Resolving Conflict in Intimate Relationships

The Problem of Conflict
The problem of conflict in relationships

Most couples want to keep life as calm and as free of conflict as possible. They believe this is the key to a good relationship. They may even evaluate the success of their relationship on the basis of how few or many fights they have and how well they communicate.

But conflict, itself, doesn’t ruin a relationship. And couples with good communication skills are not guaranteed good relationships. In fact, research shows that unhappy couples with good communication skills can use these skills to punish each other and ruin their relationship.

The reality is, conflict is essential to a healthy relationship. And when a relationship works, it works, in part, because conflict is faced and worked through, feelings are expressed and understood, and a generally positive atmosphere is maintained.

So if you are in an unhappy relationship, before you focus on eliminating conflict or mastering good communication skills, you need to focus on learning how to work through conflict and how to develop goodwill towards each other. The focus should be on changing what is going on inside of you as well as what goes on between you.

This course is for anyone who wants to learn about the qualities of constructive conflict resolution and how to develop goodwill towards your partner. It is about:

- Learning to take responsibility for any hostility or negativity that characterizes your conflicts
- It is about understanding your habitual conflict patterns and what you can do to change these patterns
- It is about learning to de-escalate conflict by calming yourself as well as your partner
- It is about how you can ensure that you don’t misinterpret your partner’s intentions and that your own intentions are received in the way you want them to be.
- It is about increasing the number of positive behaviors in your relationship to far outweigh the number of negative behaviors
- And it is about strengthening your friendship to ensure that your relationship is positive and strong and mutually supportive

Accept Responsibility

Criticism and defensiveness escalate the conflict and distract you from taking personal responsibility for solutions and from cooperating with your partner. It is critical that you accept that you cannot force change on another person. You have to accept that if any change is needed, it must start with you.

The following items deal with various ways that people handle marital conflict.

Think carefully about some recent, specific instances where you and your partner argued, fought, or had a disagreement. Think about your typical response to your partner during these times and select from the following list those statements that best reflect your own response. Circle the statement number, as many as apply.

During times of disagreement or conflict I tend to:

1. Insist that my way of thinking or doing things is right (and my partner is wrong)
2. Have difficulty considering the needs of my partner during an argument
3. Get easily offended or insulted if my partner complains about our relationship
4. Sulk after a disagreement and refuse to talk to my partner
5. Say things to make my partner feel guilty
6. Criticize my partner’s character
7. Show contempt for my partner as a person
8. Insult my partner or call him/her names
9. Hide my feelings or thoughts about what I am really concerned with
10. Feel a sense of righteous indignation about my partner’s complaints about me
11. Find fault with my partner
12. Keep track of how much more I have done for the relationship than my partner has
13. Justify my hurtful actions (or inaction) because of what my partner has (or hasn't) done
14. Focus on winning the argument, looking for ways to 'come out on top' or have the last word
15. See my partner as 'the enemy'
16. Dwell on my partner's flaws and weaknesses
17. Try to get my partner to admit that he or she is in the wrong
18. See myself as an innocent victim of my partner’s unreasonable actions
19. Agree to a solution in order to end the conflict, but in practice do nothing about it
20. Keep the argument focused on topics that are not really the core issue for me
21. Have difficulty telling my partner exactly what I'm upset about
22. Have allowed the spirit of bitterness and resentment to take over my feelings
23. Regularly bring up things from the past that my partner has done that upset me
24. Get so worked up, physically or emotionally, that I lose track of what I am saying, and say things I don't mean
25. Walk away from an argument in a huff, and rarely go back to repair the damage or try to resolve things
26. Act helpless in order to get my partner to come to the rescue or do things for me
27. Ignore my partner's attempts to try to stop the negativity between us
28. Get stone-faced and say nothing
29. Tell my partner that his or her feelings about the issue are ridiculous or silly
30. Assume the worst when my partner does things that upset me

Look closely at the items you have circled. Do you notice any items that seem similar to each other? Can you reduce the list to your top three typical ways of responding in an argument with your partner? Write them in the space below. It is much easier to think about changing three things than it is to think about changing many.

1.
2.
3.
Now, with these typical responses in mind, write a brief answer to each of the following questions:

1. Where do these responses come from?

2. How might these responses impact my partner?

3. How might these responses impact our relationship?

4. What is my intent in using these responses?

5. How well do they work in helping me accomplish my intent?

6. How well do they work in helping me to resolve conflict and create a healthy, vibrant relationship?

7. How do they hinder me from dealing with conflict effectively?

8. What could I do instead?
Self-Reflection Questions

Here are some questions that you may want to reflect on to determine your readiness to transform or strengthen your relationship.

1. Am I willing to sacrifice my self-interests in favor of building up this relationship and ultimately creating a win-win situation for both of us? Have I shown this willingness lately?

2. Am I willing to accept full responsibility for my contributions to our relationship difficulties, without any blaming or finger-pointing at my spouse? Have I shown this willingness lately?

3. Am I willing to be open and honest with my partner, in a respectful way, about how I really feel, even if it means that my partner might not like what I have to say? Have I shown this willingness lately?

4. Am I willing to look inside my partner’s heart, if he or she will let me, and accept what I find there? Have I shown this willingness lately?

5. If I really wanted to show love for my partner by opening space for him or her, what ideas or needs of my partner’s would I open space for?

6. Am I willing to give up some of my favorite defenses in this relationship in the hope of creating something better as a couple? Have I shown this willingness lately?

7. List three things that I typically do to protect myself in this relationship (e.g. I yell and scream, I withdraw emotionally, I blame my partner, I nitpick at things my partner does).

8. How would it make a difference in my relationship if I started to give up some of these defenses?
Strengthening your relationship begins with you

Do you have thoughts like these:

- “If only she would stop nagging me, things would be fine.”
- “He pays more attention to the computer than he does to me.”
- “She’s so selfish. It’s no wonder we can’t make things work.”
- “He always has to have the last word. He thinks he knows everything.”

To you, such statements may seem like reasonable explanations for why you feel unhappy with your relationship. To your partner, such statements will likely feel unfair or critical. That’s because these explanations are attacks on your partner, not attacks on the problem.

Criticism and defensiveness escalate the conflict and distract you from taking personal responsibility for solutions and from cooperating with your partner. It is critical that you accept that you cannot force change on another person. You have to accept that if any change is needed, it must start with you. This section is intended to help you focus on your role in creating a less than healthy relationship.

As marriage therapist Brent Barlow comments “get a mirror rather than a magnifying glass.”

Susan and David

Let’s take a look at a pattern of conflict between Susan and David.

Susan feels that David cares more about his children from a previous marriage than he cares about her. As a consequence, Susan criticizes them frequently.

David feels protective of his children, so he defends them and withdraws his attention from Susan.

But the more David withdraws from Susan, the less important she feels to him. And so she takes it out even more on his children.

Let’s recap. Try to think about the pattern that is occurring here.

Susan criticizes David’s children. Her intent is to punish him. She wants him to focus on her.

David feels hurt and protective and perhaps even embarrassed that his partner is doing this. He thinks to himself “you are forcing my hand. If you criticize my children you are criticizing me.”

So David defends his children, and he withdraws from Susan. His intent is to protect his children.

Susan experiences his withdrawal and sees him protecting his children. She feels unimportant and rejected and hurt. And she think to herself “it’s true, his children are more important to him than I am.”

And so the pattern continues. Susan is no more to blame for this communication problem than David is and vice versa. Each person has a part in this problem. Each person’s part of the problem is both an understandable and predictable reaction to, and stimulator, of the other person’s part in the problem. And it goes on and on, in this back and forth manner.
Examine your conflict patterns

You and your partner form a system. A system consists of parts working together in connected ways. You and your partner are those ‘parts.’ Over time you form patterns of interaction that are predictable. These patterns can be negative (vicious cycles) or positive (virtuous cycles).

If you and your partner are co-creating a system that isn’t working for you, then you need to alter the way that system works. You do this by altering what you put into the system – your thoughts, feelings, actions, and intent. Changing one part of the system changes how the whole system works. That one part of the system can be you.

The first step is to become more aware of the predictable patterns that you fall into in your relationship and how they take on a life of their own. The second step is to make conscious decisions to think, feel, and/or act differently so that you begin to expand the possibilities for creating positive interaction patterns.

The following exercise is designed to help you identify a vicious cycle (negative interaction) that you create in your own relationship, reflect on your own contributions to this cycle, and take steps to alter the cycle. While this is important work to do on your own, when you have completed it, you may find it helpful to share it with your partner and engage your partner in a discussion about what you have written.

**Step 1**

Think of a recent situation where you and your partner had a disagreement that became a problem for you. Think of a situation that:

- Involves something your partner did that upset you
- Is related to a perpetual, unresolved problem in your relationship

With this specific situation in mind, answer each of the following questions. Remember, that this exercise will only be helpful if you are honest with yourself.

*Continue with Step 1 (next page)*

before returning to Step 2.

**Step 2**

Now it is time to put yourself in your partner’s shoes. Answer each of these questions as though you were your partner. This means that you will need to set aside your own perspective as much as possible and do your best to reflect on these questions from your partner’s viewpoint.

This exercise might be very difficult for you if you are not used to thinking this way. It is critical, however, that you learn to see the world through your partner’s eyes, not just through your own. Don’t worry so much about trying to get it “right.” Unless your partner has told you how he or she feels, you will have to make an educated guess.

If you have the opportunity to find out how your partner actually answers these questions, you may want to compare your guesses with your partner’s actual views.

Otherwise, do your best to think about how your partner might reply to these questions.
1. Clearly describe the situation.
   Example: “David’s young adult daughters came over to the house on Friday night, unannounced for a visit. David and I were going to watch a movie. David invited them in to watch it with us. They were making popcorn and made a mess on the stove. I got really angry and yelled at them. They left shortly afterward. David and I got into a big argument that ruined the evening.”

2. What immediate goal were you trying to accomplish prior to this problem erupting?
   Example: “My overall goal was to have a pleasant evening together, just David and me, with no distractions. It has been so long since we have focused on each other. I didn’t want anything to interrupt it.”

3. What did your partner do that upset you?
   Example: “He invited his daughters in to watch the movie, when we had planned to be alone. He didn’t consult me about it. Afterwards, he got really angry with me for yelling at his daughters. He said it was too hard to live with me and wondered if we shouldn’t split up.”

1. Clearly describe the situation.
   Example: “My young adult daughters came over to the house on Friday night, unannounced for a visit. Susan and I were going to spend the evening together and watch a movie. I invited them in to watch it with us. The next thing I knew, Susan was yelling at them and telling them to leave.

2. What immediate goal were you trying to accomplish prior to this problem erupting?
   Example: “I just wanted everyone to get along. I wanted to have a pleasant evening with my family and enjoy a good movie together.”

3. What did your partner do that upset you?
   Example: “She yelled at my daughters. She called them slobs. She ruined the evening.”
4. Why do you think your partner did that?

Example: “Because his daughters mean more to him than I do. They come first in his life. Sometimes it seems like he is afraid of saying no to them, but he has no trouble saying no to me.”

Note: It is entirely possible that your partner acted the way he or she did for the reasons you attributed to him. Keep in mind that it is equally possible that he acted that way for entirely different reasons.

4. Why do you think your partner did that?

Example: “Because she doesn’t like my daughters. It doesn’t really matter what they do, it is never right. She was in a bad mood.”

Note: Taking yourself out of role for a moment, keep in mind that this may not be the same reason you actually had for doing what you did, but do your best to think about how your partner might have interpreted your actions.

5. How did you feel about what your partner did?

You may have felt angry, but try to identify any emotions you experienced underneath your anger, such as hurt, fear, or sadness. If you can’t describe how you felt, use the following list of feeling words to help you. This is just a brief list to get you thinking. You might list other emotions.

- Hurt
- Sad
- Lonely
- Afraid
- Unimportant
- Unwanted
- Frustrated
- Inadequate
- Betrayed
- Disappointed
- Embarrassed
- Unappreciated

Example: “I felt unimportant, lonely, hurt, angry, frustrated.”

5. How did you feel about what your partner did?

If you can’t identify the emotion(s) use the list of feeling words to help you.

Example: “I felt hurt, angry, and sad. I felt embarrassed.”
6. Why were you feeling each of these emotions?
Example: “I felt hurt because David knows how much it upsets me when he chooses his daughters over me, and he did it anyway. I felt frustrated because we aren’t being a couple. I felt lonely and unimportant because David hasn’t been paying much attention to me lately. I felt angry because David should have known better.”

7. What did you do in response?
Example: “I became irritable and grumpy. I attacked his daughters. I made them feel unwelcome. I said some hurtful things to them and to David.”

8. What was your immediate intent in reacting this way?
Example: “I wanted to punish David. He knew that spending time together was important to me and he invited his daughters in anyway. He didn’t care about me so I wanted to hurt him back.”

9. What did you hope your partner would think?
Example: “That he was in the wrong. That he needed to apologize to me.”

6. Why were you feeling each of these emotions?
Example: “Hurt – because my daughters and I are close and Susan criticized them. Embarrassed – because Susan made a big scene. Sad – because my daughters’ feelings were hurt and because I wanted a fun evening and now it was ruined. Angry – because it was unfair and rude.”

7. What did you do in response?
Example: “I yelled at Susan, and told her she was out of line. I told her to leave the room and calm down.”

8. What was your immediate intent in reacting this way?
Example: “I wanted her to know how it felt. I wanted her to know how inappropriate it was. I wanted to defend my daughters.”

9. What did you hope your partner would think?
Example: “That she was out of line. That she was acting childish.”
10. What did you hope your partner would feel?
Example: “Guilty. I hoped he would feel sorry.”
Note: It is entirely possible that your partner thought and felt the kinds of things you hoped he would in response to your actions, but it is also possible that he felt and thought entirely different things.

11. What did you hope your partner would do?
Example: “That he would send his daughters home. That he would apologize and treat me more special. That he would put his arm around me and tell me he understood my reaction.”

12. What did you believe would happen if you had not done what you did?
Example: “No one would have known I was upset. David would have just assumed that everything was okay with me. He would have thought he had gotten away with ignoring me again. He wouldn’t have given it a second thought. I would have remained at the bottom of his priority list.”

10. What did you hope your partner would feel?
Example: “Guilty. I hoped she would feel sorry. I wanted her to realize that she hurt my kids’ feelings.”

11. What did you hope your partner would do?
Example: “That she would leave the room and calm down. That she would apologize. That she would stop attacking my children.”

12. What did you believe would happen if you had not done what you did?
Example: “Susan would have gone on attacking them. My daughters would have left and maybe not come back. They wouldn’t feel welcome next time.”
13. Is the way you are handling this situation working? Is it inviting the result you want or intend?
Example: “In this case, no. We ended up not talking to each other for the rest of the evening. I felt even less like a couple than I did before.”

14. In the future, what do you want or need from your partner?
Example: “I need David to be a partner with me. I need him to set boundaries with his daughters that will protect our time together. I need him to want to spend time with me and want to focus on us as a couple.”

Step 3
Now, use the following blank diagram to describe the vicious cycle that you and your partner create.

Fill in each blank space in the diagram using your responses to the previous questions.

Remember that unless you have checked with your partner, your can only guess at your partner’s perspective. However, if you have thought carefully about your partner’s viewpoint, you should begin to see how each of you was caught in a predictable pattern.

As you think about this pattern, reflect on whether the same pattern has emerged in other situations, at other times, in your relationship. The more the same pattern emerges repeatedly, the more central it is in defining your relationship.
Our vicious cycle

My action(s)

My intent

My feelings

My thoughts

My partner's feelings

My partner's thoughts

My partner's intent

My partner's actions