

Tip Sheet

Tips for Service Providers: Healthy Conflict Management



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“A good marriage is the union of two good forgivers.” Ruth Bell Graham

Negotiating conflict in constructive ways can help reduce negativity and preserve a healthy communication system that promotes appreciation, admiration, trust, and respect in a couple’s relationship or marriage.

Potential Conflict Issues

A number of general issues can provide the context and trigger for conflicts in relationships, including:¹

- Gender and perspectives;
- Commitment, trust, and loyalty;
- Power and control tactics;
- Money and financial;
- Sexual and ideologies;
- Autonomy and privacy;
- Children and parenting; and
- Health, nutrition, and health care.

Conflicts are usually triggered by one of these issues, when one person sends a critical message to his/her partner. This sets off a series of defensive responses that often results in increased criticism and contempt on both sides. As the conflict escalates, one or both partners may send messages that invalidate the other and destabilize the appreciation, admiration, trust, and respect they share. The stability of the relationship can also become fragile when one or both partners make a habit of checking out or refusing to communicate.

All couples have disagreements and conflicts, but each person needs to develop the skills to “fight fairly” so that negativity does not destabilize the relationship. Couples should learn constructive conflict management skills so they can discuss a frustration—accepting accountability and responsibility for the complaint by not becoming defensive—and manage conflict in a constructive way.

Helping Couples Develop Conflict Management Skills

Encourage clients to assess how they are currently handling conflicts. This will help them

understand what they are already doing well and identify which of the constructive conflict management skills they need to develop. Once they understand the problem areas in their conflict management, work with them to learn and use constructive conflict

management skills. Couples and individuals may even want to track their habits after each conflict they experience to better understand how they are using the skills.

The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families has a virtual library with free resources. Visit www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org/Library and use the keywords “interpersonal relationships,” “conflicts,” and “conflict resolution” to access tip sheets, worksheets, activities, and more that you can use with your clients to help them develop constructive conflict management skills.

Strong Families: Tips for Healthy Conflict Management
A companion tip sheet is available to share with families interested in learning about healthy conflict management skills: <http://tinyurl.com/families-cm-p>

Nine Constructive Conflict Management Skills¹:

- **Calm Down:** Call “time out” to calm everyone involved when conflict becomes heated and flooded with emotion. The time out period should last for at least 25 minutes before the discussion resumes.
- **Complain:** Use “I” messages to introduce an issue, such as “This is how I feel when (insert behavior) happens, because . . .”
- **Speak Non-Defensively:** Deescalate negativity by using a soft voice, lowering the intensity of the expressed emotion, and taking care to use verbal and non-verbal messages that promote respectful communication.
- **Validate:** Send and receive verbal and non-verbal messages that communicate that others are heard, understood, emotionally safe, appreciated, and capable.
- **Overlearn:** Make these communication skills a habit so they become second nature during conflicts and discussions.
- **Don’t Criticize:** Never attack someone’s personality or character with verbal or non verbal messages that suggest the person is not valued or capable. For example, never imply someone is, or call a person, stupid, ignorant, or lazy.
- **Don’t Become Defensive:** Verbal and non-verbal messages that indicate a refusal to take responsibility for one’s actions, including making excuses, denying fault, and deflecting accountability, will trigger the cycle of conflict.
- **Don’t Show Contempt:** Avoid sending verbal and non-verbal messages that escalate conflict through unhealthy strategies such as sarcasm, threats, name-calling, and rolling the eyes.
- **Don’t Stonewall:** This happens when an individual checks out of interactions and intentionally refuses to engage in healthy conflict resolution.

Sources

¹ Adapted from Gottman, J. M. (1994a). *What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital process and marital outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Adapted from Gottman, J. M. (1994b). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Fireside.

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