

TRANSITIONS

A Dress for Duress

BY DAN SHAPIRO, PHD

A couple I work with recently came to my office eager to share the details of one of their fights. He was hoping I'd tell her that he was right, and vice versa. Here's the fight:

Her plane lands. She comes down the long alley and out near security where her husband waits. She's just flown cross-country, it's been only a few weeks since her chemotherapy ended, and she's exhausted. There's one other important detail. She's wearing a gorgeous lavender-colored garment. There's a tired embrace and as they walk toward the escalator he says, "New dress?"

She says, "Yes."

That's it. The entire fight.

This story was relayed to me in my office. I'm a psychologist and a cancer survivor of 20 years. My wife was diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago, so I've had the dubious distinction of having been a patient, a spouse and a psychologist who treats folks with cancer. When the couple was done describing their escape from the airport, they both looked at me expectantly, eager for my sage wisdom, which is rare even on good days. When I confessed to having no idea of the problem, they looked confused.

"Well, of course, we didn't speak to one another for the next four days," he added. She nodded in agreement. I smiled weakly.

After some questioning the problem was clarified. For this couple, this was fight No. 4. Many couples have a set of fights with both sides tightly scripted. For them, this was a fight about money. Roughly once a month they have a fight, usually about how he talks to their daughter (fight No. 1), infrequency of sex (fight No. 2), the role of her mother-in-law in their lives (fight No. 3), and this one, the money fight (ta-da).

The money fight is about her secret shopping trips. She has an affinity for "retail therapy" and will often argue, after returning from a sale, that she saved the couple thousands of dollars by making a number of prudent purchases, usually on expensive dresses. He, in contrast, only sees the money being spent and it concerns him. (For now, I will avoid analyzing the logic of their mutual perspectives because my wife also likes to shop, she's going to read this, and I am a coward.)

The important thing to notice is that the couple has been having this exact fight for years. They've got it down so efficiently that now they can have it in under 12 seconds and using only three words!

Here's another example: Until recently, my grandmother, age 98, and her older sister, age 103, would often get together. Here's one of their conversations: Aunt Etta says, with a hint of competitiveness, "It's so nice to have all of my grand-children and great grandchildren living so close to me."

My grandmother's grandchildren are splashed across the country. She barks back, "At least I can walk!"

Their mother reportedly once said, "My girls argue only once a day; it just lasts from morning until night." These two sisters quarreled their entire lives, loving one another deeply but also having the same competitive fights over and over. It might sound obvious, but it's been my observation that if you don't actively change how you communicate, you won't change how you communicate!

For couples coping with cancer, major fights seem to escalate after treatment ends. There's something about pushing together against the cancer that unites some couples, or at least infuses some modicum of perspective. "How can I yell at her for buying herself a dress when I know she's worried about how she looks without hair?" he might have thought during treatment. But now that treatment is over and they're trying to get back to "normal," he unleashes his fears and they fight.

So what are the solutions? Clearly, the answer is to purchase expensive dresses. Hah! Some of you would like it if I left it there, wouldn't you? You could run out and purchase an expensive dress and then blame me and *Heal* magazine.

Let's step back and say what communication does and doesn't do. Good communication is not always the key to good relationships. Some couples do just fine communicating terribly or not at all. You've probably known people who lived happily snapping at each other regularly like underfed Chihuahuas on speed. For most of us though, communicating well helps us feel loved and appreciated. So it's worth taking the time to do something different.

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First, start from a place of recognizing that the cancer experience has just happened to both of you. I've now done the patient job and the spouse job. I can safely say that both jobs are unpleasant things to do with one's summer (or fall or spring and especially winter).

Second, listen carefully and start your response to any attack by acknowledging the true parts of what your spouse has just said. Even if the true part is tiny. This is probably the most important technique I can share. Your instinct is going to be to follow the argument script, to say exactly what he or she expects. Don't be surprised if your spouse faints when you change your approach. I taught this technique to one couple and after she said, "You're right" in the middle of a fight, her husband continued his side of the fight without her for a good 10 minutes before he said, "Wait a minute, what did you say?"

Third, we can try to do the little things that make our spouses feel loved. For example, if I clean the bathroom my wife gets excited; it's foreplay in our house. Seriously, she knows I love her if I clean. And I like to sleep with something over my eyes. I know she loves me when she puts a T-shirt under my pillow so I can wrap it over my eyes. It seems small, I suppose, but these little things make up a relationship. These are ways we communicate with one another that we are in love in addition to what we say. And these little actions take the air out of our fights. It's harder to be angry at her when she's put the T-shirt under my pillow.

Finally, I am not one of those folks who is glad to have had cancer. I'd trade all the opportunities and wisdom that came packaged with the experience for a chemotherapy-free lifetime. Still, I suspect one of the lessons wrapped in cancer is about the importance of relationships — that our closeness to other human beings is the nectar of our lives. Maybe we can all learn to give up our favorite dress, or let our spouse buy one without hearing our complaints, and enjoy our metaphorical ride out of the airport, together, just a little more.