

Week 23

Five Fights That Everyone Has - Fight #2: Flooding

Mistake: Attacking, Defending, Withdrawing

What is flooding? The definition of flooding is the response our body goes through when we are overwhelmed in conflict, hijacked by our own nervous system in response to negativity from our spouse.

The physiological (bodily) effects include a heart rate that exceeds 100 beats per minute. Stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) are injected into our bloodstream by the truckload. We are in the midst of a full-blown fear response, ready to outrun a tiger, but ill-equipped to have a compassionate conversation with our spouse.

The significance of being flooded is that we cannot fight right. We lose the ability to process information, pay attention, listen, or understand what our spouse is saying. In response, we resort to using the first three of the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse (criticism, defensiveness, and contempt), while our spouse resorts to the fourth (stonewalling). If you remember, these four interactions are toxic to a marriage.

Once criticism or contempt enter the discussion, our classic fallback positions become attack and defend, in which our spouse is seen as the enemy, or shut down and withdraw, in which our spouse becomes a stranger. At this point, we can no longer reach each other. There is no listening and no learning, and we have lost the opportunity to explore the underlying causes of the conflict.

Amazingly, 97% of couples list flooding as a major challenge during conflict. It is easy to conclude that flooding is not only normal but also common.

We have already discussed how to start off on the right track in conflict by using the softened start-up. Now, let's look at how to stay on the right track by beginning to learn how to deal with flooding.