

Managing Conflict in the Couple Relationship

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The old adage states that a committed romantic relationship is built on the pillars of patience, trust, open communication, and mutual emotional understanding. Yes, the recipe for a long-lasting love prescribes for participants to live these ideals to a fault; but what happens when one or both partners falter on these ideals? Conflict is sure to follow. The truth of the matter is that without adequate maintenance, the best vehicle will collapse over time. This is even more true of our love relationships (Gottman and Gottman, 2008). In a seminal work entitled *Gottman Method Couple Therapy*, Gottman and Gottman (2008) provide a blueprint for handling negative affect during times of conflict in the couple relationship, and they provide detailed explanations for how to achieve this task.

Research seems to suggest that some conflict is unavoidable in relationships. While conflict is usually regarded as a negative construct in our society, we must also acknowledge that conflict serves a number of prosocial functions. These functions include: selecting which interpersonal interactions do not work, helping us to know one another as we change, and constantly helping us renovate the courtship (Gottman & Levenson, 1988). Therefore, we should not make attempts to eradicate conflict from our romantic lives altogether; instead our goal should be to work towards understanding the dynamics of the relationship so that we may be better equipped to handle conflicts when they do arise.

### Step 1: Process Fights and Other Regrettable Events

Gottman and Gottman (2008) indicate that a useful strategy for couples to employ when attempting to manage conflict in the relationship is to process fights and other

regrettable events. Processing an argument entails the partners discussing the argument without getting back into it. In order to achieve this task, partners must take turns talking about what they were feeling during the incident, validating what the other partner is expressing, admitting their role in the conflict, and exploring ways to make the conversation run more smoothly next time.

#### Step 2: Reducing the Four Horsemen

Partners must reduce the occurrence of those factors which are typically involved in relationship dissolution. Gottman and Gottman (2007) called these predictors the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and they call for the partners to be aware of these constructs so that they may be able to reduce their occurrence. The first horseman is *Criticism*, and it is characterized by one partner criticizing the other partner's character. Harsh criticism can be monumentally damaging in the couple relationship because it can lead to resentment, anger, sadness, and shame. It can even lead to retaliatory behaviors from the partner who is being criticized. Instead of name-calling and identifying alleged character deficits, partners should be gentle in the manner in which they phrase their complaint(s) in order to avoid some of these potential maladaptive response patterns.

The second horseman is *Defensiveness*, and this is usually a partner's attempt to protect him/herself by becoming argumentative. In addition, this partner might even wage a counterattack on the other partner who is involved in the conflict. In order to overcome defensiveness, one must take responsibility for his/her part in the problem. This step is important to engage because a deeper understanding of one's role in the negative event can often lead to awareness about how one's own behavior may be impacting the other partner.

The third horseman is *Contempt*, and this describes “a statement [that is] made from a position of superiority that often includes sarcasm, direct insults, name-calling, or something more subtle” (like correcting the other person’s grammar when one is angry (Gottman & Gottman, 2007, p. 145). The antidote for contempt is to completely eradicate it and replace it with respect. In order to foster an environment of respect and appreciation for the other person, each partner must be proactive and seek out actions of the other partner to appreciate. In addition, partners may take turns expressing their appreciation for each other either spontaneously or by enacting some other gesture of affection. The goal here is for the couple to see the positive in their partners, not the contemptible.

The fourth horseman is *Stonewalling*, and this construct involves an emotional disconnection from the interaction. An individual who is stonewalling another might decrease his/her verbal and non-verbal responses to what another person is expressing, giving the appearance that he/she is in fact, a stone wall. In order to overcome a stonewalling stance, the partner who expressing this characteristic should self-soothe and reduce physiological provocation. In addition, this partner must commit to staying emotionally engaged so that meaningful discussion can take place. Once the partner is able to do this, he/she may begin to express the feelings he/she was attempting to avoid by putting up this stone wall.

### Step 3: A Blueprint for Speaker and Listener

Rapoport’s (1960) seminal work with conflict resolution suggests that conflict discussions should be gentle. Partners must commit to adhering to a gentle discussion of the problem(s) and should be willing to take turns being the speaker and the listener as

the issues(s) are being discussed. The blueprint for this type of action is as follows: Both partners must take a paper and a pen, and they should feel free to take notes throughout the course of this exercise. One partner will be the speaker and the other will be the listener. The speaker must do all the speaking and the listener must not talk or interrupt the speaker during this time. The speaker should speak for a brief period of time (e.g. 30 seconds or 1 minute), and he/she should only use “I” statements when discussing a specific issue or when expressing personal needs and desires. The listener must then restate what the speaker has said to the speaker’s satisfaction, and then validate what was expressed. When this is done, the speaker and listener will then switch roles and continue with the exercise. The goal of this technique is to increase awareness regarding each of the partner’s experiences.

#### Step 4: Problem Solving and Compromise – A Concentric Circle Approach

Once partners have made efforts to understand one another’s feelings, problem solving can then begin. Each person should draw two concentric circles on a sheet of paper and then identify a core need that they cannot compromise on. These needs should be written inside the inner circle of each of the partners’ concentric circle designs. The partners should take turns discussing what they have each written. Partners must each identify their core needs and explain why these needs are so important to them. Partners must listen intently and respond in a calm manner. Once these needs have been discussed thoroughly, the partners can then move into an area of flexibility and make agreements that will help them develop functional and healthy compromises.

Although most relationships experience conflict, research seems to indicate that most stable and satisfying relationships generally take a gentle approach to conflict. In

other words, partners will typically soften the manner in which they broach issues. Furthermore, each partner will listen intently to what the other partner is expressing and they will allow themselves to be influenced by the information that they are receiving. These couples generally compromise, repair negative events early, and accept repair attempts that are presented by the other partner (Gottman & Gottman, 2007). Although most couple problems stem from differences in personality structures and personal needs, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of many of these problems can be improved. Communication is key to increasing understanding and working through some of life's challenges in the context of the couple relationship.

## References

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