

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

(OR HOW TO FIGHT FAIR)

Conflict is a normal part of human relations. Whether between husband and wife or other family members conflicts arise as we all try to meet our needs, wants, and desires. These normal disagreements can be worked out in a structure that leads to greater understanding and support for the couple or family or they can lead to a path of misunderstanding and conflict for the couple or family.

Outlined below is a structure that will help you to better understand and manage conflict in a way that will enhance your relationship. This structure is based on the concept of an equal relationship in which each partner has a right to his/her opinion and no coercion is used against any other person. The object is not to “win” or “score points” but to resolve conflicts in a way that increases our understanding of our selves and our partners and strengthens the relationship.

The best way to deal with any conflict is to avoid it; so prevention is always the best cure. Your grandmother’s suggestion to count to 10 slowly when you are upset is as sound today as it was in her time. We know that strong emotions release chemicals into your body that prepare you for “fight or flight” and that these chemicals override your reason and may lead you to actions and words that you may later regret.

Deep breathing and taking a short walk when facing an emotional situation will give you time to reflect on the situation and give you the opportunity to put the situation in a context or seek other information before you respond. You may then be able to reframe the situation in such a way that it is no longer a conflict but becomes a problem for you and the other(s) to solve. A corollary to this is postponing a disagreement to a later time. For instance, if you come home late from work and both you and your partner are tired after a long day it would be appropriate that you postpone discussing an emotionally laden topic until later because neither of you have the strength or energy to deal effectively with the issue and there is a strong possibility that this could lead to a blowup. This is not an excuse to avoid the issue. Just to deal with it at a time when both partners can better handle the situation.

If a conflict cannot be avoided there are five rules that need to be followed to keep the situation from becoming destructive:

1. Stay in the present: Stick to the issue and don’t be side tracked because your husband forgot your anniversary or never takes out the garbage. If the issue is helping with the dishes keep discussing the dishes until you can come to some resolution or until you are heard.

2. Listen to what your partner is saying and try to listen for the feeling: This works best if your emotional system is not activated but with practice can be used anytime. Most of the time when we are upset we want to be heard and supported and this can go a long way to defuse even a highly emotional issue.
3. When you have a problem own it: If you own the problem you give your partner the maximum opportunity to hear you and give you the support and understanding you need. One model for doing this is the “When, I Feel, Because. It works like this: “When you don’t take the garbage out like we agreed I feel angry and hurt because you are not following through on our agreement and that make me feel like you don’t respect me.” This format gives you the best opportunity to be heard and your partner the greatest latitude to respond.
4. When emotions reach meltdown take a break: As soon as emotions reach a certain level they override reason and you will say and do things that you may later regret. Come back in half an hour and work on resolving the problem. The break is recognition that as long as emotions rule It is not possible to get to a mutually agreed upon solution.
5. You can agree to disagree. As long as both sides are heard and respected you can hold differing views on a subject and still live together.

Work at treating your partner or family member with the same kind of respect that you give to your best friend. In intimate relationships remember the 3A's: adapt to your situation, adjust to changing circumstances, accommodate to the needs in your life. Don't be afraid to ask your partner for what you need. In a loving relationship that is what we are here for. Finally, if you find yourself in trouble get help. No one prepared you for this kind of intimate relationship and there is no shame in recognizing a problem and getting help to fix it. The effort is more than worth it.