resist its advice, your negotiation will turn into an argument. But if you can keep each other safe, you will be able to use your intelligence to help you make the changes you both need.

Ground Rule # 3:

If you reach an impasse where you do not seem to be getting anywhere, or if one of you is starting to make demands, show disrespect, or become angry, stop negotiating and come back to the issue later. Just because you can't resolve a problem at a particular point in time doesn't mean you can't find an intelligent solution in the future.

Don't let an impasse prevent you from giving yourself a chance to think about the issue. Let it incubate for a while, and you'll be amazed what your mind can do. If your negotiation turns sour, and one of you succumbs to the temptation of the Taker with demands, disrespect or anger, end the discussion by changing the subject to something more pleasant. After a brief pause, your spouse may apologize and wish to return to the subject that was so upsetting. But don't go back into the minefield until it has been swept clear of mines. The mines, of course, are demands, disrespect and anger, and you must discuss how to avoid them before you return to the issue. You can't negotiate if your Takers' destructive instincts control your discussion.

Guideline 2: Identify the problem from both perspectives

Once you have set ground rules that guarantee a safe and enjoyable discussion, you are ready to negotiate. But where do you begin? First, you must understand the problem from the perspectives of both you and your spouse.

Most couples go into marital negotiation without doing their homework. They don't fully understand the conflict itself, nor do they understand each other's perspectives. In many cases, they are not even sure what they really want.

One of the responsibilities of a marriage counselor is to help couples clarify the issues that separate them. I'm amazed at how often the clarification itself solves the problem. "Oh, that's what we've been fighting about!" many couples say. And once they understand the issue and each other's opinions, they realize that the conflict is not as serious as they thought. Or when the issue is clarified, the solution is immediately apparent and the conflict is resolved.

Respect is the key to success in this phase of negotiation. Once the issue has been identified, and you hear each other's perspectives, it is extremely important to understand each other--not try to straighten each other out. Remember that your goal is enthusiastic agreement, and there is no way you will be enthusiastic if you reject each other's perspectives. In fact, the only way you will reach an enthusiastic agreement is if you not only understand each other, but also come up with a solution that accommodates each other's perspectives.

It's so much easier to negotiate the right way when your goal is enthusiastic agreement. It eliminates all the strategies that attempt to wear each other down with abuse. You may as well forget about demands because they never lead to an enthusiastic agreement. The same can be said for disrespectful judgments and angry outbursts. If you are looking for real solutions to your problem, you will find them in whatever yields an enthusiastic agreement.

But when I take demands, disrespect and anger away from some couples, they are left feeling naked. They don't know how to discuss an issue if they can't demand, show disrespect or express their anger. And without those Love Busters they often feel hopeless about resolving their problems, because they have rarely approached their problems with the goal of finding a win-win solution. And they simply don't know how to do it. It's as if the only way they know how to communicate in marriage is through demands, disrespect and anger. Is that true of you and your spouse?

If so, remember that with practice you will begin to feel more comfortable approaching every conflict with the goal of mutual agreement. You learn to ask each other questions, not to embarrass each other but to gain a fuller understanding of what it would take to make each other happy. And when you think you have the information you need to consider win-win solutions, you are ready for the next step.

Guideline 3: Brainstorm with abandon

You've set the ground rules. You've identified the problem from each other's perspective. Now you're ready for the creative part--looking for solutions that you think will make you both happy. I know that can seem impossible if you and your spouse have drifted into incompatibility. But the climb back to Intimacy has to start somewhere, and if you put your minds to it, you'll think of options that please you both. The secret to understanding your spouse is to think like your spouse's Taker.

Guideline 3: Brainstorm with abandon (Cont'd)

The secret to understanding your spouse is to think like your spouse's Taker. It's easy to appeal to your spouse's Giver. "If she really loves me, she'll let me do this." or "He'll be thoughtful enough to agree with that, I'm sure." But lasting peace must be forged with your spouse's Taker, so your solutions must appeal to your spouse's most selfish instincts. At the same time, it must also appeal to your own selfish instincts.

When you brainstorm, quantity is often more important than quality. Let your minds run wild; go with just about any thought that might satisfy both of your Takers. If you let your creative side run free, you are more likely to find a lasting solution.

Carry a pad of paper or a pocket notebook, with you so you can write down ideas as you think of them throughout the day. Some problems may require days of thought, and pages of ideas. But keep in mind your goal—a solution that would appeal to both of your Takers.

Resist one type of solution that your Giver and Taker may suggest the "I'll let you do what you want this time if you let me do what I want next time" solution. For example, imagine that you want to go out with your friends after work, leaving your spouse with the children. So to arrive at an enthusiastic agreement for that thoughtless activity, you suggest that you take the children another night so that your spouse can go out with his or her friends.

What you're really proposing here is that each of you will sacrifice so that the other can have fun. The problem with that arrangement is that you are agreeing to behavior that makes one of you unhappy whenever the other is happy, and as I've said earlier, once you have made an agreement, it can easily turn into a habit.

The Giver and Taker suggest those kinds of win-lose solutions because; they don't understand win-win solutions. Their concept of fairness is that if you are both suffering equally, that's fair. My view of negotiation is that by the time you are finished you should have arrived at a solution where neither of you suffers. And each part of the solution should not require either of you to sacrifice so that the other can be happy.

Guideline 4: Choose the solution that meets the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement - mutual and enthusiastic agreement

After brainstorming, you will have come up with some good and some bad solutions. Now you need to sort through them. Good solutions are those both you and your spouse consider desirable. In other words they meet the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement. Bad solutions, on the other hand, only take the feelings of one spouse into account at the expense of the other. The best solution is the one that makes you and your spouse most enthusiastic.

Many problems are relatively easy to solve. You will be amazed at how quickly you can find an enthusiastic agreement to some problems when you have decided to hold off on any action until you both agree.

That's because when you know you must take each other's feelings into account, you become increasingly aware of what it will take to reach a mutual agreement. Instead of considering options that are clearly not in your spouse's best interest, you reject them immediately and begin to think of options you know would make both you and your spouse happy. It's amazing how smart you can be when you direct your mind to find smart solutions.

Guideline 4: Choose the solution that meets the conditions of the Policy of Joint Agreement - mutual and enthusiastic agreement (Cont'd)

For example, consider the situation we mentioned above. You would like to go out with your friends after work, leaving your spouse with the children. Before you had agreed to the Policy of Joint Agreement, you may have simply called your spouse to say you would be late; or worse yet, arrived home late without having called. But now, you must come to an enthusiastic agreement prior to the event. It certainly restricts your freedom of choice, but on the other hand, it protects your spouse from your thoughtless behavior.

After having presented your case, you would probably hear immediate objections. Your spouse might feel that he or she does not appreciate your having fun while he or she is home battling the kids.

"Besides," your spouse might mention, "our leisure activities should be with each other." In response, you might suggest that your spouse drop the kids off at your parents' (which you will call to make the arrangements) and join you.

If you and your spouse can enthusiastically agree on that suggestion, you are home free. Your parents take your children for a couple of hours, and your spouse joins you wherever it was you were planning to meet your friends. Problem solved. In fact, if going out after work with friends becomes a regular event, you can plan ahead for it by arranging the child-care in advance.

Of course, other problems can be very difficult to solve, involving many steps. Learning how to meet each other's emotional needs, for example, can require quite a bit of trial and error, along with the time and energy it takes to create the habits that eventually make meeting a need almost effortless.

If one of you struggles with an addiction, you will find that the Policy of Joint Agreement simply cannot be followed at all until you have overcome the addiction. Whether it's drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, or any other addiction, you will find that thoughtfulness is almost impossible to practice as long as you are addicted. You must sweep the addiction completely out of your life before you will be able to negotiate in the way I have suggested.

When a couple has tried to follow my advice, but can't seem to negotiate with each other regardless of how hard they try addiction is usually the culprit. In fact, a good way to determine if you are addicted to a substance or activity is to see if you can follow the Policy of Joint Agreement after you have agreed to it. If you find you can't, chances are, you're an addict. If you follow the guidelines I have suggested, negotiation can be an enjoyable way to learn about each other. And if you avoid unpleasant scenes and negotiate to an enthusiastic agreement, you can resolve with relative ease all of the many conflicts you will have throughout life.

One last point: Whenever a conflict arises, keep in mind the importance of depositing as many love units as possible while avoiding withdrawals. In other words, use the opportunity to find a solution that will make your spouse happy, and avoid solutions that make either of you unhappy.