

Communicating for Effective Conflict Resolution

Objective: *To help couples restructure communication patterns for successful conflict resolution*

You Should Know

All couples experience differences and disagreements. Research indicates that the level of disagreement is not related to marital happiness as much as *how* conflict is handled. Often conflict is rooted in misunderstood, manipulated, or “avoided” communications. Happy couples don’t avoid disagreements; they resolve those disagreements in a respectful, clear, caring manner. Effective communication is essential to healthy relationships. Clear communication is a window into the world of your partner. Truly being “heard” strengthens relationships.

When disagreements turn into personal insults, name-calling, raised voices, or mocking tones, the discussion is no longer productive. Pause the conversation if the disagreement becomes personal.

Information obtained during this exercise is designed to educate you and your partner about each other’s needs, effectively resolving conflict while avoiding common (and destructive) patterns. Be mindful to focus on the issue/problem/conflict without placing blame on your partner.

Does This Sound Like You?

Annie (42) and Brian (age 44) have been married for 15 years. They have three very active children, and the focus of their marriage has turned to raising their children and paying the household expenses. Brian works more than 50 hours/week and Annie works part-time in order to be available for their children. They have drifted apart, and the focus of their relationship is centered around their children’s needs and activities – as well as ensuring they have enough money saved for college tuition and retirement. Recently their discussions have become more heated, and their arguments have become hurtful (shouting, interrupting, blaming – typically followed by a few days of icy distance from one another). Annie believes that counseling will be helpful because their communication and disengagement has damaged their relationship. Brian says they have no time to fit in counseling considering their busy schedules.

How is your relationship similar to Annie and Brian’s? How is it different?

Have you ever been confronted with a similar situation? How did you manage the situation?

What do you think Annie and Brian could do differently when conflict arises? Write some notes here.

What to Do

This exercise will teach you the “Couples Dialogue” strategy for resolving conflict. There are three steps to this process:

Mirroring – This is the process of accurately reflecting back the content of a message
(Example: *paraphrasing what your partner just said to you*).

During conflict we often focus on getting our own point across rather than listening to our partner. Before responding to your partner, re-state what they have said to you – in your own words. Continue this until your partner agrees that you fully understand.

Validation – Let your partner know that the information received and mirrored makes sense; you are making the effort to see the issue from your partner’s point of view and understanding what is true for your partner. This doesn’t mean you agree with your partner; trust and closeness are enhanced when your partner feels validated, listened to, and understood.

(Example: say “I can see that...” or “I understand why you might take it that way...”)

Empathy – The process of reflecting your partner’s feelings and emotions at a deep level – recognize, reach into, and (on some level) experience the emotions of your partner.

(Example: “I sense your frustration...” or “I understand how much you’re hurting right now...”)

Empathy offers remarkable healing power. *Remember to use “I” statements and take responsibility for your own feelings/emotions.*

Being accurately heard and understood initiates healing in relationships. Partners no longer feel as if they must cut off parts of themselves in order to be loved and accepted. Defensiveness, aggression, and other unhealthy communication tactics are minimized. Good communication skills may not solve all of the problems within your relationship, but nothing can be successfully resolved without it!

1. Set a time and a place for discussion.

Place _____ Date _____

Time of day _____

2. Define the problem/issue/conflict to be addressed (be specific):

3. List any past attempts to resolve the issue:

4. Discuss potential solutions to this issue (don't judge or criticize the suggestions).

Acknowledge each partner's needs - what is the desired outcome?

5. Discuss each solution. Be as objective as possible, while practicing **mirroring** and **validation**.

Listen carefully and accurately paraphrase each message while clearly and honestly communicating with one another. Validate each other's experience of this process and **empathize** with your partner's feelings. As you share potential solutions the level of vulnerability will increase. Use all of information gathered in a loving and supportive manner (*not as a weapon to hurt your partner*). Agree on the solution and determine how each partner will work toward this solution (*be specific*):

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in effectively communicating with your partner during conflicts?
