

Keeping it Cool Together



Content on this side is intended for the educator's reference. The information on the back can be photocopied and shared with clients.

Objective: Clients will better understand various strategies to help calm down from emotionally intense times in couple relationships.

Audience: This tool is applicable to individuals in any type of romantic relationship. Some of this information can also be applied with other interpersonal relationships as well (such as with one's child, the child's other biological parent, in-laws, etc.).

Estimated Time: 15-20 minutes

Educator Instructions: Review the instructions printed on the tool. These four strategies are not in any particular order, but each illustrates a different type of strategy. Some strategies may seem rigid, but during emotionally-arousing situations, clear-cut instructions can be useful to remembering and following the strategies suggested. Clients do not need to use all strategies – just those that seem most useful for them. Not all strategies will be used in every conflict, but it can be helpful to know about different options. This tool may be particularly useful to do in association with the “Getting Worked Up” and “Keeping Your Cool” tools.

Discussion Starter: All couples have arguments and times of conflict – these may be related to things like child care, finances, or personal habits and behaviors. Such conflict, if not managed well, can hurt your relationship. Given that conflict is inevitable, what matters most is not if you have conflict, but how you manage it. One important part of managing conflict is finding ways to “self-soothe” or calm down when emotions get intense. Let's talk about a few different ways that you can manage conflict. Some of these may seem simple and straightforward. The key is to remember to do them when things get intense. Most important is that you find ways that work for your relationship.

Follow-up: In later conversations, ask how they have used the strategies. Are they useful? If they have not used the strategies, what is preventing them from doing so? How much interest did their partner show in using the strategies?



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All couples have conflict. If it is not managed well, conflict can build up, get out of control, and lead to saying and doing things that hurt the relationship. Below are four strategies that can help you manage conflict.

Establish clear rules – Each couple can decide on specific actions, words, and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable during disagreements. What are your rules? Below are a few examples to get you started.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talk one at a time | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't bring up past problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listen with full attention | <input type="checkbox"/> Be open to your partner's ideas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don't talk over each other | <input type="checkbox"/> Share what you are feeling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not judge or interrupt | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't try to guess what the other person is thinking or feeling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions if you do not understand | <input type="checkbox"/> Say what you need and be specific |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Think before responding | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on one topic or issue | |

Are there other rules you have or want to follow when conflicts come up?

Use repair attempts to deal with conflict – Repair attempts are actions that help keep conflict from getting out of control. Which of the following do you use, or think you could use in the future?

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Speak in a soft voice | <input type="checkbox"/> Give partner a hug | <input type="checkbox"/> Smile |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use humor | <input type="checkbox"/> Apologize | <input type="checkbox"/> Say something caring |

Are there any other examples that you would be likely to use?

Take a "time out" – Taking a break allows time for each person to calm down before returning to talk about the issue. Here are a few important "Time-Out" reminders:

- (1) Both partners agree to take a time-out.
- (2) Both partners agree to come back later and work through the issue.
- (3) During the time-out, partners do not dwell on their anger or plan the next "attack."
- (4) During the time out, both partners should do something that helps them calm down.



Use "soft" start-ups – Individuals can begin conversations without blame and accusation. Starting the discussion in a calm (versus harsh) way prevents the other person from becoming defensive. Here are a few examples. How would you "soften" them?

Harsh start-up

You never help take care of our child.
I can't believe you did that again!
You are the most irritating person ever.
I knew you were going to say that.

vs. Soft start-up

Would you mind watching the kids? I really need a break.
It frustrates me when you do that. Could you try not to?

Application: Think about a recent conflict. How could you have used some of these strategies?

Conflict is normal. Managing conflict in healthy ways keeps relationships safe and strong.