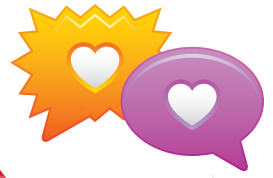


# Tame

*Cultivate strategies to manage your differences in healthy and safe ways*



## Objectives

- Understand that differences between partners and conflict are normative aspects of all healthy couple relationships.
- Identify strategies for regulating emotions and managing stress and conflict.
- Aspire to engage in behaviors that promote positive communication and conflict management practices.

## Background Reading for Facilitator

- NERMEM Chapter – *Manage: Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways*

## Facilitator Materials

- Stress bottle: clear water bottle filled with water and 3 Tbsp. dark glitter
- Participant workbook materials (3 tip sheets; 4 worksheets)
- Video: *He Never Helps* – Part 1 (1:00 min.)
- Video: *He Never Helps* – Part 2 (1:48 min.)
- Timer for pulse count
- Relationship Wheel

## Participant Workbook

- Tip Sheet: *Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways* – p. 45-46
- Tip Sheet: *Common Myths About Conflict in Relationships* – p. 47-48
- Tip Sheet: *When Couples Fight Children Suffer* – p. 49
- Worksheet: *Getting Worked Up* – p. 50
- Worksheet: *Anger (Mis)Management* – p. 51
- Worksheet: *Keeping Your Cool* – p. 52
- Worksheet: *Managing Tough Talks* – p. 53

## Session Overview at a Glance

- Conflict is normal (Slides 1 & 2)
- How we respond to anger (Slides 3-6)
- Applying the breaks (Slides 7, 10-12)
- Mindfulness practice: Attitude change (Slides 8 & 9)
- Managing conflict and applying repair attempts (Slides 13-18)
- Summary and action plan (Slide 19)

## 75-120 Minutes

5-7 Minutes

20-32 Minutes

15-24 Minutes

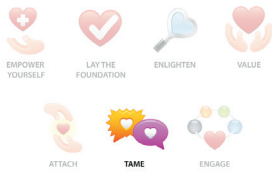
10-14 Minutes

20-35 Minutes

5-8 Minutes

1

## TAME



*[Because this module is longer, plan ahead for a brief (5-10 minute) break. A good place to break might be after the “Pulse Check” (Slide 9; page 78) and before starting “Find Your Calm, Then Carry On” (Slide 10, page 79)]*

**Ask:** In every relationship, differences will arise. What do you think are the top things that couples argue about? *[Write list on board. Highlight money, sex, work, children, housework, and in-laws.]*

2

## TAME



Clearly, there are many things that come up over time in all relationships that couples will not agree on. All couples experience some conflict. And, in fact most will not be *resolved*; there are some things that you may have to just accept. It is better to think in terms of what you can do to *manage* your differences and your reactions during challenges in healthy ways.

## KEY POINT



Conflict is normal, and not all differences can be resolved. It is important to learn how to *manage* conflict.

## VIRTUAL ADAPTATION



Ask questions - See p.116 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

**Ask:** Where/how do we learn to handle conflict? *[Write list on board. Be sure examples include family-of-origin, past relationships, friends, media.]*

**[Advance to Slide 2]** How we manage our emotions, the beliefs we have about conflict, and the skills we employ when confronted with conflict are shaped through “relationship dances” which occur over time. Like the visual on the slide, the mountain terrain lays the framework for the flow of the stream. Even after the streambed dries up, when the rains come, the stream will flow wildly through the cut terrain. Similarly, the conflict we have experienced in other relationships (e.g., with family, friends, co-workers), and especially in romantic relationships (past and present), have wired our bodies emotionally, physically, and psychologically for future relationship confrontations. Like we discussed at the start of the program, the heart and brain will respond to future conflict based on these previous experiences.

This is why we often resort back to responding to conflict in the same way we learned or did so in past interactions, particularly when things get stressful. And, if you find yourself struggling to manage conflict in healthy ways, the good news is that these skills can be learned – but they require *intentionality* and practice. Today, we will explore what those skills look like and practice some of them together.

If you have ever been in an intense argument or highly stressful situation, you have likely noticed that your heart started beating faster or your breathing quickened. When we experience a strong negative emotion, such as anger, our whole body reacts. Let me demonstrate this for you.

**[Demonstrate the stress bottle]**

[Step 1: Show clear water bottle with glitter resting on the bottom; can also use a glass and spoon to stir] This represents the “normal” state of our bodies and brain. During these times, we can hear others more accurately, perceive things more clearly, and process information more calmly.

[Step 2: Shake bottle so the glitter is swirling around]. This represents the “stressful” state, triggered by conflict, when the brain has released stress hormones throughout the body. As you can see, it is much more difficult to see through the bottle. When like this, it’s harder to think clearly and process information before we speak. This puts us at risk of saying things we may later regret.

[Step 3 is processed later on **Slide 7**.]

So, how does your body respond to threats? What are your anger triggers? Let’s take a moment for you to consider this.

**Activity** (Getting Worked Up)

- Provide about one minute to fill out the top half of the worksheet on **page 50** individually, prompting couples to focus on symptoms they experience when angry.
- Allow two minutes to fill out the bottom half of the worksheet individually and provide some specific situations/behaviors that are triggers.
- Provide about three minutes for partners to share their responses with each other. Encourage couples to focus on anger signs; triggers will be processed later.

The way our bodies react to negative emotions impacts how we respond and behave during intense disagreements. When we recognize the signs that we are upset, distressed, or angry and the types of situations that make us feel this way, we can better manage how we react to those emotions.



**KEY POINT**

Understanding how one’s body responds to threats is the first step in managing anger and conflict.



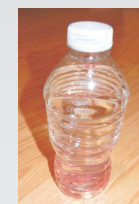
**WORKBOOK**

**Getting Worked Up, p. 50.** Objective: understand how our bodies respond to stress and specific events that lead them to become angry and experience negative emotional arousal.

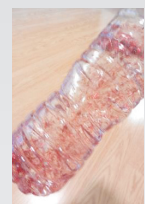


**SPECIAL NOTE**

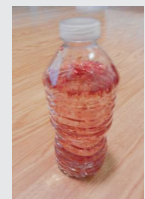
**Stress Bottle Demonstration**



**STEP 1**

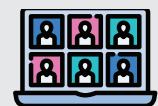


**STEP 2**



**STEP 3**  
(Do on slide 7)

**VIRTUAL ADAPTATION**



See p. 116 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

4

**TAME**

He Never Helps!



5

**TAME**

Take Your Pulse



**KEY POINT**

Managing conflict is about working together to compromise – not win.



**VIDEO**

**He Never Helps – Part 1** AHMREI Relationship Reality (1:00 MINUTE)



Download from  
[www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php](http://www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php)

**VIRTUAL ADAPTATION**



Ask: What did you observe? – See p117 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

When a trigger activates our body's stress response, we often react in one of two ways: "fight" (e.g., engage in the conflict) or "flight" (e.g., turn or walk away and avoid conflict). Sometimes our flight or fight reactions trigger us to engage in negative ways, without thought for the consequences.

Let's take a moment to watch an example of what this could look like.

**Video:** *He Never Helps – Part 1*

**Ask:** How did observing that interaction make you feel? Did it remind you of an argument you might have had in the past with your partner?

**[Advance to Slide 5]** Let's see how this impacted your heart.

**Activity** (*Take Your Pulse*)

- Have participants take their pulse for 15 seconds using one of the methods illustrated on **Slide 5**.
- Use a timer and announce "start" and then "stop" (after 15 seconds pass) so that participants can focus on just counting their heart beats/pulses.
- On **page 4** in their workbook, have participants record pulse count (in **the next blank row**) and multiply that count by 4 to compute their heart rate per minute.

**Ask:** What did you notice about your heart rate this time (compared to your previous recordings)?

I am sure we can all relate to having experienced disagreements that have escalated in similar ways. And, just seeing something causes our body to respond. The problem with the interactions you observed in the video is that they put a drain on our emotional bank account [see *Value*] and we become resentful of our partner and unhappy in our relationship.

**Ask:** What did you observe in their interactions that can be harmful to sustaining a lasting, healthy marriage? [Write points on board that will be referenced on next slide.]

Anger is a common emotion that everyone experiences. There are some good examples here of ways anger can be mismanaged. Similar to what we saw in the video:

- Many times, anger is expressed through non-helpful verbal responses such as yelling, criticisms, and defensiveness. Whereas complaints tend to be focused on a specific event and the feelings associated with it, *criticisms* involve attacking a partner's character or personality and often include generalizations like: "You always...", "You never..." or "Why can't you ever..."
- In turn, *defensiveness* can take the form of cross-complaining where one person meets a partner's complaint or criticism with one of their own, ignoring what the partner said (much like in the video).
- Others express anger in passive ways through sarcasm, pouting, silence, or contemptuous comments. *Contempt*, attacking a partner's sense of self and putting them down (e.g., name calling, insults), is one of the most corrosive behaviors to a relationship.
- Some people suppress anger. This does not make it go away and can cause unresolved problems to build up. Suppressing anger can also lead to health problems such as headaches, stomach aches, ulcers, and other illnesses.
- And, sometimes anger is expressed through physical actions. Although this can provide momentary relief, it mistreats the person we care about.

These strategies do not help in managing the conflict; they further escalate it. What we strive for is to manage our anger in more active and healthy ways. Let's take a moment to reflect on ways you manage conflict.

#### Activity (Anger (Mis)Management)

- Provide participants about two minutes to fill out the worksheet on **page 51** individually, thinking back to some recent times when they were angry.
- Explain that they will not be asked to share their responses with the group, this is just for them.
- Allow an additional two minutes for couples to share their responses with each other.

If you found yourselves checking off mostly physical or verbal, suppressed, or passive anger behaviors, the good news is you can learn the skills to more actively manage your anger. Let's get started with exploring those skills!

**TAME**  
Anger (Mis) Management

6

**KEY POINT**

Anger is a common emotion that can be mismanaged. Findings ways to manage this strong emotion is healthy ways can be learned.

**WORKBOOK**

**Anger (Mis)Management, p. 51.** Objective: understand harmful versus helpful ways of dealing with and expressing anger.

**SPECIAL NOTE**

Depending on the time you have available, this may be something you want to assign as homework.

Also, if couples identify with mostly physical or verbal ways of dealing with anger, encourage them to seek out the support of a relationship counselor or therapist; education alone may not be enough to help them develop more helpful ways of dealing with and expressing anger.

7

## TAME

Apply the Brakes



## KEY POINT

Managing conflict often requires “applying the brakes” to let yourself and your partner cool down.



[Resume shaking glitter bottle.]

**Ask:** What do I need to do to stop this behavior and not react in this way? [Looking for “stop shaking the bottle” – reinforcing that you have to learn to stop and soothe before you can do anything else.]

[Step 3: Let bottle return to calm state with glitter settling to bottom and water becoming clear]. Like this bottle of water, our bodies can return to a calm state if we give it time to settle down. Understanding what is happening inside our bodies can also help us know when we need time to calm down before addressing important issues.

**Ask:** What is one of the first things we learn about driving a car? [Looking for “how to use the brakes.”]

Yes, we learn how to stop the car by applying the brakes so we can avoid accidents, wrecks, and hurting ourselves and others. Learning to apply the brakes in a relationship is one example of a repair attempt.

Repair attempts are used when a discussion starts off on the wrong foot, or when one partner feels tension rising – they help de-escalate, or reduce, the tension so we don’t do something that will hurt ourselves, our partner, and the relationship.

We will explore some more repair attempts soon, after we process this strategy. “Applying the brakes” is a stopping and soothing behavior that allows you to calm down. Let’s take a moment to do just this.

Healthy couples argue, in some cases, as much as unhealthy couples. The difference is how they deal with the conflict. In this mindful activity you will focus on disengaging from the negative feelings and focus on positive thoughts about your partner. You will also focus on the words or actions you can change to make the situation better.

**Activity** (*Attitude Change – 2 Minutes*)


*[Read the following instructions to the participants, pausing momentarily between each step.]*

1. First, think back to how you were feeling when you watched the video and/or that last argument you and your partner had that upset you. Recall how you were feeling and what you were thinking during that moment. Everyone have that memory?
2. Now, close your eyes and disengage from stress feelings and thoughts related to that argument.
3. Shift your attention to your breathing. Breathe deeply in-and-out. Do not worry if one breath is deeper than another, just focus on the breathing.
4. If your mind wonders away from your focused breathing, don't worry. Just bring your attention back to your breathing.
5. *[After 30 seconds of breathing]* Now think of a memory that is full of joy or gratitude towards your partner. This memory should bring you positive emotional feelings. Hold on to that moment as you continue to focus on your breathing.
6. *[After 30 seconds]* Now ask yourself: "What words or actions should I change within the relationship at this time?" Take note of those thoughts and emotions so that you can follow through.
7. *[After 30 seconds]* When you are ready, open your eyes and slowly become aware of your surroundings.

*[As a reminder, calmly come out of this mindfulness practice before proceeding to pulse check on next slide.]*


**TAME**


Mindfulness Practice: Attitude Change



8

What words or actions should I change within the relationship at this time?





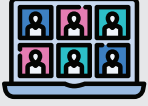
**MINDFULNESS PRACTICE**

**Attitude Change:**  
Allows people to disengage from draining mental and emotional reactions in the moment by shifting their attention to their breathing and relaxation.

This is followed with a connection to positive memories of their relationship that bring them the greatest feelings of joy and gratitude. From this they will focus on changing their actions within the relationship.

**VIRTUAL ADAPTATION**

Attitude Change – See p.117 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.



9

TAME  
Take Your Pulse

## KEY POINT

Participants will take a final pulse rating and compare it to prior ones in order to see how the mindfulness practice may have helped them physiologically.



Before we process this, let's see how this helped your heart.

**Activity** (*Take Your Pulse*)

- Have participants take their pulse for 15 seconds using one of the methods illustrated on **Slide 9**.
- Use a timer and announce "start" and then "stop" (after 15 seconds pass) so that participants can focus on just counting their heart beats/pulses.
- On **page 4** in their workbook, have participants record pulse count (in **the next blank row**) and multiply that count by 4 to compute their heart rate per minute.

**Ask:**

- How is everyone feeling? Is your heart rate calmer compared to your last pulse check?
- Were you able to think of actions you could change in your relationship?
- Why did I have you first think of a joyful memory?

*[Provide participants a moment to share their memory with their partner.]*

Before we move on, let's examine how your heart rate has changed or remained relatively constant during the course of the program. Take a moment to share your pulse check with your partner.

**Ask:**

- Would anyone like to share what they observed?
- How can being mindful of your heart rate help you and your relationship?

It is important to understand that applying the breaks to calm down is not the same as “disengaging or suppressing feelings,” noted earlier as a “mis-management strategy.” Let me explain with a sports analogy.

**Ask:** In basketball, when do coaches call a time out? When they are doing well or when they are struggling?

Most often they call a time out when there is a need to slow things down and give their players an opportunity to re-group and focus.

When you recognize the signs that you are angry, take a moment to calm down (like the water bottle demonstration). Before you react and say or do something you may both regret, call for a “time out.”

Use that time out as an opportunity to calm down before you carry on. This is hard to want to do – you are likely going to want to make your point, stand your ground, and “win” the fight. But, in the end, your relationship loses! Take a time out for yourself and for your relationship. Let’s explore what this involves.



#### KEY POINT

When you recognize that negative emotions are building, ask for a “time out.” When both partners feel calm, come back together to discuss your disagreement.



11

## TAME

Find your calm, then carry on!



## Rules to Disengagement

- ✓ Agree on a time out signal
- ✓ Call your own time out
- ✓ Respect your partner's need for a time out
- ✓ Agree on a time to come back

12

## TAME

Find your calm, then carry on!



## Rules During Disengagement

- ✓ Don't dwell on the anger
- ✓ Don't plan the next "attack"
- ✓ Recall the positive qualities of your partner
- ✓ Do something that helps you calm down

## KEY POINT

When taking a time out, follow certain rules to help you and your partner find your calm before carrying on.



## WORKBOOK

**Keeping Your Cool, p. 52.** Objective: understand various strategies to help manage situations of emotional arousal.



Like most things, there are steps that are important to follow in order for a time out to work. Here are a few ground rules for initiating the time out. [Walk through steps on **Slide 11.**]

[After walking through steps on slide 11, **advance to Slide 12**]

And, when you are taking a time out... [walk through steps on **Slide 12**]

Earlier in the program, you explored ways you manage stress. [Have couples refer back to "Managing Stress" worksheet on **page 12** in their workbook.] Let's revisit that and see how some of those practices also apply here when you are calming down.

**Activity** (*Keeping your Cool*)

- Provide about two minutes to fill out the "Thinking and Behavioral Strategies" section on **page 52** individually.
- Next, provide two minutes to fill out "Your Turn" individually. Prompt participants to choose one trigger from the last worksheet (or another situation if preferred) and think of a strategy they could use in that situation.
- Last, provide about three minutes to share their situation and strategy with their partner. Encourage couples to focus on describing their responses to one another, not reacting to each other's responses.

**Ask:** Did anyone include the mindfulness activities we have practiced as a strategy?

When your heart-rate is elevated, practicing these mindful activities can help you calm down, so you can carry on.

When you come back together after calming down (or when you need to bring something up for discussion), *soften your startup*. Discussions often end up on the same note they begin. Start gently by remembering the good in your partner. Starting the discussion in a calm, caring (*not crabby*) way can help prevent the other person from becoming defensive.

One technique that helps soften how we bring up a problem while expressing our concern in a clear way is the *W.I.N. Formula*. This formula is described in the *Managing Tough Talks* worksheet on **page 53**:

- W – When this happens (explain the situation briefly)
- I – I feel (briefly explain how it makes you feel)
- N – I need (explain what you want to change)

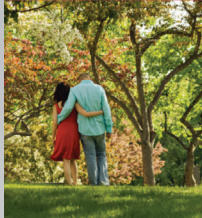
**Ask:** Let's consider some examples. How might you "soften" these statements?

1. [**Advance to Slide 14**] Example WIN: I know how important your friends are to you, but WHEN we have alone time, often I FEEL disconnected. I NEED (or would like) to have some time together on a regular basis that we "protect."
2. [**Advance to Slide 15**] Example WIN: WHEN I was almost late for work today because I had to stop and fill up on gas, I FELT really angry that I had to stop to do it. I understand you were in a hurry to get home yesterday, but in the future I NEED (and would really appreciate) if you could fill up the tank when you see it's on a quarter tank, or just let me know, so I can plan ahead to fill it up in the morning.

Some of you may be thinking, "this is difficult to apply in real life," and you are correct! If this was easy to do, everyone would be doing it. Research shows us that couples who are able to use this technique (or others like it), are less likely to fall victim to those unhelpful anger management strategies we reviewed earlier.

**TAME**  
Go slow and both W.I.N.!

13



**When this happens...** explain the situation briefly

**I feel...** briefly explain how it makes you feel

**I Need...** explain what you want to change

**TAME**  
How can you both W.I.N.?

14



"Seriously! I can't believe you are going out with your friends again!"


**TAME**  
How can you both W.I.N.?

15



"For once I wish you would put gas in the car! I almost didn't make it to work this morning!"

**KEY POINT**



Managing tough talks requires softly starting the discussion and clearly expressing your concerns and needs.

## WORKBOOK

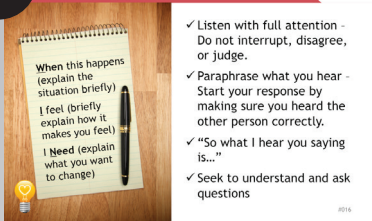
**Managing Tough Talks, p. 53.** Objective: understand effective ways to communicate – both how they speak and how they listen – during conflict.



16

## TAME

Stop it before it starts...



## KEY POINT

Managing tough talks requires starting the discussion gently, speaking clearly to be understood, and listening carefully to understand.

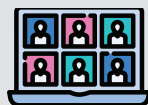


## SPECIAL NOTE

For those without a partner present, encourage them to write down descriptions for strategies they will try.



## VIRTUAL ADAPTATION



Apply Skills to Discussing Triggers – See p.117 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

And, as you can see on the worksheet on **page 53**, it's not just important to speak calmly and clearly so you are understood, it's also important to listen carefully to understand.

Earlier we talked about *bids for connection* and how we *turn towards* to those bids. Those same ground rules apply here as well. Now, let's put the two skills together into practice.

**Activity** (*Apply Skills to Discussing Triggers*)

- Ask couples to pick one trigger from each partner's "Getting Worked Up" worksheet on **page 50**. Alternatively, couples could share goals or things they need from their "Talking about Money" worksheet (from *Enlighten* module) on **page 29**.
- One partner should share a trigger/goal using W.I.N. while the other partner applies the listening skills.
- Provide couples about four minutes to practice. While doing so, walk around and "coach" as needed.

**Ask:**

- How did it go?
- Were you able to clearly express your needs?
- Did you feel listened to and understood?
- Do you feel you can apply these steps to future discussions around topics that trigger intense emotions?

While at first these steps may feel awkward and maybe unnatural, they are intended to slow down the conversation. Remember, from earlier in the program I shared that it's easier for lower brain areas to send signals up to higher brain areas (emotions influence thoughts). It is much harder for signals to flow down (being rational when emotional). Practicing these steps can help slow things down to allow for those rational connections to be made and lead to emotional connections between you.

Still, none of us are perfect! When we forget to use these techniques and let our emotions get the better of us, there are a few more repair attempts you can try.

When we offer a repair attempt, we are taking responsibility for part of the problem. Repair attempts are simply bids for connections and efforts to make things better before things escalate and get worse.

For example, if we're looking for common ground we might say, "We can tackle this together," "I see what you mean," "I see your point," "We are both saying essentially the same thing," "I know this isn't your fault," or "Let's compromise."

And, sometimes it takes an apology to slow things down and regroup. When we are sorry we can say, "I didn't mean that," "Can I take that back?" "Let me try again," "I didn't think of that," or "Forgive me."

Let's see how these repair attempts can help.

**[Advance to Slide 18]** In this video, we re-visit our earlier couple to see how that argument could have gone different with a few repair attempts. As you watch the video, notice how they applied the W.I.N technique in their own way.

**Video:** *He Never Helps – Part 2 (Repair Attempts)*


**Ask:** Which repair attempts did you see them using?

*[Examples should include: she recognized the "glitter" in her system; applied brakes; apologized; focused on other's stress; hand-holding.]*

Notice, that before understanding occurred, they "applied the brakes" and found a way to sooth each other. Only then were they able to hear each other's concerns and needs.

**TAME**  
Apply the Brakes

17



**Common Ground**


"We can tackle this together."  
"I see what you mean."  
"I see your point."  
"We are both saying the same thing."  
"I know this isn't your fault."  
"Let's compromise."

**Apologize**

"I didn't mean that."  
"Can I take that back?"  
"Let me try again."  
"I didn't think of that."  
"Forgive me."

**TAME**  
He Never Helps!

18



### KEY POINT

Repair attempts can be used to de-escalate conflict.



### VIDEO

**He Never Helps – Part 2 (Repair Attempts)**

AHMREI Relationship Reality  
(1:48 MINUTES)

Download from  
[www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php](http://www.nermen.org/ELEVATE.php)



## 19 Action Plan

- ✓ What am I doing to manage conflict in healthy and helpful ways?
- ✓ What can I do differently to help better manage conflict in my relationship?



## KEY POINT

Healthy relationships and marriages require we use strategies to manage conflict in healthy and safe ways.



## WORKBOOK

Dealing with Differences in Healthy Ways, p. 45-46.



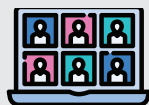
Common Myths About Conflict in Relationships, p. 47-48.

When Couples Fight, Children Suffer, p. 49.

## My Action Plan, p. 2.

Objective: encourage participants to document at least two new things (per module) they will try to do.

## VIRTUAL ADAPTATION



Action Plan – See p.118 in *Adaptations for Virtual Delivery* guide.

Applying these skills takes practice as you find your way to infuse them into how you interact. Everything we have covered here today is important to managing conflict:

- We have to recognize our signs of stress and find ways to manage it so that we can remain calm during our interactions with each other.
- We seek to understand our partner so that we can be open to their point of view when differences arise.
- We show our partner respect by acting in caring (not crabby) ways.
- And, we turn towards each other's bids for connection.

So, now we have identified some additional skills that can help when conflict arises. In your workbook, we have provided a few additional tip sheets that summarize the *manage* skills we covered (**page 45-46**), and describe some common myths about conflict in relationships (**page 47-48**) as well as how conflict impacts children (**page 49**), for those of you who are (or plan to be) parents. It's important to understand, that what you practice in your relationships is observed by your children, impacts your children, and will have an influence on their relationships one day.

Take a look at your **Relationship Wheel** [or refer to **page 8** in the workbook if you do not have wheels] and remember to ask yourself these questions on a regular basis:

What am I doing to ensure....

- We share concerns in a calm, respectful tone?
- We focus on understanding each other's view?
- We avoid defensiveness and criticism?
- We soothe and support each other?
- We take "time outs" and come back to talk?
- We understand that there can't always be agreement?
- We maintain emotional and physical safety?

Based on what we have covered, what do you plan to do to tame your response to conflict and manage it? Take a moment and write at least one new thing down in your workbook on **page 2**.

[As participants complete their action plan, review the flip chart listing the participants' expectations (from Introduction). Check-off each topic that was addressed.]