

Conflict in Relationships

Conflict can affect relationships in positive and negative ways.

Conflict can be good for a relationship if it:

- **Resolves misunderstandings:** Conflict often arises from misunderstandings. Resolving misunderstandings can help improve communication in the relationship.
- **Surfaces unmet needs:** Conflict can also be caused by failure to consider each other's needs and wishes. Communicating with each other and being considerate of each other's needs can help improve emotional intimacy in the relationship.
- **Encourages problem-solving:** Though conflict is not pleasant, discussing issues can help partners find solutions.
- **Enables growth:** Conflict can offer an opportunity for growth, as individuals and as a couple.

These are some of the ways conflict can harm a relationship:

- **Becomes a habit:** Conflict can become an unhealthy habit, leading to a repetitive pattern where one or both partners constantly feel hopeless because there is no resolution in sight. This can spiral into resentment and lead to frequent inflammatory or toxic interactions between partners.
- **Festers and grows:** Not addressing issues as they occur or reoccur is a mistake, because it causes them to fester. Unresolved conflict can result in stress and constant rumination about the dissatisfactory elements of your partner or your relationship.
- **Harms mental well-being:** Constantly dwelling on mistakes and perceived shortcomings can lead to a vicious cycle that puts you at risk for mental health problems and emotional distress, which has been linked to the development of anxiety, depression, and substance use.² Stress can also result in poor sleeping patterns, unhealthy eating habits, blood pressure issues, or heart conditions.

How to Address Relationship Conflict

Recognize Triggers

When either person is triggered, explore what triggered them. These are educational indicators, so taking the opportunity to learn about the “why” can help you avoid them in the future.

Avoid being negative when discussing triggers. Instead, speak calmly and understand that even if you don’t agree, both your viewpoints are still equally valid. The goal is to gain insights into how to manage conflict in the future.

Create a Plan to Address the Conflict

Creating a plan to address problems, whether chronic or solvable, can start the process of alleviation. You want to ask one another “What actionable steps can we take to address the problem causing these emotional reactions?”

Deciding to agree to disagree can be part of your plan of action to create happiness and minimize discontent.

Evaluate Your Needs

These are some factors to think about as you work on finding solutions:

- How do you want to be loved?
- How does that differ from how your partner wants to be loved?
- How do you and your partner express love?
- Are your definitions of love modelled from anywhere (such as caregivers, books, movies, etc.)?
- How do you both cultivate and honour that for one another?

Understand Conflict Rituals

Everyone reacts to conflict differently. The way you and your partner process conflict is a conflict ritual.

Define what your conflict rituals are. For instance, do you have to be left alone to think and process on your own first? Do you need to have it resolved before going to bed or can it wait until you are both ready and regulated? Do you prefer to talk it out with loved ones or keep it between the two of you?

Sometimes conflict rituals can be a source of conflict in themselves. For example, if your partner chooses to run away, you may get upset about that. However, understanding your partner's reactions to conflict and developing a healthy mechanism to process and deal with conflict can help resolve it.

Don't let issues go unaddressed, or they fester and get worse.

As far as possible, try to discuss and decide on a mutually beneficial outcome as soon as the issue occurs. If it's not possible to address it immediately, decide on a time when you can discuss it in the near future.

Conflict Management

Conflict management is the ongoing process of addressing and handling chronic issues in a relationship. It aims to minimize the negative impact of the conflict and maintain a functional relationship.

Chronic issues are problems that get revisited time and time again. She explains that these situations are persistent and require management to maintain the peace and keep them from disrupting the relationship.

If, for example, you and your partner have very different tastes in movies and that is a source of repeated conflict in your relationship, a simple conflict management solution would be to compromise and take turns picking the movie. This doesn't necessarily solve the issue of having different tastes in movies, but it helps manage the conflict that can arise as a result.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution, on the other hand, specifically focuses on finding a final solution for a solvable conflict. It aims to address the root causes of the issue, find a mutually satisfactory solution to the problem, eliminate conflict, and restore harmony in the relationship.

For example, if you and your partner share a joint account and your partner makes an expensive luxury purchase from it without telling you, you may feel angry and frustrated in response to this conflict. The process of conflict resolution may involve sharing your feelings about what happened with your partner, explaining what you need, and requesting you consult with each other before making any purchases over a certain dollar amount from your joint account, make big personal purchases from an individual account, or another solution that feels acceptable for both of you. You and your partner can work together to reach conflict resolution by collaborating and coming to an agreement on how to handle big purchases from your joint account moving forward.