

10 The Three States of Mind in Marriage

Some of the brightest people I know become idiots when faced with marital conflict. I've seen this happen in case after case. An intelligent man listens to his wife talking about her needs, her desires, her interests -- and it's as if she's speaking a foreign language. A brilliant woman hears her husband describe his perspective, and she doesn't get it. What makes marital communication so tough? Is it that men and women just can't communicate? Or is there something about marriage that blurs their thinking? Having spent decades counseling couples who seem communicationally challenged, I am thoroughly convinced that it is marriage itself (or more specifically, romantic relationships) that makes communication difficult, and not differences between men and women. The men I counsel have very little trouble resolving conflicts with women, and their wives are usually just as good negotiating with men. It's conflicts they have with each other that seem impossible to resolve. My experience trying to help couples negotiate has led me to the conclusion that, left to their own devices, they negotiate from one of three states of mind, each having its own unique negotiating rules and its own unique emotional reactions. I call these states of mind Intimacy, Conflict, and Withdrawal. And regardless which state spouses are in, negotiations can be very difficult.

The First State of Mind in Marriage: