

The Issues and Events Model of Conflict

By Daniel W. Trathen, D. Min. Ph. D.

Issues tend to be the larger areas of married life that we all have to cope with. The three major issues that most married couples say cause problems are money, sex, and communication. Other common issues are in-laws, children, recreation, alcohol, religion, sex, careers, and housework. You may have many issues that are more specific to your relationship, such as a health problem or step-parenting issues, and so forth. Issues on this level usually require good problem solving skills.

Some issues are "hidden" or buried. This means that they are usually not being talked about openly. Instead, they are the key issues which often get lost in the flow of the argument. For example, you may be very aware of feeling uncared for, but when certain events come up, that may not be what's talked about. These are deeper, fundamental issues that reflect needs of the heart that are often at work with any issue or event. Too often, these are not what couples talk openly about. They are too threatening. You won't be able to deal directly with these important issues unless you are making it safe to talk openly and with respect in your relationship. Here are six of the most common "hidden or deeper issues" in a couple's life that are themes that are triggered over and over and cause great frustration and exasperation.

Power

With power issues, the question is status or control. Who decides and who is in control? Are your needs and desires just as important as your partner's? Is your input important or are major decisions made without you? Do you easily feel controlled, even when it may not be warranted?

Caring

Here, the main theme is the extent to which you feel loved and cared for. Does your partner's love for you seem clear? Does it seem conditional?

Recognition

Does your partner recognize your activities and accomplishments? Recognition issues are about whether or not you feel valued by your partner for who you are and what you do.

Commitment

Here, the focus is on the long-term security of the relationship--"are you going to stay with me?" Is your relationship secure? When there is insecurity about the commitment, this can be a hidden issue that affects your relationship deeply.

Integrity

Integrity is triggered when you feel challenged in who you see yourself to be. For example, have you ever noticed how upset you get when your partner questions your intent or motives? That's because your integrity is being challenged. It's not wise to argue about what each other really thinks, feels, or intends. Don't tell your partner what's going on inside of him or her. Almost anyone will respond defensively when challenged in this way.

Acceptance

There seems to be one primary root issue that often underlies the others listed here: the desire for acceptance. Sometimes this is felt more as a fear of rejection, but the fundamental issue is the same. At the deepest level, people are motivated to find acceptance and avoid rejection in their relationships--sometimes by resorting to sinful strategies. We all have a deep need to be both respected and connected.

There are surely other hidden issues, but these six capture a lot of ground. How are you affected by these deeper issues? How did Christ display perfect love with regard to such issues? How can you more perfectly model his love in dealing with such hidden issues? Hidden or deeper issues like these need the structure and implementation of specific listening and problem solution skills. If your observation is that you as a couple "spin your wheels" and don't get anywhere then try separating the problem discussion from the problem solution. Remember, more intense emotion does not lead to quicker resolution. The more escalated we get in the arguments we face, the greater the chance we are drilling down to one of these sensitive hidden issues.

Material adapted from *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. Stanley, S. M., Trathen D.W., McCain S., Bryan M., 1998, Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers. San Francisco, California.