

# GTO Seeds for Growth

## Power Struggles: A Sure-Fire Way to Lose

By Harold & Bette Gillogly

In our last SEEDS FOR GROWTH, we began discussing **Conflict**...that crippler that terrifies and tears us apart. You know what we're talking about, don't you? You probably have some old, unworkable habits you just naturally fall into when anger and conflict arise in your marriage and family relationships. Right? Yeah, we all do. We walk away (either physically or emotionally), we blow up, we blame....It's a long list. But you know the ones you usually use.

We have some good news for you! The way you handle conflict is a **learned response**. Now, the good news about that is *anything learned can be relearned*. You are not trapped in your Conflict Method. **You can change**. God has said that all along. In fact, He commands it. Romans 12:2 — *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Remember, there are three basic reasons for our conflicts: (1) because of the way we look at our differences, (2) because of our power struggles and (3) because of our faulty communication patterns. These are the things we want to be transformed **FROM**. Last time, we talked about our **DIFFERENCES**. This time, let's examine **POWER STRUGGLES**.

What is a **POWER STRUGGLE**? The best way to answer this is probably to give you a few everyday examples.

Barb and George are talking with some friends. Barb: "When we moved here three years ago, we...."

George: "No, Dear, it was two-and-a-half years ago."

Barb: "Well, I remember that it was closer to three years ago, because we moved in the summer. Anyway, when we moved her THREE YEARS AGO, we thought it was the most beautiful place in the world."

George: "Actually, we said that Colorado was just as nice."

Now, do you think Barb and George are really debating facts? No. They are in a struggle for **POWER**. They are fighting for **CONTROL**.

Here is another example: Mary says to Sam, "You're wearing THAT shirt? Why don't you wear the shirt I gave you for your birthday? You know you look awful in THAT shirt!"

Sam: "I like THIS shirt. It's comfortable. I think it looks better with these pants than the shirt you gave me for my birthday."

Mary: "I'm just trying to make you look presentable enough to go to church."

Sam: "Well, as far as I'm concerned, THIS shirt IS presentable. So there!"

Are Mary and Sam really fighting over THAT shirt? They may think they are, but this fight isn't escalating over a shirt, is it? It's about **CONTROL**.

That's what **POWER STRUGGLES** are all about! Power in a marriage relationship is the ability of one partner to influence or change the behavior of the other. If you will notice in the two examples above, power struggles have two sides as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. The **desire to control** and the **fear of being controlled**. But please notice one other thing about these examples: *neither side wins*. The funny thing about power struggles is that the more you struggle for control, the less control you have. In other words, the harder you try, the worse it gets. And the saddest thing about most power struggles is that they are battles that don't even **NEED** to be fought. Why fight a battle no one can possibly win?

**Do you want your mate to do things differently?**

Perhaps you wish your mate would do some things differently, or maybe **BE** different in some way? Say, you wish your husband or wife would talk more with you. Now, there is nothing wrong

with such wishes. But be careful. They can turn into power struggles very easily. Maybe this scenario will sound familiar.

Joan says to Ken, her strong, silent husband: "You never talk to me. I've been sitting here all evening waiting for you to say something more than 'turn to channel 3.' And you've hardly said a word."

Ken: Grunt.

Joan: "You know, I'm here all day with the children. Don't you think I'd like to have a conversation with someone who can talk in complete sentences?"

Ken: Grunt. He says to himself, 'If she thinks ranting at me like this is going to get me to talk with her, she's got another think coming.'

And so it continues in a vicious circle: Joan keeps nagging and complaining, and Ken keeps resisting. They each want to change the other. But somehow, they just aren't seeing what they are doing **IS NOT WORKING**.

Jeff wants Sarah to make him feel more important by treating him like his mother treats his father. Jeff: "Boy, my Dad sure has it made. You've noticed how my Mom takes care of him, haven't you?"

Sarah: "Well, your mother doesn't work in an office all day long before she fixes supper. I'm not your maid!"

Jeff: "I said that my Dad had it m-a-d-e, NOT that I wanted a m-a-i-d. I could just as well be a stick of furniture around here for all you care!"

Sarah: "Maybe you should have married your mother!"

Poor Jeff and Sarah — the harder they try to change the other, the worse it gets.

So...what do you do about power struggles? How can you short circuit them?

1. The first step sounds so easy, you'll wonder why you didn't think of it yourself. **STOP doing what you are doing!** Stop playing your part of the

## Power Struggles (cont')

game. If what you have been doing is not working, then DO SOMETHING ELSE.

Have you ever seen two puppies playing with a rag, each pulling with all his might on opposite ends? Finally, they lie exhausted, neither having won the rag. What if one of them decided to just let go of his end? Remember what we said at the beginning? The more you struggle for control, the less control you'll have. That goes for puppies...and for people.

2. The second step is to **open yourself enough to see your spouse's point of view**. Just because your way is RIGHT does NOT mean your partner's way is WRONG. In every example we have given in this article, each mate had a very real need. Granted, it was **pushed** upon the other, but it was **still O.K.** to have that need. Ask the Lord to open your ears to hear your partner's need underneath what he or she is saying.

3. **Loosen your hold on your own point of view**. Your partner MAY be better off if he or she would change and be like you want him or her to be. But what's your real motive here? Is it to make a better person of your mate? Or is it to get what you want? Are you fighting battles that don't need to be fought?

4. **Ask God to help you Devise a plan of what YOU are going to do DIFFERENTLY** (not what you want your mate to do differently) and **commit it to the Lord**. Ask him to help you be consistent and persistent in it.

What are some plans that would work? Let's go back to the examples we gave one by one.

(1) Remember Barb and George and their public struggle over details? What if Barb had turned to George after he first interrupted her with "No, Dear, it was 2 and 1/2 years ago," and replied, "Maybe you're right, Honey." She would have taken away his reason to fight for control, without losing anything herself. The power struggle could have been avoided. Proverbs 17:14 wisely advises, *Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.*

(2) Our next example was Mary and Sam and the infamous shirt. What if Sam, instead of jumping to his own defense, stopped digging in his heels and responded to Mary's initial barrage with, "What is it about this shirt you don't like, Dear?" That might have given Mary a chance to be honest about how she is afraid people will feel sorry for him because of his old clothes. After that, neither of them might feel the need to struggle for control.

(3) How about Joan and her silent husband Ken? Apparently Joan would be happy if he said *something...ANYTHING*. But what if Ken took it a step further and honestly admitted why he is so uncommunicative. He could simply say, "Yeah, I guess I don't talk much, do I? I'm really tired when I get home from work. I just haven't considered how you've been here alone with the kids all day and need a grownup to talk to." Joan would probably faint. At least she might not feel the need to nag anymore.

(4) Finally, let's look at Jeff and Sarah. It's pretty obvious Sarah is feeling resentful that she has to make supper alone after working outside the home all day. She wants Jeff to show he

appreciates her efforts by helping out. And Jeff wants assurance he is still important to his wife. Can they both get what they want? Yes! Sarah could take the first step by saying something like, "Out of all the things your mother does for your father, what's the one thing you would like most for me to do?" (Maybe it's a neck rub after dinner.) Then she could add, "If you will help me with dinner, I will have a little more time and energy, and it would be my pleasure to give you a neck rub after dinner." That would be Jeff's signal to respond with a hearty "All right!" and head straight for the kitchen.

In each of our original examples, both partners were working very hard — emotionally and physically — to intensify a problem they really wanted to get rid of. Why work so hard to get something you DON'T WANT? That doesn't make any sense, does it? But our pride works against us this way. James, the brother of Jesus, hits the "pride nail" on the head when he declares, *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it....Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you....Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up* (James 4:1-10).

### Humility brings victory

Yes, if the Holy Spirit lives within you, you *really can* do what seems impossible. You can lay aside your pride and direct your energy into relearning and practicing these new ways of handling power struggles. And finally, you can start winning!

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