



## Healthy Conflict Management

*Naomi Brower*, MFHD, CFLE, Extension Assistant Professor

Conflicts are a natural part of human interaction. Whenever two or more people are in the same environment for a long enough period of time, it is inevitable that conflict will occur. However, the conflict itself is not the problem, but rather how they choose to react and deal with the conflict that can sometimes cause problems. Conflict can be destructive when it leads to stress, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, and damaged relationships, but it can be constructive when it leads to better decisions, innovative win-win solutions, and personal and relationship growth.

### Sources of Conflict

A variety of factors lead to conflict, some of which include limited resources, differences in goals and objectives, miscommunication, differing attitudes, opinions and values, and perception and personality clashes. For example, some of the most common conflicts in marriage include balancing job and family, frequency of sexual relations, financial issues, expectations of household tasks, communication issues, in-laws, time/schedules, and children (Harley, 2008; Risch, Riley & Lawler, 2003; Townsend, 2010). While there are endless reasons for potential conflict, these conflicts are usually just the signal of deeper emotional needs that are not being fulfilled. The acronym “STARVED” states these emotional needs which include: safety, trust, appreciation, respect, validation, encouragement, and dedication (Townsend, 2010, p. 53). When these emotional

needs are met, the surface conflict often dissipates. Or, at least, it is more easily resolved.

### Do's and Don'ts of Conflict Resolution

While there are many approaches to dealing with conflict, some are more effective than others. For example, taking the passive or passive-aggressive approach by hinting at a problem, using sarcasm, or avoiding the conflict generally does not lead to effective outcomes (Roberts, 2000). On the other side of the spectrum, blaming, accusing and attacking often lead to an escalation of emotions and can lead to negative outcomes (Markman, Stanley, Blumber, Jenkins & Whiteley, 2004; Roberts, 2000). In addition, four particularly negative styles of communication which often lead to negative outcomes in relationships include criticism, contempt (behaviors that convey disgust and disrespect such as eye rolling and name-calling), defensiveness, and stonewalling (withdrawing and being unresponsive) (Gottman, 1999).

On the other hand, successful negotiation skills such as appropriate timing, establishing a cooperative environment, listening skills, taking self-responsibility, and seeking win-win solutions can help individuals to resolve conflicts in healthy ways and can potentially provide opportunities to build relationships as individuals seek to understand and meet each other's needs.

# Keys to Resolving Conflict Effectively

**Appropriate timing.** One of the first keys to effective problem solving is finding the appropriate time to discuss the conflict. Conflict often leads to overwhelming emotional and physical feelings that may impact the ability to reason and think clearly. So, while it is often tempting to try to resolve issues in the heat of the moment, taking a time out can aid in effective problem solving and help individuals to avoid saying or doing things they may regret later (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; Markman, et al., 2004). Taking a short time away from the situation (at least 20 minutes) to do something calming such as deep breathing, taking a walk, or something else that will help distract from the situation creating the intense feelings, can help individuals to calm down and be more prepared to discuss and resolve the situation (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001).

**Establish a cooperative environment.** Set and follow rules that will establish a pleasant and cooperative environment. This includes efforts to be pleasant and cheerful throughout negotiations and kind even if a partner is losing their cool. If an impasse is reached and things are going poorly, take a break and resume negotiations later (Harley, 2008).

**Soften the approach.** Research indicates that 96 percent of the outcome of an interaction is based on the first 3 minutes of the conversation (Gottman, 1999). So, in order to have an effective outcome, it is helpful to set a positive tone from the beginning. Some suggestions include using a soft voice and approaching the situation in a win-win attitude (Gottman, 1994).

**Listening.** Repeat back what the other person is saying in your own words (Markman, et al., 2004). Validate what he or she is saying even if you disagree.

**Identify the problem.** Seek to understand the problem from both points of view before seeking to find a solution. It is helpful for each partner to express his/her thoughts and feelings (Harley, 2008; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Taking responsibility for thoughts and feelings and using “I” messages often helps the other to listen without becoming defensive (Paterson, 2000). An “I” message can be

created by statements such as “I think...”, “I feel...”, and “I want...” (Darrington & Brower, 2012).

**Brainstorm solutions.** Brainstorm as many solutions as possible to the problem without criticism. Be creative! Look at mutually acceptable options rather than options that require sacrifice from one partner or the other (Harley, 2008; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Effective solutions often require compromise.

**Choose the best solution.** Consider the solutions that take both partners' needs into account and will be mutually beneficial (Harley, 2008; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Remember, not all conflicts will be resolved (Gottman, 1999). Sometimes it is okay to respectfully agree to disagree. Regardless of whether the issue is easily solved or is more of a perpetual nature, helping your partner to feel validated and understood, and building on common ground, can help you to build and maintain a strong relationship (Gottman, 1999).

## Conclusion

Without healthy conflict management skills, conflict can often escalate or intensify over time. On the other hand, utilizing key negotiation skills can help individuals effectively address and cope with conflict and potentially build stronger relationships with others.

### For more information about effective conflict management or for classes and workshops:

- Go to <http://strongermarriage.org> for tips, articles, and to find relationship education classes near you.
- Check out your local Extension Service for relationship education classes and events.

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