

Distress In Cross-Cultural Marriages

The vast majority of calls for marital counselling come from women. In cross-cultural marriages, the complaint is often that the husband is either verbally abusive or alternately, cold, rejecting and passive aggressive. In the first case, the woman is of British decent and in the second case, the woman is of Eastern European or Middle Eastern decent. The husband is from the contrasting culture.

As the marital therapy unfolds in the first case and issues of domestic violence are explored it becomes apparent that the husband is not hurling demeaning remarks and is not name-calling. Rather, he, as per the *Seinfeld* show, is a loud talker. Here the husband has only two settings on his volume control, off and full volume. Further, he is likely to come closer to his spouse than she is comfortable with, particularly in view of the loud volume. She on the other hand, being of British decent, tends to be far more quiet and subtle in her statements, demeanour and conversation. She is overwhelmed by him and quietly withdraws. He, feeling unheard due to the increasing distance or the subtlety of her reply, comes yet closer and actually increases the volume. She then feels verbally attacked and harassed and complains so. He, on the other hand, feels vilified and in upset and anger, manages to get louder still. The dynamic carries on until the relationship collapses. He is blamed as abusive.

In the second case, the woman of Eastern European or Middle Eastern decent complains her husband is cold and rejecting. Like above, as she advances loudly, he now retreats feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with her intensity. He is vilified as passive-aggressive.

Although told from the point of view of the woman, these dynamics are as easily told from the point of view of the man. Underneath both sets of conflict however, is an abject lack of understanding and appreciation for the impact cultural differences between the couple. As a result of the lack of understanding, persons are apt to ascribe pejorative, negative motives onto the other person, believing their behaviour to be sinister in nature as opposed to simply being a culturally determined difference between them both.

While many of these same couples will argue they had the same goals and dreams upon marriage and even

still, they now seek to end the relationship for the hurt feelings that have developed the result of their differences in communication, particularly as it relates to emotional expression and intensity.

Before throwing out the marriage and laying blame on each other, couples are advised to step back from the brink and give greater consideration to these cultural differences. Thereafter, they must discuss the impact of the differences upon their relationship and after that, discuss ways of accommodating to each other. While some may argue that “this is who I am” or “why do I have to change”, they must understand that any good marriage requires the partners to make accommodations to each other for the higher goal of marital integrity. Neither person or culture should have to take a second seat to the other, but both must modify some behaviour to improve tolerance and management of the differences.

As cross-cultural marriages continue to rise, more attention to accommodating to the differences will improve marital relations and the children of these marriages can come to enjoy very rich and multifaceted heritages.

If you are in a cross-cultural marriage in distress, rather than looking badly upon your partner, consider discussing your differences in emotional expression and what this means to you. If you are loud, consider the impact of your style upon your partner and reduce the intensity. If you are quiet and reserved, hang in before removing yourself and let your partner know if you are feeling overwhelmed. Use your words, not behaviour. Couples can learn to accommodate to their cultural differences and clear up misunderstandings.

(Gary Direnfeld is second generation Canadian of mixed Polish and Russian decent.)

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.