

Dealing with Conflict in Relationships

All relationships - even the very best of them- have conflict. That is a normal part of having two people work out a life together. But there are good ways to work out differences - and there are bad ways. **Learn to live with things that cannot change.** You may wish that your partner was different in many ways. Some of those things simply cannot change. Learn to accept that. Be glad that you can bring to your partnership some qualities that your partner does not have. Be glad that your partner can bring qualities that you do not have.

Start a relationship discussion at a time when you want to strengthen your relationship

. If you are feeling angry or tired and want to correct or hurt your partner, it is not a good time to start a discussion. If your partner is tired or frustrated, save the discussion until later.

Many relationship discussions get started late at night when both partners are tired. We shouldn't let our tiredness be our message. Save the discussion until you are rested.

Do not dwell on your complaints

. Sometimes we feel irritated about things in our relationship. We list our complaints and stew about them. By the time we bring up our problem we may have talked ourselves into being mad. Rather than make big complaints, we can make requests along the way.

Make requests

. There are some statements that do NOT motivate change: "You never help me. You don't seem to notice anyone's needs but your own." There are more inviting statements: "I'm very stressed right now. I wonder if you could help me by getting dinner, helping me cleanup the house, or helping the children with homework."

Rather than argue about details, find common ground

. In any disagreement it is easy to get stuck arguing about who did what and why. Don't waste your time dealing with such issues. Instead, focus on ways you can help each other.

When people feel attacked and angry, they do not think as clearly as when they are calm. We can do things to help ourselves and our partners feel more calm. We can start discussions without attack: "I would like your ideas on an issue." We can look for solutions rather than accusations: "Do you think it would help if . . . ?" If we are feeling too frustrated, we may need to reschedule our discussions: "I need some time to think about what you are saying. Could we talk about this tomorrow?"

Confrontation is not a very good change agent. John Gottman has observed that the only way to get people to change is by accepting them as they are. Conflict will happen, but love makes the difference.

Even relationships that seem unhappy often become very satisfying over time if both partners prevent anger and resentment from taking over. In fact, differences can help us grow and help us build a better relationship.

Applications:

Most couples argue about the same things year after year. They make no progress in solving certain problems and may even get more entrenched. Think of any problems or issues that have recurred in your relationship.

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Which of them are unresolvable?

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Which of the unresolvable differences can you simply choose to accept?

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Which of the unresolvable differences can you act to minimize or manage?

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What tools will you use to help you deal with unresolvable differences? Humour? Patience? Distraction?

Which of your problems can be resolved by working together? Have you found ways in the past to have a better relationship as a result of your discussions? What makes your discussions better? When you have a disagreement, look for an opportunity to make your relationship stronger. (For example, "If we had a few minutes every week to have fun together, I think it would bring us closer.")

What is your reaction to disagreements with your partner? Is it possible to think about disagreements in a more positive way? (For example, "We both have strong personalities and sometimes we will clash. But we still love each other.")

Are you actively doing things to enlarge and strengthen the base of your relationship? Do you spend time together doing fun things? Do you take an interest in your partner's activities?

John Gottman has written an excellent book that includes a chapter on conflict called, "Solve your solvable problems." The book is called

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.

If you want additional ideas to help you work through differences with your partner, this book can provide practical ideas.