

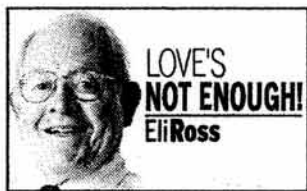
# Is your marriage caught in a riptide?

A riptide is a strong current, often close to the beach, that entraps an unwary swimmer. Swimmers, unfamiliar with the strategy needed to get through the tide, often swim vertically, directly against it. Their energy is depleted and they cannot make it through.

The correct way to pass thru a riptide is to swim obliquely until one passes beyond the tide into calmer waters. The swimmer needs patience, courage, gumption and perseverance to make it to shore. Those who have the know-how make it!

Marriages similarly encounter strong riptides — events of life that are so strong and seemingly overwhelming. Does it seem as if your marriage is drowning? Are the riptides so strong you aren't sure how to make it through?

What is the issue that is currently challenging your marriage? Can you define it? How are you attacking the issue? Head on directly into the current of conflict? Are you too



headstrong, going in on the situation too directly instead of obliquely? Do you have a swimmer's strategy?

Perhaps two of the most prominent issues in marital conflict seen by this therapist are:

- Accumulated issues of hurt that have gone unaddressed or addressed but never resolved to one or both of the parties' satisfaction.

- The lack of the communication skills needed for resolving the dissatisfactions.

As I have said many times to my clients, "When you are having a disagreement, the roof doesn't part and a voice comes down to say, 'Stop! Cut! You are doing it wrong.'"

Suppose, John is upset about Mary's shopping with the cred-

it card. The couple is in debt, and Mary had agreed not to use it, but she has done so anyway.

**John:** You broke the agreement. You can't be trusted. Keep spending like that and you will lead us into having to file for bankruptcy."

**Mary:** "Well, maybe I shouldn't have, but you never give me enough money anyhow."

**John:** "Really? You think you can spend anyway just because you want some frivolous junk you don't need!"

**Mary:** "Well, if you were a better provider, we wouldn't be arguing over a few dollars."

What is going on here? Baiting, hooking, derailing and no solution.

If there is an agreement not to use credit cards and one person breaks that agreement, then, trying to defend the violation of agreement, by making an irrelevant statement of defense, "You never give me enough money anyhow," is derailing from the issue at hand. John has been baited and

he hooked. And so the argument goes on without either party being aware of what they are doing. They are making a vertical frontal attack on each other.

The oblique approach to get through this riptide might go something like this:

**John:** I am upset that the credit card was used when we both promised not to use it.

**Mary:** You are right! I have to apologize. I guess I was feeling so frustrated in wanting to buy a birthday gift for you, I thought I would make this exception. "Will you forgive me? I will do whatever it takes to pay it off as my commitment."

Learning to enter obliquely can save you from drowning your marriage. Know-how is important. *Love alone is sometimes just not enough.*

**ELI THOMAS ROSS, Ph.D.**, is a licensed marriage family therapist in Salinas. His "Love's Not Enough" column appears Monday in Living. He can be reached at 424-7717. Send questions and comments to e-mail at [dretross1128@yahoo.com](mailto:dretross1128@yahoo.com).