

## Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways

### Introduction

Conflict is a normal part of all couple relationships, arising from differences between individuals as well as disagreements about situations and events. In addition, all couples face stressors, individually and as a family, which can create a context within which conflict arises. Some differences may reflect *solvable* problems—those that can be addressed in some mutually agreed upon way. Other issues may be *perpetual* problems—those that will likely always be present in the relationship and cannot be easily resolved; perpetual problems may reflect differences in core values, personal preferences, or individual habits. With such issues, conflict may not be easily resolved, but it can be *managed*.



It is important for couples to learn how to manage conflict, because the inability to do so can have negative consequences for the safety and well-being of couples, individuals, and children. Four negative thoughts and patterns of interaction have been identified that, when present, indicate a couple is struggling to manage conflict well in the relationship and may be headed for divorce or relationship dissolution:

- *Criticism*—personal attacks or accusations on a partner’s character with the intent to blame and make the partner appear wrong;
- *Defensiveness*—warding off perceived attacks and criticisms by denying responsibility, cross-complaining, or refusing to consider the partner’s suggestions;
- *Contempt*—attacking a partner’s sense of self-worth with the intention to insult and belittle him or her; and
- *Stonewalling*— completely withdrawing from one’s partner and refusing to communicate.

Exposure to high levels of unmanaged conflict can be harmful for children. Conversely, exposure to conflict that parents successfully manage may help children learn problem-solving skills. The *Manage* domain focuses on how to deal with conflict in order to create and maintain stable, healthy relationships. The following content provides some strategies for successfully managing conflict, including remedies to the negative interaction patterns previously

### What “Managing” Looks Like

- Understanding that there cannot always be agreement
- Using soft start-ups: share concerns in a calm, respectful tone
- Avoiding criticism and defensiveness
- Stopping conflict before it escalates
- Taking “time outs” but coming back to talk
- Soothing and supporting each other
- Being open to forgiveness
- Maintaining emotional and physical safety

described. As noted below, *successful conflict management should never entail enduring abuse of any kind.*

### Managing Negative Emotions During Conflict

Unmanaged negative emotions can undermine healthy patterns of couple communication and lead to poor relationship quality and individual health. In addition, parents' poor management of stress and emotions in the couple relationship can create an unhealthy environment for children. Thus, learning to regulate negative emotions during conflict is important for individual, couple, and family well-being.



- **Recognize Signs of Negative Emotional Arousal.** A real or perceived threat, such as a criticism, initiates a reaction in the body that limits one's capacity to listen, talk, and handle conflict in a healthy way. This physiological reaction can lead to feeling overwhelmed (or *flooded*) as well as aggressive actions. Educators can help couples develop an awareness of the stress response and its effects on each partner and the relationship. Raising awareness of the processes involved in emotion-regulation can lead to learning and applying both cognitive (thinking) and behavioral strategies for enhancing an individual's ability to manage stress and to regulate negative emotional arousal in ways that are healthy for the individual and the relationship.
- **Use Emotion-Regulation Strategies.** The way partners respond to each other in the face of stress and negative emotions influences situation outcomes. Some responses make the situation worse by increasing negative feelings. In contrast, positive reactions to conflict or stress can have a calming effect on the other person. Healthy couples are aware of and able to use a variety of cognitive and behavioral self-soothing strategies during arguments.
- **Maintain Positive Thinking Strategies.** When there is a preponderance of positive interactions in a relationship, an occasional cross word or misunderstanding will not be as damaging to the relationship as compared to instances when positive behaviors and

### *Integrating "Manage" into Child Welfare Services*

- Help to normalize low levels of conflict by telling clients that all couples argue—but that it is *how* they argue that is important and contributes to relationship satisfaction. Just knowing that all couples face similar challenges can help partners feel better about their situations and feel like the issues they face are not insurmountable.
- Individuals, couples, and co-parents can be taught to practice the skills listed here. For example, they can avoid harsh start-ups and, instead, think of ways to re-state their needs using soft start-ups.
- Clients can consider ways they can successfully regulate their emotions and manage personal stress and which of these could be used during relationship conflict. For example, if a person likes to take a walk to let off steam, they can tell their partner that they'd like to take a 20 minute walk to cool off before attempting to further address the issue at hand.

interactions are rare. Observations of couples who maintain high levels of positivity show that disagreements are naturally handled more easily and more respectfully. These actions are further addressed in *Care* and *Share*.

### **Adopting a Willingness to Accept Influence**

Partners who accept influence from one another – those who listen to one another’s advice and are willing to change their ways – report much more effective conflict management. Accepting influence is a sign of mutual respect and is representative of power-sharing and joint decision-making. Accepting influence is not about “giving in” reluctantly, but rather treating one’s partner with respect, sharing power and co-decision-making.

- **Empathy.** Empathy is both a cognitive and an emotional process that involves recognizing the feelings of the other person and a willingness to see the other’s view. Empathy can both enhance one’s ability to manage emotional arousal as well as reduce feelings of disengagement and the desire to fight.
- **Team Decision-Making.** A willingness and ability to make decisions together is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability. When partners have effective decision-making strategies, they are better able to recognize individual strengths and defer to each other, thereby promoting collaboration and teamwork. Partners who have difficulty making decisions together tend to be more competitive, which can lead to win-lose ways of thinking.

### **Strategies for Regulating Emotions During Conflict**

- *Establish clear rules of engagement* – these rules establish what actions, comments, and processes are appropriate and inappropriate during times of conflict.
- *Employ repair attempts to deal with conflict* – a repair attempt is any statement or action that prevents negativity from escalating out of control. Examples of these include speaking in a soft voice, smiling, using humor, using non-defensive listening, giving the partner a hug, or apologizing.
- *Take a “time out”* – time outs are mutually agreed upon times to allow each individual the opportunity to calm down before re-engaging later to address a difference or challenge. Time outs do not provide opportunities to completely avoid an issue or encourage sustained emotional disengagement.
- *Use ‘softened’ start-ups* – a soft start-up involves talking about a difference of opinion or an issue in a way that is sensitive to the partner’s perspective. Starting a conversation in this manner specifically avoids criticism, blame, and contempt and reduces the likelihood of defensiveness from the partner.

### **Why “Manage” Matters to Child Welfare Services**

- Children who see parents engage in conflict or violence may be more likely to exhibit similar behaviors. Children need to be exposed to adults who can successfully manage conflict so that they may learn how to do so with friends, family members, and future romantic partners.
- Parents can also learn how to speak more “softly” toward their children, as well as to their romantic partners. Getting in the habit of using gentle or soft start-ups with all family members can promote a more respectful, positive family environment—one in which children feel comfortable and safe to express their needs and share their thoughts and beliefs.

## Accepting Differences and Using Forgiveness

**Accept Differences.** All couples, no matter how many similarities they share, will have some differences of opinion, taste, and belief. Individuals in healthy relationships develop a basic acceptance of or tolerance for partners' personalities and preferences. As some differences will likely be present throughout a relationship, learning to manage – and not necessarily resolve – these issues is important for maintaining a lasting relationship. Accepting a partner the way s/he is and adjusting expectations are two of the best ways to allow a person the space to change. Accepting a partner and supporting each other's growth and change contribute to a satisfying relationship.



**Forgiveness.** By displaying forgiveness, an individual is less motivated to think or act negatively in response to the offender. It is important to recognize that forgiveness does not imply denying or forgetting about a transgression, accepting or excusing an offense, or opening the door for the person to hurt them again. Forgiveness is never something an individual can be required to do; it is something freely granted by the individual who was offended. The benefits for a relationship marked by healthy forgiveness include higher levels of commitment, effective conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction.

## Maintaining Emotional and Physical Safety

Personal safety – represented by the absence of fear of physical or emotional violence in a relationship – is a foundational component of a healthy, stable relationship. An immediate danger sign for any relationship is when individuals are unable to manage conflict without the personal safety of one or both individuals being threatened. Managing conflict never requires the use of force, threats, or harm. It is important that educators understand the signs of intimate partner violence and have response plans in place when working with couples where safety may be a concern.

## Summary

The aim in stable, satisfying relationships is not the elimination of all conflict, but rather the effective management of it. The aforementioned strategies represent various methods that couples can use to help manage conflict. By employing these processes, disagreements and conflict can provide opportunities for couples to deepen their connection and grow closer together, rather than cause a divide in a relationship.

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