

Reducing and Overcoming Conflicts

PURPOSE:

This session will provide us ideas on to how to handle the conflicts that will arise in our daily lives. How people react to conflicts. What causes conflict to happen. How to deal with conflict.

OUTLINE:

It's a natural tendency to avoid conflicts, for few of us enjoy the tension and negative emotions associated with confrontational experiences.

Confrontation, however, doesn't have to equal fighting, anger, and unhappiness. In fact once you gain the necessary skills, conflicts can become a gateway for better understanding your needs and those of your spouse.

Remember within any relationship there will be differences which will lead to conflict.

Conflict is not only unavoidable, but it is necessary within a healthy relationship.

Once you realize that confrontation is unavoidable, you can work on the skills necessary to actually strengthen your relationship through conflict. Confrontation only becomes unhealthy when it turns to anger and makes you feel unsafe in any relationship.

Confrontation should not equal fighting. There are no winners after a fight. In angry conflicts, either both of you win...or both of you loose.

When you first entered into this relationship you appreciated your differences, but as times goes on some of these differences generally will lead into conflict. What started out as, "Wow, you're unique," ends up "Gosh you're different" and eventually will lead to "You're wrong." Consequently, disagreement turns into defensiveness...which in turn becomes anger.

Most people react to conflict in two ways:

They withdraw or they get angry

- 1) They withdraw: When you begin to feel you're wrong or that your belief and views aren't valued, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Feeling unsafe or unworthy of expressing their true feelings can cause someone to hide or withdraw. Thus conflict is never ultimately resolved because feelings are tucked firmly away into a well of resentment.
- 2) They get angry: This type of person tends to attack verbally. Backed into a corner, they may come out swinging. When both parties get angry, they might remain angry. If they don't resolve the conflict, this anger comes out in other ways. If this type of person is involved with a person who withdraws, this anger heightens the other person's feeling of inadequacy.

What causes conflicts? There are generally five main reasons why conflicts exist in the average relationship.

- 1) Power and control - "I'm the boss!" This involves everything from where we will go out to eat to controlling the checkbook. When two people in a relationship are fighting for control, or one is resenting not being able to take control, there will be conflict.
- 2) Individuality - "Look buster, I'm me!" This arises when someone feels like they are losing themselves, their decisions or a right to their own feelings. This also comes up when one person tries to change or manipulate their partner.
- 3) Distance - "Give me some space!" When one person begins pulling away or putting up walls and defenses, they begin to distrust, and the need for self-preservation arises as conflict ensues.
- 4) Distrust - "You know that's not true!" When one or both people feel unsafe expressing their feelings or needs, there's conflict from distrust. This can result from lies or betrayal. Whatever the source, distrust inhabits healthy communication and leads to conflict.
- 5) Unfulfilled needs - "But what about my needs?" Conflict arises when my partner feels that their needs are not being met. For example, they may feel that they are not getting enough attention, love, affection, space, time, help, money, privacy, or privileges.

Relationships are not destroyed by differences, they are destroyed by the unhealthy ways in which we deal with differences. When we encounter conflict, it is the equivalent of approaching a door. When conflict is met with anger or refusal to solve the issue at hand, then that door remains closed...blocking off possible intimacy, and causing emotional damage. When the conflict is met with love and a desire for harmony, then the door is opened to intimacy and a healthy relationship.

The best way of handling conflict is to remain free of anger and blame and full of love and understanding.

What are some of the ways that people use to deal with conflicts?

- 1) Withdraw - when you withdraw you lose out and you don't get your personal or relational needs met, nor does your partner. You are saying, "You are not important enough for me to deal with this conflict." This is a "lose...lose situation."
- 2) Give in - when you give in you don't get your personal needs met, but you do meet your relational needs because you maintain harmony in the relationship. You are saying, "You are more important than me." This is a "I lose and you win situation."
- 3) Compromise - when you compromise you bargain some of your personal needs in order to meet your relational needs. When you compromise you solve the specific issue at hand. You are saying, "Our relationship is important enough that I am willing to sacrifice something." Sometimes it may be necessary to compromise because they may not be enough time to deal with the conflict at that moment. This is a "win - lose...win - lose situation."
- 4) Resolve - when you resolve the conflict you will achieve true intimacy. You have your personal and relational needs met and so does your partner. It is an emotional decision for the better of each other and the relationship itself. You are saying, "Both you and our relationship are important enough to work this out together forever." This is a "win...win situation."

If you don't learn to deal with conflicts and overcome them, you will just become more skilled at tearing each other apart.

Resolving a conflict is a tool that is learned throughout a relationship. For most of us every disagreement teaches us something new about what does and does not work for us.

Some couples get stuck in a negative pattern because it seems to be working for at least one of them.

Never settle for something other than a "WIN...WIN SITUATION!"

IMPROVING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict is inevitable. What matters is how it is handled. Is it handled constructively or destructively? A lot of couples brag because they never have had an argument. Some couples just avoid areas of disagreement to keep from having a disagreement. A lot of couples grew up in a family where anger was not supposed to be expressed, a belief that it was socially unacceptable to express such an emotion.

Some newlyweds have a natural instinct to walk on eggshells around each other. They are afraid to be open with one another because they feel it will be the path that leads to a conflict. What they have not yet discovered is that the more open and honest a couple is with each other, the greater the opportunity they will have for deeper intimacy.

There are generally five mistakes most couples make when dealing with conflicts:

1. *First mistake: **perceiving conflict as “winning” or “loosing.”***
Most disagreements between couples are on issues where there are no right or wrong solutions. Others do involve right and wrong issues. One example of this is a couple that was going out to dinner and a show. Instead of paying a baby-sitter they took their 2 year old daughter to a friend's house who lives on the other side of town. It was a long drive to drop the child off and a long drive to pick her up. They did not get home until after midnight and the husband blamed his wife because it was her idea. She was mad for two days but finally said that he was right and that he won the argument. But her anger proves that no one ever wins an argument. When one spouse wins the other loses.
2. *Second mistake: **assigning blame.***
Creating guilt is not helpful. If you get lost while driving, it is so easy to say, “It’s your fault, because we are lost because you were not watching where you were driving,” or “It is your fault, because you were not looking at the map.” The main thing is to get where you are going without blaming anyone.
3. *Third mistake: **excessive accommodation.***
To avoid arguments and conflicts, some spouses give in too easily, which is unhealthy. Some disagreements are healthy and necessary!
4. *Fourth mistake: **bickering.***
Pick, pick, pick is what some spouses do. One person puts the other down and is attacked in return. The issue is often trivial. The best thing to do is to state an opinion briefly on an objective issue, while avoiding attacking the other person’s character.
5. *Fifth mistake: **unhealthy conflict which leads to abuse.***
There is never an excuse for physical abuse. If it does happen, seek outside help immediately. The problem with physical abuse is that it will only grow worse with time. Many spouses are too forgiving when they are physically beaten. If abuse happens the spouse being abused should leave the house and the other spouse should seek help. Most of the time by one spouse leaving it will make the other spouse go out and get professional help because they do love the one they abuse, but they have a problem that needs guidance from someone trained in that area.

The following is a quiz that each person should take to measure whether he or she “fights dirty.” “Fighting dirty” is often a way to avoid emotional intimacy, or keeping your distance. It also can be a power play, a way to try to “WIN.” It can also be a way of just dumping your emotions on somebody.

To learn whether you keep within the bounds of fair play, take this quiz. Answer **YES** or **NO** to each of the questions below.

1. Refuse to stick to rules you made for handling fights? ___
2. Bring up old problems instead of sticking to the current issues? ___
3. Drag in references to in-laws, parents, children, etc.? ___
4. Call your partner names, such as “stupid”? ___
5. Yell at your partner? ___
6. Give your partner the silent treatment? ___
7. Leave the room to avoid conflict? ___
8. Use obscene language, knowing it offends your partner? ___
9. Quarrel under the influence of drugs or alcohol? ___
10. Try to physically intimidate your partner? ___
11. Deliberately push your partner’s “buttons”? ___
12. Lie about facts or withhold information? ___
13. Refuse to listen attentively while preparing your own rebuttal? ___
14. Refuse to accept responsibility for your share of what went wrong? ___
15. Encourage friends and/or relatives to take sides? ___
16. Fight in public? ___
17. Refuse to make a sincere apology? ___
18. Hold a grudge? Seek revenge? ___
19. Confide in others about fights when you know your partner would not approve? ___
20. Keep fighting about the same problems over and over without seeking a true solution? ___

To score this quiz on how to be fair when you fight, total the number of “NO” answers you have. Then check below to see if you are fighting fair.

___ 16-20. Your fights help clear the air and come to a better understanding. Still, work on becoming a “20”.

___ 11-15. You’re on your way to solving problems amicably. But you have work to do.

___ 5-10. You are struggling to handle conflict. Try to improve relationship skills through a course in communication.

___ 0-4. You might use fighting to avoid emotional intimacy. Take a relationships course or consider seeing a counselor.

*Reflection Questions for Couple Sharing
Reducing Conflicts*

1. Is there one particular conflict that seems to never get resolved in your relationship? If so, what?

2. How do you generally react to conflict? (get angry, withdraw, etc.) Try to explain why you react this way!

3. *"Conflict is unavoidable. It is necessary for a growing, healthy relationship."* What does this mean to you?
