



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER *for*
HEALTHY MARRIAGE *and* FAMILIES

Strong Families:

Tips for Healthy Conflict Management



Love is saying “I feel differently” instead of “you’re wrong.”

Anonymous

Conflict is natural. Everyone experiences it in their relationships and daily lives. No couple is perfect and agrees on everything or gets along with each other all the time. What’s important is that healthy couples learn ways to manage these conflicts and negative feelings so that these situations don’t get worse.

Remember that when a couple fights, they are usually not the only ones who are affected by the conflict. A healthy relationship between parents can have a positive impact on their children’s well-being, behavior, and future relationships. On the other hand, when parents are stressed out, their children can suffer. Children also learn by watching their parents, so it’s important that they see their parents dealing with conflict in healthy ways.¹

Conflict doesn’t just happen in romantic relationships. Learning how to manage conflicts, large or small, will help you get along better with employers, co-workers, friends, and extended family members.²

Five Rules for Constructive Conflict

Our responses can sometimes cause simple disagreements to spiral out of control. If you and your partner are having a conflict, follow these five tips to try to keep things positive and manage the situation in a healthy way.

Verbal, emotional, or physical abuse is never part of healthy conflict management. To learn more, visit the National Domestic Violence Hotline at <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/> or call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), available 24/7.

1. Don’t Send Destructive Messages

In the heat of the moment, destructive conflict can creep into disagreements. Always remember that these types of destructive messages will only make things worse, never better:

- **Criticism** involves attacking your partner to portray yourself as being right and the other person as being wrong, often using statements such as, “You always” or “You never.” Statements with these phrases are rarely accurate and should be avoided.³
- **Defensiveness** happens when you see yourself as the victim who’s being attacked. You may think “The problem isn’t me, it’s you!” Defensiveness may include making excuses, denying responsibility, and sarcasm. Although these reactions might be normal, defensiveness will keep you from being able to deal with the issue at hand because you are not open to suggestions or trying to understand your partner’s perspective.⁴
- **Contempt** involves attacking and intentionally putting your partner down through name calling (such as saying fat, stupid, ugly, or lazy) or body language (such as sneering, eye rolling, curling upper lip, or rude gestures). Contempt is the

most toxic and destructive way to try and deal with conflict.⁵

- **Stonewalling** is the “whatever” moment in the relationship when one partner stops caring and checks out by refusing to communicate.

2. Soften Your Startup

If you have something important that you want to talk about, don't start the conversation by immediately attacking your partner. Use a soft startup to help the other person feel less defensive and more willing to talk. If you feel too angry to discuss something calmly, don't discuss it at all until you've calmed down. Here are some ways to soften your start-up:

- **Complain, don't blame.** No matter how wrong you feel your partner is, don't approach them with criticisms. Try saying “Honey, it's frustrating when we forget to take the trash out on time. How can we remember to get it out in the future?” instead of “I can't believe you forgot to take the trash out again! You are so forgetful!”⁶
- **Make statements that start with “I” instead of “You.”** Start your sentences with “I” so you don't put your partner into a defensive position. Say, “I don't feel like you are listening right now” instead of “You're not listening to me.”

3. Soothe Yourself and Your Partner

You don't have to get angry about your differences. You can calm yourself and your partner by using time-outs, speaking in a soft voice, speaking non-defensively, smiling, using appropriate humor, relaxing, or thinking positively about your partner and your situation.⁷

4. Compromise

You don't always have to have things your way. Take other people's preferences and opinions seriously, resist the urge to be defensive, and

respectfully listen to others. Compromise is a two-way street; it is reasonable to expect your partner to consider your opinion and preferences as well.⁸

5. Accept and Forgive

Individuals in healthy relationships accept their partners' differences and forgive each other when appropriate. Understand that no matter how many similarities you and your partner share, you will have some differences of opinion and choosing to be forgiving can strengthen your family and relationship.⁹ However, if you or your partner has a pattern of saying hurtful things during an argument and expecting to be forgiven after, this may indicate a more serious issue.

Couples can't avoid all conflict and that's okay. In fact, conflict is a normal part of all relationships. By following these tips and openly communicating with loved ones, you can learn and develop healthy conflict management skills. These skills will deepen your family's connections and help you grow closer together. For more serious conflicts, you might consider counseling through your clergy or community mental health provider. ■

SOURCE: Adapted from Harris, V. (2014). *Tips for service providers: Healthy conflict management*. Fairfax, VA: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families (Product #072). Available at <http://tinyurl.com/providers-cm-p>

NOTES

- 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Marshall, J. (2014). *Conflict management mini-course*. Fairfax, VA: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. Available at <https://training.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org>
- 6 *Manage conflict: The six skills*. The Gottman Institute Relationship Blog. Retrieved from <http://www.gottmanblog.com/2012/12/manage-conflict-six-skills.html>
- 7, 8, 9, 10 Marshall, J. (2014). *Conflict management mini-course*. Fairfax, VA: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. Available at <https://training.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org>

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