



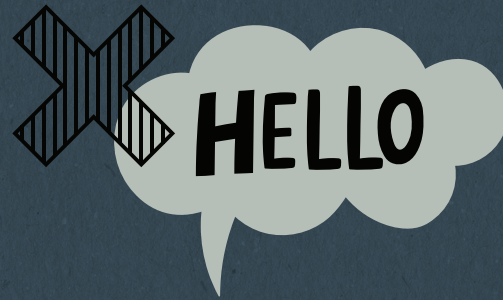
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Managing Conflict Toolkit

Building skills to help you
resolve conflict in a productive way

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**Welcome To Your Managing
Conflict Toolkit**

Conflict; What Does It Mean?

Conflict is defined as a disagreement or argument involving two or more people (or groups) about something significant. It represents difference in our beliefs, ideas, or interests and is a common occurrence in most relationships. Even the most agreeable, attentive and positive people will eventually find themselves in an argument at some point.

Our objective in relationships should not be to try and avoid conflict, but to manage the process in the most constructive manner possible in order to reduce the likelihood of injury or damage to the relationship.

In this toolkit, we will examine some concepts and beliefs regarding conflict, and provide tools and skills you can use to help resolve conflicts in the most productive ways possible.

Conflict; What Does It Mean?

Below are some unhealthy beliefs regarding conflict for couples

Mistaken Beliefs:

- If my partner loved me, he/she would not disagree with me.
- If my partner disagrees, he/she is challenging me, being disloyal, and it's a sign of disrespect.
- I am more rational (as opposed to emotional), so therefore, I am right.
- Conflict is about winning the argument (which also means someone's losing).

Contrast the beliefs above with these more balanced and realistic views

Healthy Beliefs:

- Conflict in a relationship is normal and unavoidable, and does not equal a challenge or competition.
- I cannot expect or demand my partner to agree with me.
- My partner is my equal and has his/her point of view, and I have mine.
- Conflict is about finding win-win outcomes.



In every conflict, there was a conversation the couple needed to have, but an argument occurred instead



Create A Win-Win Argument

If we have an attitude where there are “winners and losers” in arguments, this outlook will shape how we engage in the conflict process.

Lose-Lose Arguments

Even if a person happens to “win” the argument, it usually comes at a price. The other party might end up feeling resentful, humiliated, shamed, or angry because they “lost” the fight. Moving forward the “loser” may carry these negative sentiments into future interactions, potentially seeking retaliation and payback. In the end, both parties may feel the negative consequences of the argument’s conclusion.

Win-Win Arguments

The guiding principle in Win-Win disputes is maintaining the health and viability of the relationship should always matter more than the outcome of a particular conflict. If you do “win” an argument but ultimately hurt the other person and damage the relationship, everyone loses.

The objective is to work towards compromises and solutions, always keeping in mind the health of the relationship, and each other’s wellbeing.



Parts Of An Argument

Issue- Emotions- Process-

In the heat of an argument, it can often feel like a messy whirlwind of words, opinions, accusations, attitudes, and emotions.

However, if you tear apart any argument or disagreement, you'll discover it is most often made up of three parts. All three are active and "in play" at all times during a conflict.

Argument = Issue + Emotions + Process

Issue:

This is the actual topic you are arguing about. It represents the differences in our beliefs, ideas, or interests. The differences we have can involve some very big or very small concerns.

Example - Should we spend Saturday night out with friends, or have a quiet night at home?

Example - Should we relocate and move to another city for better job opportunities, or stay here?

Issue- Emotions- Process-

Emotions:

This part captures the emotions that arise during (and before) the conflict. It is important to recognize the emotional state that each person brings into the conflict and how this may affect the course and outcome of a conflict.

Process:

This part represents the How of the argument: the structure. Who initiated the conversation? How was the concern brought forward? Where and when is it taking place? Are there any rules or guidelines to help manage the conflict? Who is present?

The Process is a critical factor in successfully and productively managing our conflicts. We will examine two key tools to assist the process piece in the next module - Rules for Fighting Fair and Timeouts.

Recognizing that these three parts are present in all arguments can help us respond more directly and effectively to What and How the other person is communicating.

[Click here to learn more about Parts Of An Argument](#)



Healthy Arguments

The Rules

As we noted earlier, conflict is common in most (if not all) relationships, and how we manage conflict impacts the quality and satisfaction of our relationships. Therefore, it makes sense to have a game plan for when conflict does arise.

Introducing the - Rules for Healthy Arguments

I don't think any of us would attempt to play a card game without first knowing the rules; the same should go for arguing. Each person needs to know what behavior is acceptable, what is not acceptable, and mutually agree to follow the rules. Basically, this is about the Do's and Don'ts of conflict.

While there are no absolute rules that everyone must follow, we will cover some generally accepted principles and guidelines of conflict. The key here is to discuss, develop, and agree to your own version of the rules with the partner or person you will/might be in conflict with.

It is highly recommended that you create your rules prior to jumping into a conflict situation.

[Rules for Healthy Arguments worksheet](#)



Timeouts

What Is A Timeout?

By definition a Timeout is when a person steps away from the discussion in order to “cool off” or gather their thoughts. It’s a little like hitting a Pause and Reset button for yourself if you feel the argument is getting out of hand. While this may sound simple to describe, it can be difficult to do in the heat of the moment.

So, in order to use Timeouts effectively and equally during a conflict, it’s important to have a plan of action, just like we did with our

Fighting Fair rules. Timeouts should always include a purpose, structure and principles.



Timeouts should never be used as a tactic to avoid a difficult conversation, or to control/manipulate the other person

[Follow the link to see a sample of Timeout Guidelines](#)

What Is A Timeout?

When creating your own guidelines and process for using Timeouts, consider answering the following questions:

- **When is the right time to use a Timeout?**
- **Who can ask for a Timeout?**
- **How should a Timeout request be communicated to the other person?**
- **How long should a Timeout last?**
- **What is the agreed to purpose of a Timeout?**
- **What should both people do (and NOT do) during a Timeout?**
- **What's the best way to re-engage in the discussion after a Timeout?**
- **Can a Timeout request be denied?**

If used thoughtfully and fairly, Timeouts can become a dependable strategy in managing your most challenging conversations.



Emotional Regulation

Increase Physical Activity

Whenever two people engage in a discussion about a subject they are anxious or passionate about, invested in or challenged by, there's a pretty good chance their emotions and bodily sensations will become activated. Rest assured this is a normal and natural response in these moments.

If our emotions become too escalated during a conflict (i.e. anger, anxiety, fear, etc.), this could derail the conversation and even possibly become an obstacle to continuing a healthy dialogue. When a person has this type of an intense and elevated emotional experience, it is called emotional dysregulation.

It's important to have some tools or techniques you can use in these emotionally-charged moments. Below are three common emotional regulation techniques you can try:

1: Counting your breath “4-5-6 breathing”

- Take a deep breath and slowly breathe into your belly, silently counting to 4.
- Hold your breath and silently count from 1 to 5.
- Breathe out slowly and completely, counting from 1 to 6
- Repeat this at least five times (as many times as necessary).

Increase Physical Activity

2: Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR was developed in the 1920's and involves tightening and then relaxing muscle groups in a particular pattern. Physical relaxation corresponds with mental relaxation. PMR is a simple, concrete way to develop relaxation and down-regulate your emotions.

Click to listen to and/or download a Progressive Muscle Relaxation audio file.

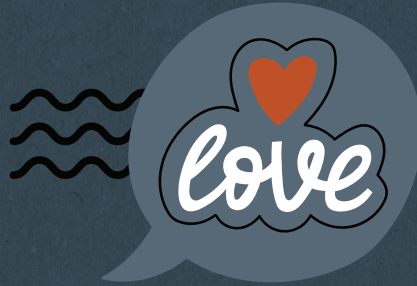
3: The Five Senses

Calm your emotions and thoughts by tuning into the present moment through your five senses. Being present and mindful in the moment and connecting to your body helps ground your awareness and regulate your emotions.

Ask yourself, what are:

- 5 things I see
- 4 things I feel (touch)
- 3 things I hear
- 2 things I smell
- 1 thing I taste

Practice using these techniques whenever you're feeling emotionally unsettled due to a conflict.



**Conflict Management Skills:
Empathy**

Empathy

Empathy is commonly defined as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. This is in contrast to sympathy, which is to feel sorrow or pity for a person's condition.

Empathy is also a critical skill in successfully resolving a conflict. Empathy encourages us to relate to what the other person is thinking and feeling in the moment and reflecting back what we hear, and that we understand and care. Being empathetic does not mean we have to necessarily agree with the other person, rather it's simply recognizing what it must feel like to be them.

Empathy is a skill that will developed and strengthen with practice.

Being empathetic is not always easy to do, especially in a heated argument. However, if our goal is collaboration and common understanding in order to resolve a dispute, empathy encourages us to be fully present, listen deeply, and be emotionally connected with the other person involved.

Empathy

Some principles to keep in mind when being empathetic are:

- **Focus on the other person. Take their perspective: Try and see the issue through their eyes.**
- **Suspend any judgment and criticism.**
- **Validate their thoughts and emotions: Let them know you hear and understand their feelings and opinions.**
- **Just be there with them: Remain open to the moment.**

When we experience an empathetic response it “fuels connection” between people, as researcher and author Brené Brown says, and creates closeness in our relationships. Conversely, a lack of empathy in intimate relationships can create distance, judgment, and may ultimately lead to a more disconnected relationship.

[Click to read the article - Empathy: the ‘Secret Ingredient’ in Relationships](#)



Conflict Management Skills: Active Listening

Active Listening

The ability to accurately hear what another person is saying, get their complete story, acknowledge what is being communicated and then respond appropriately creates a foundation of trust, respect and connection in a relationship.

Listening effectively is more difficult than it appears – our opinions, judgments and agendas can often get in the way. Rather than focusing on understanding what the other person is actually saying, we are often waiting for our turn to respond in the conversation. By placing our full attention on the person speaking we can avoid listening for what we want to hear, or think we hear.

Active Listening can be broken down into a set of four sub-skills:

1: Paraphrasing

Reflecting back to the other person what you just heard them say. It shows them you are paying attention and hearing them correctly. You can do this with summarizing phrases such as, “What I’m hearing is…” or “What you are saying is…”

Active Listening

2: Clarifying

Being curious and asking questions (specific and open-ended questions) to get more information to better understand the other person's experience, situation, feelings and needs.

3: Body Language

Paying attention to the person's body language and nonverbal cues (i.e. tone of voice, posture, eye contact, etc.) to deepen your understanding of their story.

4: Feedback

Sharing your reaction to the other person and what you thought or felt about what the other person said. It is not trying to fix or solve their issue. You can do this with phrases such as, "This must be very difficult for you" or "Now I see why you feel so frustrated."

Use Active Listening combined with empathy to improve connection in your relationships.

Active Listening Obstacles

Some of the obstacles to effective Active Listening are:

Judging: This gets in the way of understanding the other person. Saying something like “You shouldn’t feel that way” or “It’s not that important” or “That’s a waste of time” diminishes the other person’s experience.

Fixing: Again this ignores what the person is saying. Only go to problem solving if asked by the other person.

Interrupting: Avoid jumping in with opinions or reactions and allow the person speaking to come to a natural end of their story. You can use verbal confirmations like, “I see” or “I know” “Sure” or “Go on” or “I understand” to indicate you are listening.

Arguing: This is about debating the situation, rather than just listening e.g. “You never think about me, only yourself.”

Being Right: Here you try to justify your point of view. It’s about winning the argument, not listening to the other person.



Conflict Management Skills: Core Values

Core Values

Our personal core values are the feelings, beliefs, and principles we have that guide and motivate our individual lives. Everyone has a unique set of values which have been shaped by our personal upbringing, life experiences, culture and many other factors.

You could consider core values like our inner compass that points to how we want to act in the world, what sort of person we want to be, and the life we want to live. Click to see a sample list of core values.

Why are personal values relevant and important in helping us manage conflict?

In an earlier section, we learned that arguments have three main components – the issue, emotions, and the process. However, underlying these factors are also each person's core values which tend to surface in a dispute if we look for them. They represent the What and Why of a person's motivations, opinions, beliefs, or preferences within the argument.

For example, imagine a couple having a very classic argument about money.

Partner A – complains and criticizes Partner B for over-spending, wasting money on frivolous things, and not watching the couple’s budget.

Partner B – complains and criticizes Partner A of being stingy, cheap, a penny-pincher, and always saying NO to any expenditures.



Who is right and who is wrong here?

If we dig a little deeper within the argument, we might uncover each person’s core values on display. Consider this possibility:

Partner A – they value pleasure, excitement, spontaneity, and moments to deeply enjoy life.

Partner B – they value stability, security, certainty and are averse to taking risks in life.

When we examine the argument through a core values lens, we see a much different disagreement happening. The conflict isn’t really about money; it is about what we value most in life and represents a difference in core values.

[Click here for a Identifying Our Core Values worksheet](#)