



Manage

Dealing With Differences in Healthy Ways

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What *Manage* Looks Like

- Understanding there cannot always be agreement
- Using soft start-ups: share concerns in a calm, respectful tone
- Avoiding criticism and defensiveness
- Listening and accepting influence
- Stopping conflict before it escalates
- Taking “time outs” but coming back to talk
- Soothing and supporting each other
- Being open to forgiveness
- Maintaining emotional and physical safety

Introduction

Managing the differences that arise in a relationship, as well as the negative emotions that can result, are keys to a strong partnership (Steuber, 2005). Problems and conflicts are a normal part of couple relationships. No couple agrees on everything; individuals often bring very different backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and habits into relationships. In addition, most couples face stressors, individually and as a family, which can create a context within which conflict arises. Partners will have to deal with many stressors and differences, large and small, in their relationship. Importantly, research shows that the majority of problems in long-term, healthy couple relationships are never completely *resolved*; couples simply work to *manage* them (Gottman, 1998).

This chapter provides an overview of what we know about how to prevent and manage conflicts well (while maintaining safety) in order to create and maintain stable, healthy couple relationships. *Manage* focuses on partners' use of strategies to stay calm, contain their stress response, soothe their partner, listen attentively, make an effort to understand their partner's point of view, accept differences, and forgive one another. Efforts to build skills in this area of couple functioning will result in a couple's ability to manage stressors and differences effectively (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Wiley, 2007).

Conflict in the Relationship

Disagreements and conflicts are a natural and normal part of all relationships. However, thoughts and behaviors that are negative in character can erode a positive environment and lead to relationship dissatisfaction and instability. Several key negative behaviors and thought patterns have been identified in research that lead to marital dissolution. Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling are red flags in couple communication and conflict management (Gottman, 1996; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).



- *Criticism* involves attacking a partner's personality or character with accusations and blame. It is important to distinguish between criticizing and making a specific request or complaint. Specific requests can be helpful if they address a key issue in a non-critical way. A partner is much more likely to respond favorably to a specific request or non-blaming complaint than to criticism (Gottman & Silver, 1999).
- *Defensiveness* involves protecting one's self from a perceived threat (i.e., a partner's criticism) and refusing to take responsibility for personal actions. When someone feels criticized or attacked, it is natural to feel defensive (Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). However, defensiveness blocks a couple's ability to deal with an issue effectively because a defensive person is not open to suggestions and is not focused on the other person's perspective.
- *Contempt* is a highly toxic and destructive communication pattern that develops over time as couples use more criticism and defensiveness. Contempt is a very negative view of the partner and may involve the use of intentional insults, name-calling, mocking, and rude or dismissive gestures.
- *Stonewalling* involves withdrawing from one's partner physically and/or emotionally and refusing to communicate. This is different than "conflict avoidance" (Roberts, 2000) or "time-outs" (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002), which are proactive strategies that can be helpful when emotions and reactions are intense (see next section). With stonewalling, a partner makes a habit of checking out and does not re-engage with their partner to try to manage or soothe the situation.

When couples engage in these destructive patterns of communication, their relationship becomes fragile. Research shows that these four negative interactional patterns tend to occur in sequence: use of criticism is met with defensiveness; this pattern over time leads to the use of contemptuous attitudes and behaviors by one or both partners; eventually one or both partners begin stonewalling and shutting out the other (Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Research shows that either the man or the woman may initiate the sequence of attacking and defending, depending upon who is seeking change (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Crohan, 1996; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). When individuals feel offended or want their partner to change, they are more likely to use verbal attacks. However, a verbal attack typically does not result in a desired change. Instead it tends to ignite a downward spiral of negative interaction that leads to emotional and physical disengagement. Raising awareness of these patterns can be helpful to couples.



Why *Manage Matters to Parenting and Children*

- Children who see parents engage in conflict or violence may be more likely to exhibit similar behaviors.
- Children need to be exposed to adults who can successfully manage conflict so that they learn how to do so with friends, family members, and in future romantic relationships.
- Parents can also learn how to speak more "softly" toward their children, as well as romantic partners. Getting in the habit of using gentle or soft startups with all family members can promote a more respectful, positive family environment – one in which children feel comfortable and safe to express their needs and share their thoughts and beliefs.

Managing Negative Emotions During Conflict

Unmanaged negative emotions can undermine effective and healthy patterns of couple communication and can lead to poor relationship quality and relationship break-up (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). In addition, parents' poor management of stress and emotions in the couple relationship can create an unhealthy environment for children (El Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1994). Research indicates that the ability to self-regulate emotions and self-calm is developed over time, and that these abilities are the result of both innate tendencies (i.e., what we "came with") and environmental influences (i.e., our family members, peers) (El Sheikh et al., 2001; Katz & Gottman, 1997). Although general patterns of emotion regulation are stable over time, there also is evidence that people can change their patterns of managing stress and emotions (Fetsch, Schultz, & Wahler, 1999; Gross, 2001;

Keiley, 2002). This means it is possible to learn to better regulate emotions and respond to stress and conflict in helpful and healthy ways. Strategies include recognizing negative emotional arousal triggers and symptoms, stopping escalation, using soothing behaviors and repair attempts, and maintaining positive thinking strategies.

Recognize Signs of Negative Emotional Arousal

A real or perceived threat, such as a criticism, initiates a reaction in the body that limits one's capacity to listen, talk, and handle conflict in a healthy way (Nichols, 2009). When individuals focus on their angry feelings, they often get angrier (Williams & Williams, 1998). This can lead to a phenomenon that Gottman and Silver (1999) refer to as *flooding* – feeling overwhelmed both emotionally and physically. Feeling flooded can lead to aggressive actions. Research provides evidence of physiological differences in men's and women's responses to couple conflict. Men are more easily overwhelmed by conflict than their wives (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When men feel emotionally overwhelmed they tend to withdraw and disengage. If they are not able to re-engage and work through the situation, this is unhealthy for the relationship (Stanley et al., 2002).

Educators can help couples develop an awareness of the stress response and its effects on each partner and the relationship. Understanding the physiology involved in emotional arousal can help couples enhance their strategies for managing its effects. It can also be valuable for individuals to assess family history and its influence on their patterns of emotional arousal and emotion-regulation. Raising awareness of the processes involved in emotion regulation can lead to learning and applying both cognitive (thinking) and behavioral strategies for enhancing an individual's ability to manage stress and to regulate negative emotional arousal in ways that are healthy for the individual and the relationship.

Use Emotion-Regulation Strategies

Partners can assist each other when negative emotional arousal occurs. Soothing strategies – both in thinking and in behaviors – are used by couples in healthy relationships (e.g., Gottman & Silver, 1999). The way partners respond to each other in the face of stress and negative emotions influences situation outcomes. Some responses make the situation worse by increasing negative feelings. In contrast, positive reactions to conflict or stress can have calming effects on the other person (Acitelli, 1997; Rowan, Compton, & Rust, 1995). Some examples include:

- *Establishing clear rules of engagement.* Harmful patterns of interaction can be avoided by establishing rules for conflict in the relationship. For example, a couple might agree that name calling, insults, and

raised voices are unacceptable ways for them to deal with conflict. Instead, they might agree to give their full attention to one another, listen to the emotions and needs that are being expressed, and understand the issue from the other person's point of view. They might also agree to take a "time out" and come back to an issue later if tensions are escalating, or they might even agree to disagree.

- *Employing repair attempts to deal with conflict.* A repair attempt is any statement or action that prevents negativity from escalating out of control (Gottman & Silver, 1999). It is an effort to soothe one's partner (i.e., speaking in a soft voice, smiling, using appropriate humor, using non-defensive listening, giving the partner a hug, or apologizing) to help him or her calm down.
- *Taking a "time out."* When used to calm a situation, a time out can also be effective (Stanley et al., 2002). This is different than the emotional disengagement of stonewalling. Time-outs are a positive strategy when they are agreed upon by the couple because they allow each individual the opportunity to calm down before re-engaging later to work through a difference or challenge.

Importantly, how conflict begins generally predicts the path it will take. A key strategy in managing conflict is the use of soft startups. A soft startup involves talking about a difference of opinion or an issue in a way that is sensitive to the partner's perspective (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Soft startups are free from criticism, blame, and contempt. When a soft startup is used, the other person generally does not feel as defensive, and the likelihood of a productive discussion is far greater. For example, it is not as effective to say, "You never have time for us anymore. You are too self-absorbed" as it is to say, "I am lonely when we don't make time to do things together."



Build Up the Positive Emotional Bank

For happy, stable couples it is not a lack of conflict that is the goal. Instead, couples should strive to create a positive, supportive environment and develop habits of interaction that show respect for each other and the relationship. As mentioned in *Care and Share*, research on couples shows that in healthy, stable relationships there are typically five positives for each negative (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; 2002). That is, a partner in a healthy relationship will express love, appreciation, and affection an average of five times for each correction or complaint that he or she offers. When there is a preponderance of positive interactions in a relationship, an occasional cross word or misunderstanding will not be as damaging to the relationship as when positive behaviors and interactions are rare. Observations of couples who maintain high levels of positivity show that disagreements are naturally handled more easily and more respectfully (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). This has been termed “positive sentiment override” (Gottman, 1998). These actions are further addressed in *Care and Share*.

Maintain Positive Thinking Strategies

In addition to behaving positively toward each other, individuals in healthy relationships also think positively about each other. This includes making positive attributions, or making a conscious effort to give one’s partner the “benefit of the doubt” (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Most individuals are keenly aware of their own wants, needs, hopes, dreams, fears, and desires, but often fail to understand these things from their partner’s point of view. A positive view of a partner would include assuming that the partner is probably doing what they feel is right for the relationship based on his or her understanding of things (Christensen & Jacobsen, 2000). A positive view also includes

using positive mental explanations for a partner’s choices and behaviors (i.e., giving the benefit of the doubt). Making a habit of thinking about why a partner is loved and valued helps maintain an overall positive relational climate. Couples who put a positive spin on their relationship history and interpret present events in a positive light are likely to have a happy future as well (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Adopting a Willingness to Accept Influence

The willingness to accept influence from a partner without resentment or negativity is a key to enhancing conflict management skills. Research indicates that men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages and are less likely to divorce than men who resist their wives’ influence (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This finding has been misinterpreted as a prescription for men to give up on making decisions in relationships and allow their wives to rule their lives. However, accepting influence is not about giving in reluctantly, but rather, involves resisting a defensive response and really listening to one’s partner with respect, sharing power and practicing co-decision-making. Thus, when happy couples disagree, husbands actively search for common ground and work to understand their wife’s perspective, rather than insisting on getting their way. Reciprocally, wives of men who accept their influence are far less likely to be harsh with their husbands when bringing up and discussing difficult issues (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

This process involves the use of empathy – the willingness to see another’s view. Successful management of conflict includes accurately assessing the other person’s experience in the relationship and in the discussion (Acitelli et al., 2001; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Shapiro et al., 2004). Empathy is both a cognitive and an emotional process that is reflected in how one responds to the other (Duan & Hill, 1996). Empathy creates a dual advantage in that it can enhance one’s ability to manage emotional arousal as well as reduce feelings of disengagement and desire to fight (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Therefore, it is not surprising that accepting influence and using empathy go hand-in-hand.

This interactional style creates an environment within which team decision-making can occur. A couple’s willingness and ability to make decisions together contributes to greater marital satisfaction (Tesser, 1988) and relationship stability (Kirchler, Rodler, Holzl, & Meier, 2001). Team oriented decision-making does not necessarily mean that all decisions are shared equally. It does, however, provide both partners with clear areas of leadership and control within the relationship (Beach, Whitaker, O’Mahen, Jones, Tesser, & Fincham, 2002). When partners have well-



developed decision-making strategies, they are better able to recognize individual strengths and defer to each other according to their strengths, thereby promoting collaboration and team work (Beach et al., 2002). When partners make decisions based on each other's strengths, it helps them regulate their competitive behaviors, support each other, and enhance their relationship (Tesser, 1988). Partners who have difficulty making decisions together tend to be more competitive with one another, which can lead to a win-lose way of thinking (Beach et al., 2002).

Cultural Considerations

- *A willingness to accept influence and work together may not fit culturally with some religious beliefs.* Many religious groups promote traditional roles for husbands and wives, with the husband making most decisions regarding couple and family life. For example, Muslims in many countries appear to be concerned with approval of others and family issues. They are more concerned with the needs of the collective group rather than the individual or the couple relationship (Dwairy, 2009; Triandis, 1995). The social system in the Muslim world tends to be authoritarian with the family responding to a patriarchal hierarchy of authority. Couple communication is not about sharing feelings, but is directed by respect, fulfilling social duties, and avoiding conflict. A husband accepting the wife's influence or the couple working as a team in decision-making would not be part of a traditional Muslim marriage relationship.
- *Communication may be more non-verbal than verbal for couples in some cultures.* Some cultures rely heavily on non-verbal or high-context communication. For example, Asian Americans often make efforts to avoid shame or loss of face. Therefore, they may not verbally say what they mean. The listener will need to rely on the context of what is said to understand meaning. This type of communication avoids loss of face for both individuals. Therefore, interactive strategies for couples from some ethnic groups may be more complex and rely less on verbal communication than non-verbal communication patterns (Sue & Sue, 2008).

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Accepting Differences and Using Forgiveness

Research indicates that people with many common characteristics are attracted to one another (Amodio & Showers, 2005). However, all couples, no matter how many similarities they share, will have some differences of opinion, taste, and belief. Scholars note that individuals in healthy relationships develop a basic acceptance or tolerance of their partner's personality and preferences (Gottman, 1998). As noted, research indicates that an expectation for resolving all differences in couple relationships is unrealistic; as very few differences are truly *resolved* (Gottman, 1998). Accepting a partner the way s/he is and adjusting expectations are two of the best ways to manage conflict. Doing so may allow a person the space to change. Accepting a partner and supporting each other's growth and change contribute to a satisfying relationship.

The following story from *Reader's Digest* (McFarlane, 1992) illustrates the value of accepting differences in a relationship:

On her golden wedding anniversary, my grandmother revealed the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day, I decided to choose ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook," she explained. A guest asked her to name some of the faults. "To tell the truth," she replied, "I never did get around to listing them. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten.'" (p. 104).

Researchers and clinicians find that forgiveness is essential to a successful couple relationship (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009). Many faulty beliefs exist surrounding forgiveness, which often hinder its application in

relationships. For instance, forgiveness is often wrongly understood as requiring a person to deny or forget about a transgression, accept or excuse an offense, or it may open the door for the person to hurt them again (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Forgiveness does not require reconciliation, though it makes reconciliation more likely (Hall & Fincham, 2006). In addition, forgiving an individual is often not an instantaneous act but something that occurs over time.

Forgiveness “is the idea of a change whereby one becomes less motivated to think, feel, and behave negatively (e.g., retaliate, withdraw) in regard to the offender” (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; p. 416). As discussed in *Choose*, a person can intentionally make the choice to forgive another person in order to strengthen the relationship. Couples who exhibit less forgiveness have been found to have more ineffective conflict resolution, producing long-standing disagreements that facilitate more conflict in the future. Therefore, this act is a critical part of managing relationship challenges, large and small, much like apologizing and making a repair attempt. Use of forgiveness in relationships is linked with greater relationship satisfaction, more benign attributions, and stronger commitment to a relationship (see Fincham et al., 2006 for review).



Working with Youth

- Many adolescents are still learning how to manage their emotions, particularly strong negative emotions. Helping adolescents learn anger management skills and self-soothing techniques is important for preparing them to handle the dynamics of conflict within intimate and other (e.g., parent, teacher, and peer) relationships.
- Help adolescents understand that conflict is a normal part of healthy romantic relationships. Learning ways to handle conflict effectively so that the relationship is strengthened and grows is the key to long lasting successful relationships. In some cases, however, having conflicts, especially frequent conflicts, may be a sign that they should end a relationship that is not a good fit for them.
- Adolescents also need opportunities to practice negotiation skills. Some adolescents struggle with being assertive in their friendships and dating relationships because they fear losing the friend or dating partner. Other adolescents confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness. Helping adolescents learn and practice appropriate assertiveness skills is important. Adolescents need to experience what it is like to stand up for themselves effectively, while still maintaining respect for the other person (and for themselves). Role plays that emphasize the difference between aggressiveness, assertiveness, and non assertiveness in relationships help adolescents understand the differences and the consequences of these different approaches to dealing with interpersonal conflict.
- Not all adolescents have a well-developed sense of empathy, but like other areas of interpersonal competence, empathy can be developed. Empathy is an important part of working out disagreements with others. Helping adolescents take the perspective of another individual and to consider that individual’s feelings facilitate the development of empathy.
- Youth also need to understand the importance of not subordinating their own needs for those of others. Although the subordination of one’s own needs for the needs of one’s partner may occur in mature, long term relationships, in a give and take fashion, it is not healthy to subordinate one’s own needs as a way to win friendship or approval. In adolescent or less mature relationships, such behavior typically does not engender true caring from others, but rather communicates to others that the youth can be taken advantage of and is not to be respected. It also should be pointed out that when one always gives in to the demands of others, this can lead one to feel unhappy, uncared for, and depressed.
- Normalize the role of conflict in relationships and how to manage conflict in ways that help healthy relationships grow. Also note the warning signs that indicate a relationship is not healthy or functional and what to do. Emphasize attention to signs indicating whether one is being respected within a relationship. If one or both partners do not respect each other, and mistreat one another, their relationship is not a healthy one.

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Maintaining Emotional and Physical Safety

Personal safety is defined as the absence of fear of physical or emotional violence within the relationship (Stanley, 2004). Importantly, research highlights characteristics of distinct types of unsafe and violent couple relationships (Johnson, 2008). The term “domestic violence” is often used to describe several different situations.

- **Intimate Violence:** One partner is violent and controlling on multiple levels, including intimidation, coercion and threats, economic abuse, isolation, and emotional abuse. (Johnson, 2008).
- **Violent Resistance:** One partner is violent and controlling while the other partner is violent but not controlling. This often happens when one partner fights back against the violence. (Johnson, 2008).
- **Situational Violence:** The individual is violent but neither partner is violent and controlling. The violence is provoked by a specific situation, such as during mismanaged couple conflict and emotional arousal. Although the violence is not consistent, it can be dangerous (Johnson, 2008). Situational couple violence has been viewed as an interactional process that is often reciprocal in nature. Reciprocity is seen in the escalation of negative behaviors from one partner toward the other in intimate relationships (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

Safety in expressing emotion refers to individuals' ability to freely express their emotions without fear. In many relationships it is safe for individuals to openly express their emotions without fear of retaliation or harm from their partner. However, in some relationships this is not the case. Research suggests that the expression of certain emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, resentment) can aggravate emotional tension, and thus increase the risk of aggression in a relationship (Marcus & Swett, 2002). In contrast, researchers have found that the expression of empathy and intimacy serve as two protective factors that soothe emotional tension and contribute to the creation and maintenance of safe relationships (Marcus & Swett, 2002). Importantly, this does not apply to couples experiencing intimate violence (for more information, see Johnson, 2008). It is important that marriage and relationship educators understand the signs of intimate partner violence and have response plans in place when working with couples where safety may be a concern (Ooms et al., 2006).



Domestic Violence Resources

- Building Collaborations Between Healthy Marriage & Relationship Education and Domestic Violence Programs. <http://www.vawnet.org/special-collections/DVHealthyMarriage.php>
- Center for Family Policy and Practice. <http://www.cffpp.org/pubdomviol.html>
- Family Violence Prevention: A Toolkit for Stakeholders. <http://tinyurl.com/fvp-toolkit-p>
- Family Violence Prevention and Services Program. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/programs/family-violence-prevention-services>
- Making Distinctions Among Different Types of Intimate Partner Violence. <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=403>
- Promoting Safety: A Resource Packet for Marriage and Relationship Educators and Program Administrators. <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=82>
- The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. <http://www.nrcdv.org>



Conclusion

Conflict is a part of every relationship, even healthy ones. It is how the couple manages the conflict that is related to couple satisfaction and stability. By managing negative emotions, soothing physiological responses, having a predominance of positivity in the relationship, accepting differences, using forgiveness, adopting a willingness to accept influence, empathizing, and working together, couples can be successful in conflict management. By focusing on these skills, as well as family safety, educators can assist couples in managing conflict in a safe, healthy way.

Implications for Practice



- In order to cultivate a willingness and ability to manage conflict and differences in couple relationships, it is helpful for educators to model and practice constructive conflict management approaches with program participants.
- Normalizing the continued existence of conflict in healthy couple relationships is an important awareness-raising element for programs. Raise awareness of key differences in habits, expectations, views, and beliefs, particularly for newly formed couples and offer strategies to discuss these differences.
- Promote the use of soft engagement and interaction strategies. Prevention of high negative emotional arousal includes using soft startups and perspective-taking. Explain what happens in the body when a person is put on the defensive and is emotionally aroused. Describe and offer opportunities to role play and practice relational skills, both behavioral and cognitive, that engage partners in initiating conversations that do not put the other on the defensive.
- Raise awareness of the signs of intimate partner violence and strategies for promoting safety.
- Clarify the value of forgiveness in relationships. Discussing what forgiveness is and how an individual can offer forgiveness is an important skill to teach to individuals and couples served. Encouraging a couple to practice asking for and giving forgiveness when conflict arises is important for managing conflict.
- Encourage the use of accepting influence and enhancement of empathy skills. Perspective-taking is a key element in a person's ability to accept the influence of another. When partners actively acknowledge and value each other's view, it strengthens their ability to manage stressors and conflict in their relationship.
- Address the value of a team approach to decision-making. Individuals in healthy couples express their value for each other by promoting "we-ness" when in conflict (see *Share*), rather than using a win-lose approach. Teach conflict management strategies that reinforce understanding and teamwork.



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