

### 1. Where does conflict come from?

The potential for conflict always exists in a relationship. Each of us comes into our relationship with our own perception of reality based upon our belief systems. Our belief systems come from our life experiences which we learned earlier through our families, peers, teachers, the media, former relationships, etc. Since a relationship consists of two people, the likelihood that each partner's belief system will be identical to their partner's is highly unlikely. This does not mean that you are with the wrong person; only that you need each be respectful of each other and learn to communicate, compromise, and understand. Even very compatible couples will have some disagreements at times.

#### Some Myths and Facts about Conflict

**Myth:** In a good relationship, there is no conflict. Everything is smooth. **Fact:** A certain amount of conflict is perfectly normal in most relationships.

**Myth:** Conflict is about who's right and who wins. **Fact:** Conflict should ideally lead to compromise and better understanding.

**Myth:** Anger means an argument is inevitable. **Fact:** Anger is sometimes appropriate but needs to be addressed

**Myth:** If we disagree a lot, maybe we're just not right for each other. **Fact:** It's how constructively you disagree that is most important.

**Myth:** Conflict is always destructive and will lead to the end of a relationship. **Fact:** Conflict can lead to deeper understanding, intimacy and friendship.

### 2. Assertive and Aggressive Behavior

To explore the differences between healthy conflict and destructive conflict, it is helpful to define the differences between assertive behavior and aggressive behavior.

**Aggressive** behavior: going after what you want forcefully, with urgency and with no regard for the feelings or needs of others. This behavior is disrespectful and self oriented.

**Assertive** behavior: going after what you want with tolerance, flexibility, understanding, and respect for the feelings and needs of others. This behavior is respectful and focuses on nurturing the relationship.

As you might suspect, assertive behavior is an important part of healthy conflict, while aggressive behavior is present in [destructive conflict](#) .

### 3. What does destructive conflict look like?

1. One or both partners interrupt each other a lot.
2. Yelling, threats and intimidation may be present.
3. Withdrawal or unwillingness to talk.

4. The past is often thrown up and used to make your point.
5. Judgment and criticism are present.
6. Trying to manipulate.
7. At least one person feels afraid or intimidated.

**Hint:** It's entirely possible to have a conflict characterized by respect, positive change, and a win-win resolution.

The next section discusses guidelines that, if followed, increase the likelihood that your conflict will not be destructive.

#### **4. What are some guidelines for healthy conflict?**

1. Be clear, but stay away from criticism, sarcasm and name-calling.
2. Be respectful even though you're angry.
3. Use "I statements" (see the [communication guidelines](#) section for more info)
4. Stay with one issue until it's resolved; don't drag up the past.
5. Stay open to compromising.
6. Try to put yourself in your partner's shoes.
7. Be open to change, even if you don't know what the change will be.

If you are still too angry to follow these guidelines, you may want to try a "TIME-OUT" first. The next section gives instructions for taking a TIME-OUT that works!

**Hint:** Most couple therapists find the "TIME-OUT" skill essential to couples when conflict becomes destructive.

#### **5. How does a "TIME-OUT" work?**

There are five steps to a successful TIME-OUT: Discuss all steps beforehand (prior to next disagreement). Go over all steps together and agree that this is workable for both of you and that one or both of you will initiate these steps the next time something gets too intense. Initially, you just need to be willing to try it.

**1. Calling for a TIME-OUT:** When a disagreement occurs and one or both partners are upset to the point that the discussion is becoming non-productive, possibly destructive, one partner (let's say Partner A) needs to call for a "TIME-OUT". The initial communication is something like this : Partner A : "I need us to take a "TIME-OUT" with this discussion. I'm on overload. I do want us to resolve this and I do care about how you feel, but I'm too upset to talk about this now.

**2. Say where you are going and when you'll be back:** I'm going to: (a) take a walk, (b) go and cool off, (c) I'm going to run some errands, (d) going over to Sue's / Fred's for a bit, etc. I'll be back by (for example: 4:00 o'clock--set a specific time. This piece is essential. Otherwise Partner B will just feel like you are putting them off.)

**3. Suggest when you will be ready to talk.** Partner A continues: Let's talk about this (a) tonight when the kids are asleep, (b) when I get back from the errands, (c) tomorrow over lunch, (d) (indicate another time that is mutually convenient but no longer than 24 hrs later.

4. **Return when you said you would:** Then Partner A needs to come back from their walk, or errands, or whatever, no later than promised. I'll be back by 5:00 means, by 5:00!

5. **Approach your partner to resume the talk within 24 hours:** Partner A should also be the one to come back around within 24 hours and approach his/her partner to resume discussing the issue. If Partner B is busy or cannot make time when approached, then Partner B is responsible for suggesting another time that would work.

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict in a relationship is virtually inevitable. In itself, conflict isn't a problem; how it's handled, however, can bring people together or tear them apart. Poor communication, disagreements and misunderstandings can be a source of anger and distance, or a springboard to a stronger relationship and happier future. Next time you're dealing with conflict, keep these effective communication tips in mind and you can create a more positive outcome.

**Difficulty:** Average

**Time Required:** Just a little extra time.

**Here's How:**

1. **Stay Focused:** Sometimes it's tempting to bring up past seemingly related conflicts when dealing with current ones. Unfortunately, this often clouds the issue and makes finding mutual understanding and a solution to *the current issue* less likely, and makes the whole discussion more taxing and even confusing. Try not to bring up past hurts or other topics. Stay focused on the present, your feelings, understanding one another and finding a solution.
2. **Listen Carefully:** People often *think* they're listening, but are really thinking about what they're going to say next when the other person stops talking. While it might be difficult, try really listening to what your partner is saying. Don't interrupt. Don't get defensive. Just hear them and reflect back what they're saying so they know you've heard. Then you'll understand them better and they'll be more willing to listen to you.
3. **Try To See Their Point of View:** In a conflict, most of us primarily want to feel heard and understood. We talk a lot about our point of view to get the other person to see things our way. Ironically, if we all do this all the time, there's little focus on the other person's point of view, and nobody feels understood. Try to see the other side, and then you can better explain yours. Others will more likely be willing to listen if they feel heard.
4. **Respond to Criticism with Empathy:** When someone comes at you with criticism, it's easy to feel that they're wrong, and get defensive. While criticism is hard to hear, and often exaggerated or colored by the other person's emotions, it's important to listen for the other person's pain and respond with empathy for their feelings. Also, look for what's true in what they're saying; that can be valuable information for you.
5. **Own What's Yours:** Realize that personal responsibility is a strength, not a weakness, and admit when you're wrong. If you both share some responsibility in a conflict (which is usually the case), look for and admit to what's yours. It diffuses the situation, sets a good example, and shows maturity. It also often inspires the other person to respond in kind, leading you both closer to mutual understanding and a solution.

6. **Use “I” Messages:** Rather than saying things like, “*You* really messed up here,” begin statements with “I”, and make them about yourself and your feelings, like, “I feel frustrated when this happens.” It’s less accusatory, sparks less defensiveness, and helps the other person understand your point of view rather than feeling attacked.
7. **Look for Compromise** Instead of trying to ‘win’ the argument, look for solutions that meet everybody’s needs. Either compromise, or a new solution that gives you both what you want most, this focus is much more effective than one person getting what they want at the other’s expense.
8. **Take a Time-Out:** Sometimes tempers get heated and it’s just too difficult to continue a discussion without it becoming an argument or a fight. If you feel yourself or your partner starting to get too angry to be constructive, or showing some destructive communication patterns, it’s okay to take a break from the discussion until you both cool off. Sometimes good communication means knowing when to take a break.
9. **Don’t Give Up:** While taking a break from the discussion is sometimes a good idea, always come back to it. If you both approach the situation with a constructive attitude, mutual respect, and a willingness to see the other’s point of view or at least find a solution, you can make progress toward the goal of a resolution to the conflict. Unless it’s time to give up on the relationship, don’t give up on communication.
10. **Ask For Help If You Need It:** If one or both of you has trouble staying respectful during conflict, or if you’ve tried resolving conflict with your partner on your own and the situation just doesn’t seem to be improving, you might benefit from a few sessions with a therapist. Couples counseling or family therapy can provide help with altercations and teach skills to resolve future conflict. If your partner doesn’t want to go, you can still often benefit from going alone.

**Tips:**

1. Remember that the goal of effective communication skills should be mutual understanding and finding a solution that pleases both parties, not ‘winning’ the argument or ‘being right’.
2. This doesn’t work in every situation, but sometimes (if you’re having a conflict in a romantic relationship) it helps to hold hands or stay physically connected as you talk. This can remind you that you still care about each other and generally support one another.
3. Keep in mind that it’s important to remain respectful of the other person, even if you don’t like their actions.

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