



## Competitors or Lovers?

*Curb the destructive power of competitiveness in marriage!*

### **But we didn't start out that way...**

Of course you didn't. There's no cookie-cutter set of motivations or patterns that leads down the road to a hurtful level of competition between husbands and wives. Personalities differ, and you bring differing backgrounds from your families of origin. You have diverse ways of dealing with the things that happen in life. But here is what's at stake:

- What is the standard of decency and love that you will hold each other to?
- How much pain can your love withstand and still remain healthy?
- How can we process the quandaries or frustrations of life in ways that respect each other?
- And, from the beginning have you negotiated the right to "call" each other on behavior that is out-of-bounds?

No one starts out to hurt their spouse. Years of accumulated pain, and a sense of losing, can take their toll on a relationship.

### **So, what are we referring to as "competition"?**

For our purposes, "competition" has a couple of features that should make sense to you. First, we'll assume that competition arises mostly under pressure or anger. Competition might not be your primary way of relating. But when pushed you may revert to a different relational style. A related second, the competitive relationship finds pressure or anger reactions turning regularly toward the need to "win." The win becomes more important than the original issue. In fact, sometimes you may even lose sight of "what started it all." For some reason, the need to get your "say" drives you. Or, the need to have your way!

### **Competitors go for the "W" at all costs!**

That's just the problem—the costs are tremendous. Competition between husband and wife removes vast relational capital from your storehouse. Competition costs you trust. The need to be "right" causes your spouse to tire of your presence at times. This atmosphere costs your partner some pieces of their self-esteem. On some level, you may not even respect your self. If you have children—they're watching and learning! Is winning worth all that?

### **Competitors don't care who the audience is**

"Praise in public, discipline in private" is the work-world wisdom. More supervisors should know this rule and go by it! So should more spouses. Competitiveness that has taken root in a marriage often plays out in front of the kids, the friends and family. Eventually, no one cares who's watching or listening. Until the issue has passed, that is! Then the horror of the drama sets in. Awkward conversations ensue, bringing loss of self-esteem, anger and frustration. Is any of this building a better marriage for anybody? Not likely. Are public displays wearing on your relationship? You bet! And, damaging each other in front of others exacts more relational tolls—including that which happens with your friends or family who may love you—but dread wondering when the next little drama will suck them in again!

## You deserve better

You both do! You deserve better than to be in constant competition with your spouse. One of the steps toward awakening is to draw from your self-esteem and to realize that you deserve better than to live in a disappointing, embarrassing and damaging pattern. You and your spouse signed on for a lifetime of missional marriage. That is, being the presence of Christ to each other. Instead, competition sucks the love out of the relationship. Competition postures spouses as rivals who threaten and cannot be trusted at a fulfilling level. Whether your competition is near constant, or just occasionally hurtful, you can work toward new and rewarding ways of loving each other. One of the crucial tasks, though, is owning the notion that YOU deserve better. And especially knowing that your partner deserves the best possible you. Under God, you do! Both of you.

## But do we have to agree on everything?

Of course not. Diana Garland and others agree that this simply is not realistic. Married partnership is not about always being on the same page. In fact, one test of a healthy partnership is how you handle the times in life when you're absolutely at ODDS with each other. No couple can see 100% of life in the same way. Not even close. It's just that your relationship is the ONE arena where a lifetime of enrichment counts on your respectful disagreement. Partnership demands that you find ways to differ and to problem-solve so that you move on meaningfully. You have a busy and complicated life. Your energy and resources need to be aimed at managing that demanding life, not jettisoned off in wasted and hurtful competition with each other.

## Know when to ask for help

The toxic competitive relationship may need some professional help. Earlier, you read that competition often arises as a relational style that you revert to either under pressure or anger. You may need help unpacking why your spouse has so consistently become a source of anger. This starting place may need the skilled exploration that a trusted counselor or therapist can provide. Identifying your pattern of reverting to anger or competition is the starting place. Because this way of relating has become comfortable, this level of self-awareness may be more difficult than you could imagine. There is an irony at work—the very target of your anger or competitiveness may be the one in the best position to “call” you on the pattern. In a relationship where habitual and toxic competitiveness has taken root, they may not have the permission to raise the issue. This is a problem. Can the two of you permit each to lovingly “mirror” for the other?

## Breaking the cycle

A wife and mother sobbed in my office. She said, “I don't want to live like this. I don't want our kids to see us like this!” That was the breakthrough moment. She had awakened by way of seeing the destruction she and her husband had left in their wake. In their unique ways, they had fallen into a pattern of “going at each other” as an early-and-often way of dealing with their differences. They embarrassed themselves, pushed loved ones from them, and risked embedding this pattern of relating in their young children. But when those images connected with her—she got it! Her spouse had seen the pattern a little earlier—but it will take two to tame the competition beast! They set to work on it, armed with new boundaries and covenants they both could own. They continue to seek new ways of interacting. Frankly, a primary aim is to move back in the direction of the respectful love they shared as a dating couple.

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