

## Dealing with differences in healthy ways

### Conflict is Normal in a Relationship

Every relationship involves some level of conflict and stress; it's a natural part of relating to another person. However, there are many things that you can do as a couple to reduce this stress and improve the way you handle conflict. Learning constructive conflict management is very important to avoiding unnecessary distress in your relationship. Here are a few helpful things to remember:

- **Differences are a normal part of relationships** – you are two different people after all! Don't expect to resolve all of your differences.
- **Accepting your partner the way he or she is** and adjusting your expectations of him or her are two of the best ways to allow him or her the space to change.
- **Putting yourself in your partner's shoes** will help you to be more understanding of his or her point of view. Try to focus on how he or she might be feeling rather than just trying to get your point across.
- **Try to focus on the positive aspects of the relationship.** The more conflict couples have, the more likely they will stew on the issue – leading to even more negative thoughts.

### Parental Conflict Can Be Harmful to Kids!

The level and intensity of the conflict between parents and whether or not the conflict is resolved has the most influence on the child. It is unrealistic to never fight in front of your children. What is important is that you pay attention to *how* you are handling the conflict and *what* you are modeling to the child. Be patient with each other and show forgiveness and compromise so children learn these skills.



#### There are several ways that children respond to negative conflict:

- Acting out
- Turning inward
- Trouble interacting well with others
- Trouble concentrating
- Poor academic performance

*Watch for these signs and be aware of what you are exposing your children to during times of conflict.*

### Managing Stress in Conflict

- **Maintain a positive environment.** Try to make emotional “deposits” in your partner’s love bank; tell them what you love about them or why you’re thankful for them.
- **Avoid harmful patterns of interaction.** Avoid criticism, insults, defensiveness, and ignoring. Instead, listen and speak gently and honestly.
- **See your partner in a positive light.** During times of conflict, take time to think about why you value and love your partner. This will help you to see things more positively.
- **Always, always, always maintain emotional and physical safety.**

## Regulating your emotions

Remember these three tips when trying to regulate your emotions:

1. Identify what is causing the emotion you are feeling so that you can be prepared the next time it comes up. Think about the emotions you experience and how you are expressing them. Are you overreacting?
2. If necessary, practice soothing behaviors to calm down during times of stress (such as taking deep breaths or walking away from the conflict for a moment).
3. Practice managing your emotions together as a couple to promote connectedness.

## Use SPEAK skills when you are sharing your thoughts, feelings, or concerns with your partner.

- **Start with a positive.** Start by saying something positive about your concern. Long-lasting relationships have 5 positive interactions for every 1 negative interaction; really good and happy relationships have 20 positive interactions to every 1 negative interaction.
- **Pay attention to what you say and how you say it.** Be careful about the words you use, your tone of voice, and your body language. You are more likely to be listened to if you speak in a gentle, non-threatening way.
- **Explain how you feel, using details.** Share how something makes you feel and what specific situations have upset you. Use an “I” statement to take charge of your own feelings. Name the specific behavior that concerns you and how that behavior makes you feel. For example: I feel frustrated when you say you will clean the house but you don’t.
- **Avoid trigger words, like always and never.** Trigger words are words that can quickly turn a conversation into a fight. Everyone has their own set of trigger words as well. Recognize these words and avoid using them.
- **Keep it brief; then give your partner a chance to paraphrase.** Briefly share your concerns with your partner, and then allow your partner a chance to paraphrase what you said.

## Use HEAR skills when you are listening to your partner share thoughts, feelings, or concerns.

- **Honor your partner’s thoughts and feelings.** Honoring your partner is about making your partner feel valued and showing respect for his or her thoughts and feelings. Show your partner that you value him or her by listening and focusing on what your partner is saying, not what you want to say next. *When using the HEAR skills you are only listening to your partner’s viewpoint, not sharing your own.*
- **Empathize: Put yourself in your partner’s shoes.** Empathizing with your partner means that you understand and can imagine how your partner might be feeling. Show your partner that you respect his or her feelings as being real and valid.
- **Allow a difference of opinion.** Even if you disagree with your partner, your job as the listener is only to listen to what your partner is saying and to repeat back what you hear. Don’t judge your partner or share how you feel.
- **Repeat respectfully.** After your partner is done sharing his or her feelings, repeat what your partner said as closely to his or her words as you can. This helps you to really focus on what your partner is saying.



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