



HEALTHY
RELATIONSHIPS
INITIATIVE

Toolkit for Couples

Tip Sheet #3: Keys for Effective Conflict Management

1. **Understand conflict management styles.** Every person has a unique approach to managing conflict. Some people prefer resolve differences as quickly as possible, while others prefer to put conflict-based discussions off as long as possible. Some people engage in intense arguments, while others discuss conflicts through calm, logical discussions. Partners who share similar conflict management styles are more likely to be satisfied with the outcomes of conflict situations, while partners who use very different styles often face major challenges related to managing conflict. Take time to understand your own and your partner's conflict management styles, and then consider how you can work together to address conflict in ways that feel comfortable and safe for both of you.
2. **Remain calm and self-focused.** As much as you are able, remain calm in the face of conflict so you can stay in control of your behaviors and words. By staying calm, you can monitor your reactions to the conflict and notice when you are no longer able to participate productively in the conversations. If you feel overwhelmed, ask for a time-limited time-out so you can calm down, such as to take some deep breaths and think encouraging, positive thoughts. In any conflict, consider your own role and what you can do to change the situation, especially since you can't control your partner's words or actions. If your partner crosses any lines into disrespectful or abusive words or behaviors, consider what steps you can do to safely remove yourself from the situation until you can decide whether and when it is safe for you to revisit the conflict again.
3. **Establish ground rules for fighting.** Develop ground rules for when you disagree. Discuss the types of comments or behaviors that are unacceptable during conflict, as well as how you'd like to act toward one another when you fight. Examples of ground rules include no name calling; no screaming; no using violence or threats; and agreeing to take turns listening carefully to one another.
4. **When you disagree, focus only on the current issue.** Deal with one issue at a time, and result each issue separately. When couples bring up several issues during one disagreement, they quickly become overwhelmed, and the argument can spiral quickly out of control. Times of conflict are not the best times to bring up the past. Remain focused on a single, current issue to promote successful conflict resolution.
5. **Avoid destructive communication patterns.** Heated moments of conflict often lead people to say hurtful things to their partners. However, hurtful comments can't be taken back, and the sting they leave behind endures long after a fight is over. Negative comments toward your partner don't

help to resolve conflicts and don't help your partner feel any better toward you. Instead, they can tear you apart individually and as a couple. Monitor yourself during conflicts to ensure that you don't use hurtful words or actions. If you do something hurtful, have the courage to acknowledge your error and offer a sincere apology. Then, recommit to using more adaptive communication strategies through the rest of the conversations.

6. **Use positive communication skills.** Perhaps the most important communication skill to use during conflict is listening. During conflict, people tend to be more concerned with convincing their partners they are right than they are with listening to them. However, if you and your partner go back and forth without listening, you'll move even further from resolving your conflict. Listen to one another during conflict, wait patiently for your turn to speak, and aim to understand each other, even you don't necessarily agree with your partner.
7. **Never allow physical, emotional, or verbal abuse to become part of your conflict.** Abuse takes many forms, such as physical violence or intimidation, verbal aggression, or emotional attacks. Abuse happens in all types of couple relationships, it can have devastating effects for victims. Your relationship cannot provide safety or security if you feel threatened by your partner or if your partner feels threatened by you. Relationships that are built on the control and intimidation of one partner by the other are not healthy for either person. Your relationship should be a safe place for both of you, so take any form of violence seriously, and seek help from professionals in your community to determine your best options for seeking safety.
8. **Seek professional help when necessary.** Some conflicts are difficult for couples to resolve on their own. Unresolved conflicts cause great stress in a relationship. Fortunately, there are professionals to whom you can turn for help. Qualified couples counselors and therapists are trained to help people resolve problems in their relationships, and they provide guidance and insight that is specific to your situation. Find someone both you and your partner trust. You can seek counseling at any stage in your relationship, and it is best not to wait until your relationship is in a crisis to seek help.
9. **Develop strategies to manage unsolvable issues.** Most couples face some issues that they will never be able to resolve completely. In these cases, it's more important to figure out healthy, constructive ways to manage these unsolvable issues than it is to force a solution. On some issues, you and your partner may have to accept that you don't agree. It is normal and understandable for you and your partner not to agree on every issue. Respect each other, and seek alternative ways to live with your differences.
10. **Try to learn and grow from every conflict.** Each conflict presents an opportunity for your relationship to grow stronger. Conflicts are part of the process through which relationships must go to build a stronger connection between partners. Make every effort to learn about yourself, your partner, and your relationship through every disagreement. After you resolve a conflict, discuss the following question with your partner: "What can we learn from this disagreement?"