

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ISSUES & EVENTS

EVENTS: Small, everyday happenings in life are what couples argue most often about.

ISSUES: Money, sex, and communication are the 3 main issues in relationships. Other common issues are relatives, in-laws, friends, children, recreation, alcohol and drugs, religion, careers, and housework.

HIDDEN ISSUES: Deeper, fundamental issues that can come up with any issue or event.

Examples: *Caring, Acceptance, Control, Integrity, Commitment, Recognition.*

KEY: Being able to separate out events from issues and then to separate out the issues that are most apparent - like money, communication, and sex - from the deeper, often hidden issues that affect your relationship.

Issues and events work like the geysers in Yellowstone National Park. Underneath the park are caverns of hot water under pressure. The issues in your relationship are like those pressure points: The ones that give you more trouble contain the greatest amount of heat. The pressure keeps building up when you aren't talking about them in a constructive manner, then events trigger an eruption.

Yellowstone's Old Faithful can be spectacular and beautiful. However, the blast of negative energy in your relationship when an issue is triggered by an event isn't so pretty. And when it happens a lot, *your issues are controlling you. You aren't controlling them.* At Yellowstone, the eruptions release pressure for a while. In your relationship, the eruptions only add to the storehouse of negative energy connected to the issues.

KEY: Learning to become aware when an *event* triggers an *issue*. The temptation is to want to discuss it right away. The *key* to this is *saying to yourself*, "I don't have to deal with this right now. This may not be the best time. We can talk later." Example - "That phone call from your mother really set off an issue for me. We need to discuss it later." This can be cathartic - letting off some steam for the moment.

One reason why people focus on events and let them turn into issue discussions is that they don't feel that "later" will happen, so why wait? And they jump in right away. Then they wind up in a marital mine field, with the issues being the explosives and the events being the triggers. It is not a good idea to talk about your issues in the context of events.

HIDDEN ISSUES

You may find that you aren't getting anywhere when you talk about a particular problem; you're just spinning your wheels. These are signs that you aren't getting at the real issues. The real issue isn't about money, careers, housework, etc. - it's deeper and more elusive.

Hidden issues often drive the really destructive arguments. Hidden issues mean that they're usually not being talked about openly or constructively. Instead, they're the key issues that often get lost in the flow of the argument.

Control & Power

With control issues, the question is who will have the status and power. Who decides who does the chores? Are your needs and desires just as important as your partner's, or is there an inequality? Is your input important or are major decisions made without you? Who's in charge? If you're encountering these kinds of issues, you may be dealing with the hidden issue of control.

Whatever the topic or disagreement, control issues are least likely to damage your relationship when you feel that you're a team, and that each partner's needs and desires are attended to in the decisions you make.

Often people are motivated to be in control because they're actually hypersensitive about being controlled by others, so control becomes a big issue. Usually these people have experienced a very controlling and powerful authority figure, often a parent, somewhere in the past.

Needing & Caring

The main theme is the extent to which you feel loved. Such issues are often felt as a concern that important emotional needs aren't being met.

Recognition

Are your activities and accomplishments appreciated by your partner? While caring issues involve concerns about being cared for or loved, recognition issues are more about feeling valued by your partner for who you are and what you do. It's okay to want your partner to recognize and appreciate what you bring to the relationship. How long has it been since you told your partner how much you appreciate the things s/he does?

Commitment

Focus here is on the long-term security of the relationship, expressed by the question: "Are you going to stay with me?" Job advancement and pay-raises can be interpreted as threats to commitment.

Integrity

Focus here is when your partner questions your intent or motives.

Acceptance

The mother of all hidden issues! One primary issue that can underlie all the others listed here - the desire for acceptance. This can be felt as a fear of rejection, but the fundamental issue is the same. At the deepest level, people are motivated to find acceptance and to avoid rejection in their relationships. This reflects the deep need everyone has to be both respected and connected.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF HIDDEN ISSUES

You can't handle hidden issues unless you can identify them. There are four key ways to tell when hidden issues may be affecting your relationship.

1. Wheel Spinning: When you find yourselves spinning your wheels as you talk about the same problem over and over again. When an argument starts with you thinking, "here we go again," you should suspect hidden issues. You never really get anywhere on the problems because you aren't talking about what really matters - the hidden issue.

2. Trivial Triggers: When trivial issues are blown out of proportion.

3. Avoidance: When one or both of you are avoiding certain topics or levels of intimacy. If walls have gone up between you, it often means that important, unexpressed issues are affecting the relationship. Perhaps it seems too risky to talk directly about feeling unloved or insecure. But the trouble is that these concerns have a way of coming up anyway.

4. Score-keeping: When one or both of you start keeping score. Score-keeping could mean that you're not feeling recognized for what you put into the relationship, that you're less committed, that you're feeling controlled and are keeping track of the times your partner has taken advantage of you. Whatever the issue, it can be a sign that important things are not being talked about - just documented.