

FAMILY & CONSUMER *sciences*

Marriage Enrichment: *Conflict Resolution*

To be human is to experience conflict. Into every marriage a little rain must fall, but rain can help. Differences in opinions, values, desires, needs, and habits are the stuff of daily living with one another. Though most of us would rather avoid conflict, we can't if we are to maintain our marriage relationship. Early warning signs that conflict is escalating in a marriage is often seen in increased sarcasm, teasing, nit-picking, criticism, yelling, avoidance of one another, and stony silences.

Conflict in marriage can have any one or more root causes. Some of the more common causes observed by marriage counselors and researchers include:

- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of consideration, respect, or appreciation
- Lack of open affection or public acknowledgment of love
- Fear of intimacy
- Granting imaginary power to a partner; expecting him or her to "fix" things
- Too much — or not enough — dependency
- Inflexible gender roles
- Wanting partners to change
- Believing that being in love means you can say or do anything to your partner
- Taking each other for granted
- Unfulfilled sex life
- Financial instability
- Inability to forgive
- Problems with in-laws and family involvement
- Inability to fight fairly or deal with anger
- Inability to communicate effectively

Whether marital conflict is helpful or hurtful depends on the ways couples choose to play out these conflicts. Conflict resolution can be positive or negative. Positive resolution strengthens relationships by remaining focused on ideas, issues, values, and principles. Negative conflict management weakens relationships because it is based upon personalities, personality attacks, vindictiveness, and personal power struggles.

Whenever a couple becomes conflicted, it becomes the right and responsibility of both partners to work toward a positive solution. Bringing a conflict back to a positive basis once it has been allowed to deteriorate into negative conflict is very difficult. Each person must be prepared to make firm statements such as: "That is not the issue. The issue is..." or, "Let's not point fingers. Our problem, rather, is..." These statements are firm and meaningful, yet do not point at any particular person. When we focus on persons or personalities, rather than behaviors and issues, we are likely to provoke a defensive reaction. This only serves to escalate the conflict deterring positive resolution.

Almost everyone is aware of the results of *negative conflict*:

- It interrupts normal relations between marriage partners.
- It provokes hurtful, personally-harmful effects on the self-concept of each person.
- It causes resentment and hostility, and it makes rational discussion difficult or impossible.
- It robs the time and energy of the couple involved, causing confusion and insecurity.

Distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Employment and program opportunities are offered to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. North Carolina State University, North Carolina A&T State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments cooperating.

- It causes stress and resulting hardships.

Many people are less aware of the values of positive conflict, which are:

- It helps each partner understand what the other feels is important.
- It helps define and clarify a variety of issues and values.
- It can lead to a confrontation, that can bring out ideas, issues, and values in a way which clears the air.
- It can result in new understandings that can bring new “life blood” or growth to the marriage.
- It can bring a sense of respect to both partners.
- It can be the start of defining adjusted or new goals, that are more satisfactory to both.

Couples differ in their ability and desire to work together to resolve conflict. When a high degree of commitment toward cooperation exists in a marriage, both partners are ready to accept each other and work together. Sometimes, however, spouses may have problems in working together, which include:

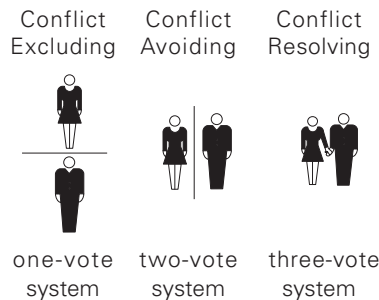
1. Disagreement on defining the problem (perception).
2. Disagreement on how to solve the problem.
3. Bad experience with past conflict management efforts.
4. Too much expected from each other (in tangibles or intangibles).
5. Fears: loss of independence, fear of rejection, fear of disrespect.
6. Personality conflict.
7. Differences in values.
8. Sense of imposed values.
9. Sense of imposed guilt.

When it seems impossible to come

into agreement, a third party, such as a counselor or clergy-person, may be able to help break the deadlock and enable the couple to get on with resolving the problem at hand.

Relational Styles Built Around Conflict

According to Dr. Britton Wood, Family Life Consultant from Fort Worth, Texas, there are three basic marital relational styles which address the issue of conflict. They are:



In the Conflict Excluding style only one spouse has the vote. Numerous cultures around the world have this as the dominant relational style in marriage, and it tends to work when both spouses want it. Conflicts are largely eliminated because one person in the marriage makes all the decisions. A major problem with this style of relationship is that the decision-maker often feels weighed down with the responsibility of the marriage, while the subordinate spouse feels squelched. The “two become one” often means that one’s identity is absorbed by the dominant spouse.

The Conflict Avoiding style of marriage is a two-vote system. The emphasis is on the fact that both spouses in the marriage have a voice, and certain “roles” are expected of each person. Both

partners can get along and avoid conflict, as long as each knows his or her roles and follows through in fulfilling those roles. Unrealistic expectations as to what the roles entail, however, sets the stage for increased conflict.

The Conflict Resolving style of marriage is a three-vote system; each spouse has a vote and the relationship itself has a vote. If something is okay for one of the partners but is not beneficial for the relationship, other options are sought. The main concern with this style is to nurture and cultivate the relationship. Often the vote for the relationship becomes the deciding vote.

Conflict Management

Conflict management calls for confrontation between marriage partners. This is never pleasant but, with the use of certain management strategies, hostility can be minimized as a workable solution is reached.

Timing will be important. Though you may want to plunge right ahead with the confrontation, you would be wise to ask whether your partner is in any shape to discuss the problem and whether your relationship can tolerate a confrontation at this particular time. You also have to assess whether your partner can do anything about the problem, whether there is enough time to work through any residual effects of bringing up the conflict, and whether you are expecting too much of the other person, the situation, or yourself.

Given this initial assessment and a subsequent decision to move ahead, you will be more effective if you use a cooperative, rather than adversarial, approach. Putting

your partner on the defensive is never a productive technique. There is a tendency to fight back harder or run away from the problem. During conflict and confrontation, gaining your spouse's cooperation will require the following:

1. Emphasizing mutual desire to solve the problem that exists.
2. Clearly spelling out the areas of cooperation needed and the time period involved.
3. Pointing out proven reasons for trusting each other.
4. Empathizing with one another; trying to encourage one another to express feelings; being sensitive to one another's fears; trying to see the other's point of view through his or her values; not judging.
5. Outlining benefits to be gained through cooperation.
6. Openly discussing any past problems and giving positive assurance that there is a genuine desire to work together.
7. Admitting past mistakes related to personality or value differences and assuming responsibility for them.

Robert Bolton, in his book entitled *People Skills*, outlines a three-step process for conflict resolution:

1. Treat your partner with respect. This is both a nonverbal and verbal task. You convey your respect or disrespect by the way you listen; the way you look at one another; your tone of voice; your selection of words; the type of reasoning you use. Please realize, however, it takes a great deal of will power to fight our

strong urges to put the other person down when we are threatened by disagreement.

2. Listen until you experience your partner's side of the issue. Often, in conflict, we don't really listen. It takes all of our patience just to wait until the other person "has his or her say" so we can get on with our real reason for being there ... to tell our side of the story. The goal of listening is to understand the content of your spouse's ideas, the meaning, it has for him or her, and the feelings he or she has about those ideas. That means stepping into his or her shoes for a bit, even if you don't like the fit of them. Carl Rogers, noted psychologist, had a rule: "Each person can speak up for himself only after he has first related the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately, and to that person's satisfaction."
3. State your views, needs, and feelings. Now, after you've given your spouse a legitimate and honest chance to speak, it's your turn. If you still feel you need to pursue the conflict further, try to follow these guidelines:
 - **Be** brief.
 - **Avoid** words and phrases that might indicate blaming or shaming the other.
 - **Say** what you mean and mean what you say. Don't withhold important information and don't exaggerate. Focus on the issue, not on personalities or what happened in the past
 - **Disclose** your feelings. Get it off your chest. But

do this carefully, rather than insistently. Avoid words like "always" or "never" or words that accuse and evaluate, such as "You ought to know better," and "If I were you...."

— **Maximize** the positive wherever possible and minimize the negative as much as possible.

Further Conflict Resolution Hints

- Keep the discussion objective and positive. Point out your concerns and ways you can contribute to a better relationship. Then ask for ideas from your spouse. Each partner must take responsibility for his or her own behavior.
- Try to identify the real problem or cause. Get to the bottom of the situation. Avoid tangents and "historical reviews."
- Be assertive not aggressive. State your position without threats. You're entitled to state your position but not at the expense of your partner.
- Make sure both of you understand the other's position. You don't have to agree. There are no rights and wrongs with feelings. Once you understand how your partner feels, you should be able to begin working toward a compromise.
- Avoid "no win" solutions. Try to find a shared understanding of the problem and a compromise for the conflict. Compromising to reach a solution will help both partners feel as if they have "won" to a certain degree.

- Be willing to admit mistakes. Many times we're so caught up in the "You should have..." routine that we fail to listen to the possibility that maybe we are the one wrong this time.
- Be patient. Allow time to cool down. Then continue to work toward a compromise or resolution.
- Be willing to admit when you can't make any further progress. If you know you've done your best to compromise, listen and avoid blaming, you may have to give the issue a rest and explore other approaches. Know when to quit.

Summary

Couples can often resolve conflicts by working to apply some of the principles just discussed. It is not unusual, however, for couples to become deadlocked; no matter how hard they try, they just can't seem to get past the conflicting situation. As mentioned earlier, outside help can often help couples to overcome the obstacles which keep them in conflict. A clergy-person may be trained to conduct counseling with such couples. Or look in the yellow pages of your phone book under Marriage Counselors and select one who is licensed or certified and who has a good reputation in the community.

Most conflict can be resolved, either as a couple or with the help

of a trained outside third party. What is absolutely necessary is the commitment of both spouses to the on-going welfare of their relationship.

References:

- Bolton, Robert (1979). *People skills*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kramer, Patricia (1995). *Causes of conflict in marriage*. Family Information Services, May issue, 26-29.
- Notarius, Clifford and Howard Markman (1993). *We can work it out: making sense of marital conflict*. New York : Putnam.
- Wood, Britton (1995). *Peer marriage*. Family Information Services, November issue, 45-58.



**North Carolina
Cooperative Extension Service**
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE & LIFE SCIENCES

Prepared by
D. Wayne Matthews
Human Development Specialist
North Carolina State University

10,000 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$750.00, or \$.15 per copy.

Published by
North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service