

CONVERSATIONS IT'S NOT WORTH HAVING (PART ONE) By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

We believe in communication. We believe in revealing and telling the truth to each other. However, we have found that the couples we see in our office often focus on the wrong conversations.

One of the conversations we recommend people not put energy into is “who said what”. We used to waste a lot of energy on “who said what”. Our best silly example of this happened in 1993. We were on a road trip and Marlene insisted that she knew what Bob had just said. Marlene’s focus was on asking Bob what he meant by it. Bob went foggy and could not remember what he said, but insisted that it was not what Marlene was saying it was. This led to 3 hours of deadlock on what was said and who was right.

We have since learned that trying to get agreement on what was said isn’t possible, and isn’t even helpful. We often use the analogy in our office of the prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of the brain (or meaning-maker), being like a tiny rider and the limbic system, the emotional part of the brain, being like a wild elephant. Meanwhile the reptilian part of the brain in the brainstem is all about threat and survival. When a threat response happens, the emotional part of the brain gets triggered and the prefrontal cortex tries to make sense of what’s going on. It’s like the wild elephant has been spooked and the rider is hanging on for dear life trying to regain control. The meaning-maker gets rigid and focuses on being right.

We are currently reading a great professional book called *Love and War in Intimate Relationships, Connection, Disconnection, and Mutual Regulation in Couple Therapy* by Marion Solomon and Stan Tatkin. They say;

While couples are in the throes of a threat response, processes involving the prefrontal cortex give way to subcortical processes to ensure survival. During these periods of dysregulation, the ability to accurately represent and sequence events is highly compromised; so too is the ability to appraise intention. Yet insecure couples often become entangled in arguments involving the reconstruction of past events. ...They will present wildly differing recollections as to content, sequence, and intent, and will remain locked into a painful, isolated reality of violent mis-attunement and persecution. It is neurologically impossible for partners to set the record straight. The unrelenting attempt at reconstruction of a traumatizing event is itself retraumatizing. (p. 112-113).

There are lots of great conversations that can assist you in feeling closer to each other. Who said what isn’t one of them. Contact us if you want to know about the kinds of conversations we have found helpful.