

## **Emotional Flooding: What happens to you during conflict?**

Put yourself in this position. You are standing at the kitchen counter doing your usual after-dinner chores. Your husband, sitting at the table over coffee, makes some sarcastic comment to you that seems to be entirely dismissive and contemptuous of your efforts to be a good mother and wife. Your blood begins to boil; the hair on your neck stands up as you shiver with immediate anger and helplessness. You decide to stand up for yourself and immediately pick him up on his disrespect and give vent to your distress. He, you can see, is taken aback but begins to defend himself feeling you are overreacting to his comment. Before you know it you are in the middle of a distressing and very stressful argument about the degree to which he appreciates and respects you.

Not an uncommon situation for many couples. It is important however to get a sense of what is happening to you in these moments. Let me introduce you to a concept that is really central to what problem-solving in a relationship is all about. It is called Flooding or more technically Diffuse Physiological Arousal and it refers to what happens in your body when you confront any kind of emotional or physical emergency.

When you get embroiled in intense conflict your body reacts in similar ways as it would if an intruder confronted you in your house. The emergency response that you feel in your body when you fight or argue with your spouse, when your 'blood boils', when the 'hairs on your neck stand up', or when you 'redden with distress' is fascinating. Believe it or not, when you are standing in the kitchen getting ready for battle with your 'ignorant' husband what is happening in your body is:

- Your heart rate goes up;
- Your heart contracts more vigorously;
- Your arteries constrict,
- Blood is drained from the edges of your body;
- Blood shuts down from your kidneys and stomach;
- Your attention narrows down and focuses more on survival;
- Your Kidney secretes stress hormones.
- These hormones secrete angiotensin which protects the volume of fluid in your blood to protect against haemorrhage;
- The insides of the adrenal glands secrete adrenalin, dopamine and nor adrenalin;
- The cortex of the adrenal glands secrete cortisone
- In the liver lipogen is converted to glucose that sends sugar into the blood;
- Your blood supply to brain is maintained.

It is astonishing to think that all of this happens instantly and entirely out of your awareness. In an emergency situation your body takes over. Now this is great if you are in a near death situation where your body gets ready for emergency and involves the lower brain. However, when it happens during a conflict it makes it impossible for you to listen and function.

When the body is stressed the area of attention gets narrowed and the body starts to signal-survival based thinking. As you will be aware, when you are in a fight with your

partner you tend to resort to exaggeration and simplification. People under pressure tend to have one of two kinds of thoughts and feelings. Thoughts of RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION or feeling like an INNOCENT VICTIM. These thoughts actually maintain the distress and keep the distress going. When you are righteously indignant you are saying things to your self and your spouse like “How dare you...”, and “Who do you think you are...” etc. When you are feeling like an innocent victim you will be saying things like “I don’t deserve this...” “This is entirely unfair....”.

Research has shown that there are gender differences in how men and women respond to stress. Very simply, men get upset quicker and take longer to calm down. Women get upset slower and recover quicker. This is not good for men! It is more common for men after an argument to be rehearsing thoughts that maintain the distress. “I don’t have to put up with this”. “People should not treat me like this” and find it hard to wind down.

So understanding FLOODING, that is how we get flooded with stress and distress, is very important. When man and women are flooded with stress and distress their mental flexibility diminishes and they become poor decision makers.

The thing to understand is that self-soothing is the anti-dote to emotional flooding and is really very important – to be able to calm yourself down, take a break, and put things into perspective. To be able to say “I am really feeling upset and stressed out and need to take a break”. Most people need a 20-minute break to allow the system to recover so the neurotransmitters can diffuse through the system and calm you down.

And, as I mentioned, men get flooded quicker than women and feel like they are drowning for longer than their female counterparts. It is for this reason that many men tend to shutdown and withdraw from discussions – not because they are totally disinterested but because they actually start getting physically upset and don’t know how to handle it. For these reasons men in anger-management need coaching in how to self-soothe because of their tendency to descend quickly into thoughts of righteous indignation or being the innocent victim. “Poor me. I am not going to put up with his anymore”, is the stress reinforcing belief.