

HANDOUT ...

What To Do When Conflict Arises

Disagreements in a relationship are not only normal but, if constructively resolved, actually strengthen the relationship. It is inevitable that there will be times of sadness, tension, or outright anger between you and your partner. The source of these problems may lie in unrealistic/unreasonable demands, unexplored expectations, or unresolved issues/behaviors in one partner or in the relationship. Resolving conflicts requires honesty, a willingness to consider your partner's perspective even if you don't fully understand it, and lots of communication.

Healthy communication is critical, especially when there are important decisions regarding sex, career, marriage, and family to be made. The following are some guidelines for successful communication and conflict resolution.

UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S FAMILY PATTERNS. Find out how conflicts were managed (or not managed) in your partner's family, and talk about how conflict was approached (or avoided) in your own family. It is not unusual for couples to discover that their families had different ways of expressing anger and resolving differences. If your family wasn't good at communicating or resolving conflict constructively, give yourself permission to try out some new ways of handling conflict.

TIMING COUNTS. Contrary to previous notions, the best time to resolve a conflict may not be immediately. It is not unusual for one or both partners to need some time to cool off. This "time-out" period can help you avoid saying or doing hurtful things in the heat of the moment, and can help partners more clearly identify what changes are most important. Remember - if you are angry with your partner but don't know what you want yet, it will be nearly impossible for your partner to figure it out!

ESTABLISH AN ATMOSPHERE OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT. Emotional support involves accepting your partner's differences and not insisting that he or she meet your needs only in the precise way that you want them met. Find out how your partner shows his or her love for you, and don't set absolute criteria that require your partner to always behave differently before you're satisfied.

AGREE TO DISAGREE AND MOVE ON. Most couples will encounter some issues upon which they will never completely agree. Rather than continuing a cycle of repeated fights, agree to disagree and negotiate a compromise or find a way to work around the issue.

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHAT YOU WANT AND WHAT YOU NEED. For example, for safety reasons, you might need your partner to remember to pick you up on time after dark. But calling you several times a day may really only be a "want."

CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGES. A clear message involves a respectful but direct expression of your wants and needs. Take some time to identify what you really want before talking to your partner. Work on being able to describe your request in clear, observable terms. For example, you might say, "I would like you to hold my hand more often" rather than the vague, "I wish you were more affectionate."

DISCUSS ONE THING AT A TIME. It can be tempting to list your concerns or grievances, but doing so will likely prolong an argument. Do your best to keep the focus on resolving one concern at a time.

REALLY LISTEN. Being a good listener requires the following: (a) don't interrupt, (b) focus on what your partner is saying rather than on formulating your own response, and (c) check out what you heard your partner say. You might start this process with: "I think you are saying..." Or "what I understood you to say was..." This step alone can prevent misunderstandings that might otherwise develop into a fight.

RESTRAIN YOURSELF. Research has found that couples who "edit" themselves and do not say all the angry things they may be thinking are typically the happiest.

ADOPT A "WIN-WIN" POSITION. A "win-win" stance means that your goal is for the relationship, rather than for either partner, to "win" in a conflict situation. Ask yourself: "Is what I am about to say (or do) going to increase or decrease the odds that we'll work this problem out?"

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