

Your Guide to Knowing the Difference Between the Big Things and the Little Things in Marriage

by Brad Miller

Together, Tami and I work with many couples, so it becomes fairly easy for us to identify common patterns. At some point, the husbands and wives we work with almost always trip over a certain communication stumbling block. Invariably, he will say that she makes a big deal out of nothing, or she will say that he does. The reverse is also true, where one partner states that some things are never important enough (or big enough) to their spouse. Do you see the problem? Can you relate?

This sounds like a simple problem, and it is, but this problem is not a simple problem to solve.

We have called this [“Your Guide to Knowing the Difference Between the Big Things and the Little Things in Marriage.”](#) It is important to know that this is intended as a *guide*, and a very helpful one, I might add. But, because you are reading this and not currently in a marriage coaching session with us, we are not stepping in as referees in your current marriage challenges here. Instead, we are offering you a guide to help you better understand some of the things you have likely been misunderstanding in your marriage – and about your spouse and yourself too.

THE BASICS

You and your spouse have some similarities — some things in common. After all, those are the things that brought you together in the first place. Maybe you both love a great book or talking about superheroes. Maybe you love exploring the outdoors. Maybe you met each other in college while in the same field of study. Whatever it was that brought you both together, it was some kind of shared interest and you were both on the same page in those areas.

But there is a less-talked-about and more difficult side as well — there have always been things you *don't* have in common with your spouse. Maybe you have different opinions on politics or mask mandates (a recent hot topic). Maybe you are a morning person, but your spouse is a night owl. Or perhaps your spouse is quick to make decisions and move on to other things, while you like to take your time and make the “right” decision. Whatever your differences are, and you certainly have some, they can mostly be boiled down to differences of preference or opinion.

“Over 90% of the things that couples experience conflict over are matters of opinion.”

THE BIG THINGS

We all have big things — things that are really important to us. Furthermore, on a scale of 1-10, we all have things that are important to us in varying degrees. A one (1) on a 1-10 scale might say, “This thing matters to me a little, but it’s not worth fighting over.” A five (5) on a 1-10 scale might say, “This thing matters to me enough to put my time and resources behind it, but it’s not a hill I’m willing to die on.” [\[See the definition of this idiom here.\]](#) A ten (10) on a 1-10 scale might say, “Not only am I willing to die on that hill, but YOU (your spouse) might be the first casualty on my way up that hill, so get out of my way!” So a ten is a very big deal indeed. Would you agree so far?

THE LITTLE THINGS

There is an old saying that goes something like this:

I “Don’t sweat the small stuff in life. And, it’s all small stuff.”

This is something I have said often, but if I were to say this to Tami as a rebuttal to something that to her is a 10 — a hill she is willing to die on — I would likely find myself quite surprised by her reaction as we spend the next 20 or 30 minutes trying to diffuse the bomb I just lit. And yes, I have done this before. And so has Tami. And so have you!

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO

Our first tip is: **Embrace Compromise**

In this case, the difference between what I think is a big thing and what Tami thinks is a big thing can be a very big difference. The same is true in your marriage. The goal is always to close the gap on that difference. Do you remember the advice your grandparents likely gave you on your wedding day? They may have said something like, “Learn to compromise so you can be happy.” Compromise is *precisely* the way to close the gap between our differences. To be clear, compromise *does not* mean we have to think exactly alike, but compromise does mean that something important to my spouse had better be somewhat important to me as well. That’s compromise. That is how you can love your spouse in both word and deed — the things you say and the things you do. And that is also one of the great secrets to a happy marriage.

I “If it is important to your spouse, it had better be important to you too!”

- Brad Miller

Our second tip is: **Remain Calm**

If either you or your spouse has ever said, “You just need to calm down,” and this comment did nothing to calm anyone down, then this tip — *remain calm* — is for you, and you should read this section several more times. Slowly so that it can sink in. Because understanding these concepts and making a few small changes in light of your new understanding will make a difference. One of the best ways to help calm your spouse down is not with words but with actions. You must remain calm yourself and demonstrate it with actions — not words.

Our third tip is: **Practice Empathy**

Empathy is a great equalizer and one of the secrets to any great marriage! Empathy is the ability to understand and feel the emotions of another — it is the ability to put yourself in someone else’s skin (or shoes). As the character, Atticus Finch, says in Harper Lee’s novel [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view — until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

Therefore, if your wife (or husband) talks about how hard her day has been, listen for a few of the *feeling* words she shares such as — *frustrated, overwhelmed, sad, or angry*, — then work hard to remember a time when you felt frustrated, overwhelmed, sad, or angry. When you do this well, when you put yourself in the skin of your spouse, you will be able to console your wife (or husband) with a sincere version of, “Wow, that sounds

really hard” and, “I’m so sorry about your day.” Furthermore, empathy will come easier for most women because their brains are wired differently than a man’s brain. But regardless of how your brains are wired, empathy can be learned and is worthy of learning well.

Our fourth tip is: **Make Room for Your Spouse’s Thoughts and Opinions**

Everyone wants to believe that they are right – that they have somehow cornered the market on the best or most correct way of thinking. Allowing yourself to believe this will only cause you grief. Each preference or opinion (or thought) you have is only one among thousands and there are plenty of people out there who have thoughts and ideas as good as yours, and sometimes, even better than yours — your spouse is one of those people.

Never assume that you are right and your spouse must, therefore, be wrong. This will always be a mistake and will work against you having a great marriage.

THE SUMMARY

You and your spouse will have varying and different thoughts and ideas about what is a big deal and what is not a big deal. Your ideas are not the correct ones (sorry) and neither are those of your spouse. The correct ideas are the ones you work on together. These are not necessarily the things you completely agree on, but rather the things that you have made some compromise on. In your marriage, you need to focus more on direction — the direction you are heading in together — and less on your ideas of what perfection may look like.

| “In your marriage, learn to focus more on direction and less on perfection.”

You and your spouse will have different ideas, preferences, and opinions. Learn to respect those of your spouse. Your spouse will feel important when you learn to value their ideas, preferences, and opinions. And you will feel important when your spouse is willing to compromise on things that are important to you. Remember that you don’t have to die on every hill, nor do you want to. Choose happiness instead!

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