



## iQuestions Faculty, Greg Smalley

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### Question:

*I've been married for six years to a man I love with all my heart. We have a lot of trouble talking, yet we were great at it while dating. When we try to discuss a problem, we end up fighting and it gets us nowhere.*

### Answer:

How do we talk about serious issues inside our relationship, when at times it just feels like we kind of spin around and around and around?

I know, for me personally, getting married—my dad is a marriage expert, and I had been traveling with him speaking—and I remember telling my wife, “Hey, don’t worry. We’re not going to be like those other people. We’re not going to have problems. Relax. Marriage is going to be a piece of cake.”

Literally two years into my marriage, I really thought that we were one more argument away from my wife leaving me. You know, I didn’t think she would divorce me, I just didn’t think she wanted to be around me anymore.

It was really the way that we tried to work through our differences. It seemed like when we were engaged, that we could talk through these things, but I don’t know what happened.

But here’s the key. This is what I didn’t understand. We went in for counseling, and great counselors talked to us about communication, “How do we talk about the issue?” talking about love language, how do we understand what each other really needs, and how to meet those



things? All really good things. But no one ever said, “Let’s talk about the core issue, the root. What is actually the root? What is driving your conflicts?”

When we started to understand that, it literally changed our marriage.

Here is actually the root of what’s going on inside of every conflict that a lot of times we never even talk about. No one’s told us this. It literally looks like this. I’m going to tell you a quick story, one from early on in my marriage. This is to illustrate that, again, this stuff was happening long before we got married.

I was home alone one time. My wife’s a nurse, she’s working late at the hospital. I was bored, nothing going on around our apartment complex. I was sort of walking around our apartment, and I walked into the master bedroom area, and I remember thinking, “Something’s not right about how Erin has this all arranged,” and something didn’t look right to me.

So, I came up with a brilliant idea, because I was so bored anyway, “Let me just rearrange the whole room, and that will look great. As a matter of fact, I’ll surprise my wife. She’ll come home, she’ll love it. Who knows what will happen?” So I did it. I took the bed, moved it to a different corner in the room, took the shelves, just redid the whole thing, and stepped back, and said, “That looks great,” and I turned off the lights and went to bed.

Literally, my poor wife comes home at about 1 o’clock in the morning, exhausted, just wants to get into her pajamas and go to bed. But, because we were newlyweds, she didn’t want to turn on any lights to wake me up.

Now, all of us in the dark in our bedrooms, we know where to jump over, and where to scoot around and crawl under whatever is in our

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way. So, I mean, she knew the obstacles and where they were, except that she didn't have any idea that I had rearranged our bedroom.

So, the first thing that she hit when coming in, she hit this little coffee table, and just went "bang!" right in the shin. That knocked her forward in the wall. She hits a pair of skis, some antique skis. They fall over, take out a shelf on the way down that had every one of her Precious Moment figurines that she had ever collected in her whole life. They crash to ground, and the skis fell over and hit the floor right next to me. BOOM!

It wakes me up. What am I thinking? "We're getting robbed!" So that whole fight-or-flight thing kicks in. I go to run out of the room, and I forget that I've moved our bed. I literally went *BAM!* right into the wall. Hit my nose, and I'm seeing stars.

Well, Erin flipped on the light—and I'll never forget this as long as I live—and she took one look at me, looked around the room and screamed, "*Where am I?*" You know, "*What's happened here?*"

And that's when I said, "Surprise, Honey!"

It wasn't the kind of reaction I was looking for, because instantly she looked around and said, "This is horrible! What did you do? I hate it." And something about the way that she said that hit me wrong. It's like it pushed a button. I didn't know to handle that.

Then I said something back to her like, "What do you know? You're not Martha Stewart!" and that hit button.

And she shot back, "Besides, what kind of husband rearranges a bedroom, anyway?"

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And so, we just started spinning around and around and around and realized that we were in the same dance that we've done for years and years and years.

Now, looking back all those years of our marriage, I realized that what was going on that I didn't understand that I now understand—and this is what I would encourage you to think about—every time you get into an argument with your spouse, what's going on is you get your buttons pushed, those emotional buttons.

You start to feel like a failure, feel unloved, or feel abandoned, or rejected, or not important, or worthless. And when our buttons get pushed, we're going to react to people in the usual way that we react—maybe defend ourselves, go after them, get angry, argue, debate, whatever. Or we're going to withdraw and kind of pull back. Either way, that usually then pushes our spouse's button, they then react, and that's the dance that get. I never understood that.

So, my biggest encouragement to you is to notice what is actually going on down deep, and that's is, we get our buttons pushed, and then we're going to go into reaction mode.

The greatest thing that you could do for your marriage in terms of how to discuss things, without getting into an argument, is to first and foremost pay attention to what are my buttons that just got pushed?

Talk about the buttons. See, we didn't know to do that. We just would focus on reactions or focus on the issue. We didn't understand that underneath all of that, down deep, that our buttons got pushed. I can do something about my button. I can share that with my wife. Hopefully she will care about what I'm really feeling.

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That's the stuff that's worth talking about. That's the stuff that's actually driving our conflict. If want to change how you communicate with your spouse, start talking about the buttons that get pushed.

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