

Rethinking Couple Conflict

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Conflict offers an opportunity to solve problems or negotiate changes in a relationship. However, many people avoid conflict like the plague. Ultimately, you cannot avoid conflict. Any close relationship will encounter conflict. There will inevitably be situations where one partner's needs or wants conflict with the other partner's needs or wants. Differing wants and needs are not necessarily bad. They are usually neutral. They are just differences. People often feel uncomfortable with these differences and develop complicated explanations for why they exist. It is the meaning we attribute to these differences that creates emotional distress.

Usually, it is not the conflict itself that causes problems in the relationship but the damage caused by how we perceive it, the feelings that arise from our perceptions, and the inappropriate methods of problem-solving we use to reduce our distress. Many people's first reaction is to perceive conflict as "bad" and that it will end badly. When you think that way, trying to protect yourself from conflict makes sense.

People engage in various behaviors to protect themselves from the "pain" of conflict. People deploy defenses to avoid uncomfortable feelings associated with conflict. Many people "go along to get along," complying with the wishes or demands of the other party. They minimize their position or feelings to please the other person. Sometimes, they avoid feelings of fear, such as the fear of abandonment. Sometimes, they don't trust their judgment or feelings. Someone uncertain about their opinions might even believe the other person knows more about their feelings. People often feel compelled to justify their positions, feelings, or beliefs to receive validation that their feelings are "right" or "correct" and to make themselves understood.

Many partners believe they must "see" things the same way and that differing perceptions or feelings mean the other person is wrong. They may attempt to minimize the other person's feelings, talk them out of their feelings, point out the errors in the other person's perceptions, or shut

them down. The anxiety around being in conflict creates enough distress that attempts to gain control over the situation are attempts to reduce that distress.

Another common way of protecting oneself against the uncomfortable feelings involved in conflict is to shut down, pretend not to care, withdraw, dismiss, or refuse to acknowledge a conflict, or otherwise refuse to engage in problem-solving.

When a partner presents a problem about the other partner's behavior, and the receiving partner begins defensive maneuvers, the conflict comes to light but does not reach a solution. If the partners argue or move into other self-defeating, defensive patterns, this attempt looks like a "failure." It adds to negative expectations about the couple's ability to problem solve. Failure to solve a specific conflict makes it more challenging to resolve it when it arises again. A circular dance of self-defense against perceived criticism or attack develops. Many self-defeating circular behavior patterns ensue, where each partner feels compelled to be understood and tries harder and louder to make their case. In contrast, the other partner views these efforts as criticism or attack. A coercive pattern to be heard and understood develops.

Conflict does not have to deteriorate into coercive arguments. Sharing one's feelings with another person is an act of intimacy. It involves risking hurt feelings. Acting out one's feelings with dirty fight tactics, "you" messages, or other "you get to guess what I'm feeling" behaviors are not "sharing." Even "why" questions are often more about protecting oneself than sharing. For example, "Why don't you kiss me anymore?" probably intends to say, "I miss your kisses. I would like it if you kissed me more." It is usually not the message that starts the argument but the presentation. The actual message delivered ends up being something other than the intended message.

So, how can you grow from a conflict?

Slow down. Pay attention. Listen. Listen to your partner. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What is my partner trying to tell me?
- What is my partner feeling? What did they say they feel?
- What does my partner want or need?
- *Listen to and pay attention to your own body to identify what you are feeling. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling?" Here is the list of feelings: fear, anger, shame, guilt, hurt, sadness, loneliness, helplessness, and joy.*
- What do I really want or need?
- When I feel compelled to defend myself against their stated feelings or their requested needs, what am I defending? *Possible answers: Feelings, beliefs, expectations, your position/power?*
- When I am being defensive, what meaning is my partner making of my defensive behavior?
- In what way does my partner's feelings or needs threaten me?
- How do my beliefs or thoughts prevent me from letting down my defenses, being vulnerable, and being open to problem-solving?
- If I let go of being "right," "justified," "indifferent," or other defensive positions and allow myself to be open to listening and understanding my spouse, what good might come of it?
- What would it take for me to let go of my defenses, be open to their thoughts and feelings, allow myself to listen, and try to understand my partner's position?
- What am I afraid of? What is the worst thing that would happen if I let down my defenses?
- What is the best thing that could happen if I let down my defenses?
- How might my partner's communication behavior change if I let down my defenses?
- How would it feel to believe that my partner actually "heard" what I said, understands my position, and accepts my feelings and position?
- What does it feel like to be accepted for I am?

To be able to listen to your partner's feelings, let them know that you heard what they said, and accept their feelings and position without defense is to be able to receive your spouse's gift to you. Letting go of defensive posturing involves not trying to change your partner's feelings, letting go of placating, abandoning the compulsion to make them change how they see things, and resisting the urge to withdrawal from conflict by refusing to engage. If you let go of your defenses and identify and own

your perceptions and feelings, you can take a risk to share with your spouse reciprocally. These are acts of intimacy. When you are able to make these communication behavior changes, you are problem-solving. The process is about growing together. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, previously included in Couple Communication Workbook, (2014), nonpublished. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**



To further enhance your ability to navigate conflicts and improve communication in your relationships, consider exploring the Brief Lessons, "Fair Fight Tactics" and "Communication Skills 101." "Fair Fight Tactics" offers practical steps for resolving conflicts constructively, focusing on collaboration, brainstorming, and de-escalation techniques. "Communication Skills 101" teaches the power of "I" messages to replace blame-focused "You" messages, fostering empathy and reducing misunderstandings. These lessons provide essential tools to build stronger, more harmonious relationships and continue the personal and relational growth journey discussed in this article. **These are digital downloads available immediately.**