

Once you're ready to overcome gridlock, here's how to proceed.

STEP 1: BECOME A DREAM DETECTIVE

Often, deeply personal dreams go unspoken or underground after marriage because we assume they must in order to make the relationship work. It's common for both partners not to feel entitled to their complaints. They may see their own desires as "childish" or "impractical." But such labels don't change the fact that the dream is something you long for, and if the marriage doesn't honor it, conflict will almost inevitably ensue. In other words, when you adjust to marriage by burying a dream, it just resurfaces in disguised form — as a gridlocked conflict.

Exercise 1: Detecting Dreams

STEP 2: WORK ON A GRIDLOCKED MARITAL ISSUE

Choose a particular gridlocked conflict to work on. Then write an explanation of your position. Don't criticize or blame your spouse. Focus on what YOU need, want, and YOUR feeling about the situation. Next, write the story of the hidden dreams that underlie your position. Explain where these dreams come from and why they are so meaningful to you.

Once you both understand which dreams are fueling the gridlock, it's time to talk about them. Each person gets fifteen minutes as the speaker and fifteen minutes as the listener.

Do not try to solve this problem. Attempting to do that now is likely to backfire. Your goal is simply to understand *why* each of you feels so strongly about this issue.

Speaker's job: Talk honestly about your position and what it means to you. Describe the dream that's fueling it. Explain where the dream comes from and what it symbolizes. Be clear and honest about what you want and why it is so important. Talk as if you were explaining your dream to a good friend or neutral third party. Don't try to censor or downplay your feelings about your dream in order to avoid hurting or arguing with your spouse. Talk only about *your* feelings and *your* needs. This is not the time to criticize or argue with your partner. How you feel about your spouse in relationship to this dream is a satellite issue that should not be addressed right now.

Listener's job: Suspend judgment. Listen the way a friend would listen. Don't take your spouse's dream personally even though it clashes with one of yours. Don't spend your time thinking up rebuttals or ways to solve the problem. Your role now is just to hear the dream and to encourage your spouse to explore it.

If you can, tell your partner that you support his or her dream. That doesn't necessarily mean that you believe the dream can or should be realized. There are three different levels of honoring your partner's dreams — all of which are beneficial to your marriage.

- The first is to express understanding of the dream and be interested in learning more about it even though you don't share it.
- The second level would be to offer financial support for her dream.
- The third level would be to become a part of the dream.

You may find that you're able to "go all the way" with some of your partner's dreams while with others you can't get past the first level of understanding and interest. That's okay. The bottom line in getting past gridlock is not necessarily to become a part of each other's dreams (although your marriage will be more enriched to the extent that you can) but to honor these dreams. After all, you don't want the kind of marriage in which you triumph at the expense of crushing your partner.

STEP 3: SOOTHE EACH OTHER

Discussing dreams that are in opposition can be stressful. Since you'll accomplish nothing if either of you becomes flooded, take a break for some soothing before you attempt to slog through the gridlock.

STEP 4: END THE GRIDLOCK

Now it's time to begin the ongoing task of making peace with this issue, accepting the differences between you, and establishing some kind of initial compromise that will help you continue to discuss the problem amicably. Understand that your purpose is not to solve the conflict — it will probably never go away completely. Instead, the goal is to "declaim" the issue, to try to remove the hurt so the problem stops being a source of great pain.

The way you start this process is by defining the minimal core areas that you cannot yield on. To do this you need to look deep into your heart and try to separate the issue into two categories.

Category One:

- In one put those aspects of the issue that you absolutely cannot give on without violating your basic needs or core values.

Category Two

- In the second category put all aspects of the issue where you can be flexible, because they are not so "hot" for you. Try to make the second category as large as possible, and the first category as small as possible.

Share your two lists with your spouse. Working together, come up with a temporary compromise. Try it for about two months and then review where you stand. Don't expect this to solve the problem, only to help you both live with it more peacefully.

To overcome the gridlock, the wife and husband have to explore the symbolic meaning of their positions.

The focus is on what each desires, not their anger and fears connected to each other.

Each sticks to explaining and describing his or her dream and its roots in their childhood.

Once you've have discussed the symbolic meaning of your positions, a transformation is likely to take place. Rather than seeing each other's dreams as threats, you may begin to see them for what they are: deep desires held by someone you love. Although your dreams are still in opposition, you are now likely to be more motivated to find some common ground, to find a way to respect and perhaps even accommodate both of dreams. Here's how they do this:

1. *Each of you define the minimal core areas that you cannot yield on.*
2. *Each of you define your areas of flexibility.*
3. *Each of you devise a temporary compromise that honors both of your dreams.*

STEP 5: SAY THANK YOU

It may take more than one session to overcome gridlock on issues that have been deeply troubling to your marriage. These sessions can be stressful, no matter how diligently you attempt to accept each other's viewpoint without judgment.

This exercise lets you finish on a positive note. The goal here is to try to re-create the spirit of thanksgiving, in which you count your blessings and look inward to express gratitude for all you have. This may be particularly difficult to do after talking about gridlocked marital conflict, but that's all the more reason to try.

Follow these five steps, and you'll be able to move out of gridlock on your perpetual problems. Be patient with the process and each other. By their very nature, these problems are tenacious. To loosen their grip on your marriage will take commitment and faith on both your parts. You'll know you're making progress when the issue in question feels less loaded to you both — when you can discuss it with your sense of humor intact, and it no longer looms so large that it crowds out the love and joy in your relationship.

Couple 1

HUSBAND: I think my wife is too neat and tidy. I find myself constantly trying to find things after she has cleaned up. I think she is being inconsiderate and overly controlling, and I'm tired of it.

My Dreams Within This Conflict Might Be:

My parents were very strict disciplinarians. They saw any disagreement with them as insubordination. As a result I became somewhat of a rebel. I freely admit that I have a problem with authority, and that's why I decided to build my own business. My dream is to have a home where I can be myself, and that means not following any rigid set of rules. I want my kids to challenge authority and think for themselves, not simply learn to be obedient. I myself want to be free in my home, including being sloppy at times.

WIFE: I like a certain amount of order and neatness in our home. I find myself constantly cleaning up my husband's messes. I think he is being inconsiderate, and I am tired of this.

My Dreams Within This Conflict Might Be:

I grew up in a totally chaotic home. There was nothing I could count on as a child. I never knew who was driving me to school or picking me up. My mom would sometimes forget to pick me up, and I hated her for that sometimes. Then I would get home, and there would often be no dinner and no clean clothes. It fell on my shoulders to create all the order and sense of responsibility, for my younger sibs. I resented having to do all that. My dream is to provide a much healthier family environment for my kids and family. To me order means predictability, security, and peacefulness. I want that for my kids. When the house is a mess, it takes me back to the chaos of my youth.

Couple 1

Gridlocked problem: Housecleaning — she wants him to be neater, he wants her to leave him alone about it.

The dream(s) within the conflict:

Hers: A sense of order and security at home

His: A sense of freedom in his own home

Nonnegotiable areas:

Hers: She can't abide dirty dishes left out in the kitchen or a dirty bathroom.

His: He can't abide having to clean up his papers right after he's finished with them.

Areas of flexibility: She can live with some clutter as long as there isn't any dirt. He can cope with cleaning dishes and bathrooms as long as he doesn't have to straighten up all the time.

Temporary compromise: They will both take responsibility for keeping bathrooms and kitchens clean. She will not bug him about his clutter more than once a week. But if he doesn't deal with it by then, she will pile it up and put it all on the floor of his home office.

Ongoing conflict: She will always hate clutter, he will always hate orderliness.

Couple 2

HUSBAND: My wife is very emotional and claims that I am far too unemotional. This difference between us makes me feel that she is overreactive and out of control at times, perhaps overly sensitive. I think that being rational is usually the best approach to strong emotional situations, not getting more emotional. My wife claims that I am hard to read and too distant.

My Dreams Within This Conflict Might Be:

I grew up in a family where everyone was a debater. We loved to argue with one another. My dad always asked a question, challenged me, and then took a contrary position to mine. Then the debate was on. It was no holds barred, and we all loved it. But getting emotional

was illegal in this debating contest. Once someone got emotional, the argument was over. So staying in emotional control was highly prized in my family. It still is. So maybe I should be more emotional, but it's not in my makeup. My dream is to be strong. I think of being emotional as a weakness.

WIFE: I am a very emotional person and my husband is far too unemotional. This difference between us makes me feel that my partner is cold and "fake" at times, not really present. Many times I have no idea what he is feeling. I am frustrated by this difference between us.

My Dreams Within This Conflict Might Be:

I am just an emotional person and that's all there is to it. I think that's what life is all about, feeling things, being in contact, responding. That's what "responsible" ought to mean, "response-able," or able to respond. That's the highest value for me. I respond to everything around me, to great art, to architecture, to children, to puppies, to competition in athletics, to sad movies, to everything. To be emotional just means being alive. This is the way I was raised, and I'm glad. My dream is to share my emotions with the person I love. If I can't the marriage is doomed to seem dead, fake, and lonely.

Couple 2

Gridlocked problem: Very different comfort levels with expressing emotions

The dream(s) within the conflict:

Hers: Being emotional is part of her self-identity and part of what gives meaning to her life.

His: He sees being emotional as a weakness.

Nonnegotiable areas:

Hers: She cannot stop reacting with great passion to life.

His: He cannot become a highly emotional person just to please her.

Areas of flexibility: They both accept that their spouse cannot change a basic personality trait.

Temporary compromise: They will be respectful of each other's difference in this area. He will be receptive to her need to talk about and share feelings. She will accept when he cannot do this.

Ongoing conflict: They will continue to have very different approaches to expressing emotion. Gottman, John M., and Nan Silver. (1999). "**Principle 6: Overcome gridlock,**" in ***The seven principles for making marriages work*** (Chapter Ten, 217-241). New York: Three Rivers Press (Random House, Inc.).