

GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION (Or, How To Fight Fairly!)

BEFORE THE CONFLICT

Normalize conflict and don't view it as a sign of impending doom or dysfunction in your relationship. It's natural for all couples to have disagreements, even those deeply in love and closely compatible.

Early in the process of forming an intimate or committed relationship, consciously agree upon a set of mutually agreeable guidelines for fair fighting – use the following list or make your own.

As your relationship evolves, periodically review your fair-fighting guidelines and recommit or negotiate modifications. Don't wait until you face a serious conflict to discover your rules have become outdated!

Designate a “fighting place” that is mutually agreed upon in advance. It's best if this place is NOT the bedroom or any place that is associated with special/shared/intimate activities.

Create daily routines where you “earn points” with the other by emotionally or physically connecting (examples: showing interest in the other's daily activities, affectionately greeting each other, enjoying a particular activity together, making plans or dreaming together, celebrating triumphs, etc.) These daily rituals soften the blow when conflicts arise.

Develop an emotional “poop detector” by not letting resentments or problems build up. Develop a ritual of meeting weekly to clear up any messes.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT

Try to confine yourself to one issue at a time. Chaining together a backlog of gripes can make smaller, more manageable conflicts seem unsolvable.

Make it clear that this conflict is a bid for connection and describe what you want (your partner's attention, interest, support, acceptance, understanding, enthusiasm, validation, affection, humor, advice, etc.)

Soften complaints by expressing appreciation for what your partner has done right in the past.

Distinguish if this is a solvable problem (which are resolved through talking, brainstorming solutions, and negotiating compromises) or a perpetual problem (which will resurface over and over again due to partners' personalities, never to be changed, and requires finding ways to feel understood and respected).

Both parties must be motivated to resolve the conflict in question; if either is unwilling or unmotivated to face the realities of the conflict (core issues, behaviors, consequences) and work toward mutually acceptable decisions, then the resolve will be incomplete.

DURING THE ARGUMENT

Own your part of the conflict

When defining the argument, each needs to clearly state how they are contributing to the conflict and take responsibility for their feelings vs. blaming the other (examples: “I’m sorry. I know I get too angry when we talk about this and I know it makes it hard to resolve this”; “When we talk about our problems and you interrupt me, I feel frustrated and afraid because I think you don’t care about me or what I’m saying”).

Recognize that your pattern of approaching conflict or even the reason why you are fighting this particular issue may reflect unresolved concerns from past relationships that are being projected onto your current relationship. Strive to create a more accurate image of your partner, yourself, and the situation.

Don’t just discuss the issue; talk about what the issue means for each of you. Express wants, needs, and feelings behind requests, which may cause more vulnerability but create more understanding.

Never assume that you know what your partner is thinking or needing; never assume or predict how your partner will react or what your partner will accept or reject. Clarify all assumptions with your partner.

Monitor the process (content and flow) of the conflict discussion

Dialogue instead of debate the issues. That is, shift from an adversarial mode (attack-defend) to an admitting mode (seeing your responsibility in the problem/argument) and then to a collaborative mode (both come up with ways to improve their discussion of the issue). Strive to achieve win-win compromises. Be creative and challenge the belief that resolution requires a winner and a loser.

Request direction and specific instructions from the other on how the situation can be improved (examples: “What do I do that bothers you that I could change?” “What do you need from me to make this feel better?”).

Slow down if your interchanges become reactive or impulsive & respect silences that allow each to collect thoughts or regain emotional composure (“I’m having a difficult time thinking when you raise your voice”).

Distinguish intention from impact. For a variety of reasons, words or behaviors may have a different impact on the receiving partner than was intended by the sending partner. It’s often helpful to verbalize what you have heard from your partner (to cross-check for accuracy) before responding yourself.

Make “repair questions” by checking in with the other regarding the process, showing concern, and pulling the other back into the conversation in a new way (example: “You got really sour. What just happened?”)

Establish an “escape clause” in advance that stipulates that either partner may unilaterally call a “time-out” – without veto from the other partner.

Short time-outs can be used effectively to regain perspective and cool off. If a long time-out is requested, the partner making that request accepts responsibility for proposing the next time to continue the discussion.

Limit attempts at conflict resolution to a maximum of 1 hour at a time – recognize that fatigue sets in after an hour of intense emotional exchange and issues begin to “recycle.”

Learn to break conflict resolution into manageable increments - accept that complex or longstanding issues may require many hours (or “segments”) to resolve.

If a conflict has not been resolved at the end of a segment, establish a mutually agreeable time to meet again and continue the dialogue.

Consider seeking a third party to assist you in your efforts to resolve your conflict(s) if you remain stuck – or tape record your difficult discussions and review the tape later when you both have gained distance or perspective that may allow you to identify constructive suggestions.

AFTER THE CONFLICT

At the end of each conflict resolution segment, each partner should offer at least one positive comment (or constructive feedback) about yourself, the other person, AND the process.

Repair after a fight (called a “recovery conversation”). Explore what kind of conversation each needed to have but didn’t (“What can we do in order to make this better next time we talk about this issue?”).

Use mutual agreements and resolution of specific segments of a larger conflict as building blocks for further success. Do not overlook the significance of acknowledging even small successes at achieving resolution.

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(adapted from *Four Steps To Conflict Resolution* by Friedman, *Relationship Cure* by Gottman, *The Art of Fighting* by Weeks & Hof, and *After the Fight* by Wile).