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FAMILY COUNSELING  
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### Fight/Flight Vrs. Nest/Befriend

A long-term staple of emotional problem solving has been the understanding that when stressed, people move toward a “fight or flight” response behavior. Such behavior seems to have been programmed into the human nervous system as an automatic response since the beginning. When stressed, one’s body automatically prepares for combat or flight. Our adrenal gland dumps adrenaline into our bloodstream, our heart rate increases, our breathing deepens, the flow of blood through our body redistributes itself from the midline of our body to our extremities and we basically prepare ourselves for strenuous physical exertion, i.e. to go to war or to flee a threatening situation at high speed. This understanding has not been challenged until recently when a female grad student in Minnesota examined the structure of previous experiments that documented the fight or flight behavior and she noticed that all the studies had been done with males exclusively. Even the lab rats were male!

This student then set up similar studies using females and found that the results did not hold for females. When stressed, females were likely to engage in behavior that she named “nest and befriend”. Women were likely to confirm and cement relationships and pay attention to their living quarters when stressed. They connected with close friends and initiated new friendships or paid attention to cleaning and decorating. These behaviors helped them deal with the stress of conflict!

These findings are particularly pertinent when we look at how conflict is handled in intimate relationships. While all people find conflict stressful, men and women respond to conflict in very different ways. Some men get angry and verbally “attack” their partner while others, realizing the foolishness of “attacking” their partner attempt to “flee”. They may leave the house or head for the garage. While this might be a good idea in terms of giving them time to cool off, it may not work well for the partner who needs to affirm the relationship in order to quiet the anxiety related to the experience of conflict.

Now we may have a man who wisely heads for the garage to avoid doing or saying something he may regret and when he gets there he finds his partner may have tearfully followed him out so they can “talk”. Faced with the inability to “flee”, he may say something hostile and the conflict escalates! Understanding how men and women handle conflict differently can help avoid escalation.