

Common Myths About Conflict in Relationships

Myth #1: *In a healthy relationship, couples never argue.*

Fact: Even healthy couples have disagreements and conflict from time to time. In fact, on average, healthy and unhealthy couples disagree about the same number of things. The difference is not the number of disagreements, but how they are handled. When happy couples disagree, they listen and respect each other. Also, they are truthful, and willing to apologize and forgive. Perhaps most importantly, they are never violent!



Myth #2: *Jealousy is a sign of love. Partners who are not jealous do not care.*

Fact: Jealousy is not an indicator of a person's love for another. In a healthy relationship, neither partner does things to make the other feel jealous nor does a person feel jealous for no reason! Ask yourself this question: *Why* is your partner jealous? When one shows jealousy or is suspicious about a partner's actions, this is not a sign of a healthy relationship – nor a sign of love.

Myth #3: *As long as the children do not see it, they are not impacted by conflict.*

Fact: Families are like a system made up of many different parts – if one part of the system is having difficulty, its effects can be felt by every other part. Higher levels of marital problems negatively affect how children feel and behave, leading to feelings of depression, yelling, and/or acting out. Conflict between parents can also negatively impact the quality of parenting that children receive.



Myth #4: *I am who I am, I cannot change the way I react when I am angry or upset.*

Fact: Everyone reacts in different ways when angry, frustrated, or upset. However, feelings of anger and frustration in conflict do not need to control us – rather we can control how we react to those feelings. Individuals can practice various strategies to “cool” or calm down in order to get a handle on their intense emotions.

Myth #5: *Forgiveness means saying that what my partner did was okay.*

Fact: Forgiving someone does not mean that you believe what the person did was acceptable. Further, forgiveness does not imply denying or forgetting about an offense, making excuses for it, or opening the door for the person to hurt you again. When you forgive, you are making a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of making your partner pay for what they did. You are agreeing to give your partner and the relationship another chance.

Myth #6: Conflict only becomes abusive once there is physical violence.

Fact: Abuse can occur in various forms. It can be physical, like hitting, shoving, slapping, or sexual coercion. Abuse can also be emotional and involve things like shaming, belittling, name-calling, inducing guilt, or making comments that devalue the victim. Such abuse can occur both during and outside of times of conflict. All forms of abuse are dangerous.



Myth #7: Once you find the right person, you will be consistently happy and feel complete.

Fact: While being in a relationship with someone who is committed and caring will bring happiness, there will be times of unhappiness and frustration. Times of conflict will occur. Also, being in a relationship with someone does not mean that all your desires and wishes will be fulfilled by them. No one can give you an identity, a sense of worth, or a purpose – you must gain these qualities yourself. Being happy and having a good relationship has a lot to do with how developed and healthy you are personally.



Myth #8: Opposites attract.

Fact: Healthy relationships are based on two people having more similarities than differences. No two people will be entirely alike and differences will exist (things that make relationships exciting and also frustrating!). Strong relationships are built on common ground where two people share a lot of the same interests, values, and goals. Picking a partner who shares many of the same values, beliefs, interests, and life goals will help to reduce the amount of conflicts that arise in a relationship. But remember, conflict is normal and happens in all relationships.



Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90CT0151. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

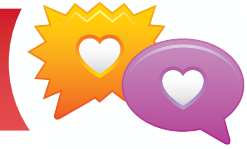
Adapted in part from Pearson, M. F. (2007). *Relationships smarts plus*. Berkeley, CA: Dibble Institute.

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Anger (Mis)Management



In any relationship, feelings of anger are going to occur. The intensity of angry feelings varies from person to person and from couple to couple. How you deal with anger can affect you and your relationship.

How do you deal with anger?

Below is a list of different ways that some individuals deal with their anger. Think back to some recent times when you were angry. What did you do? Check each behavior below that describes ways you tend to deal with anger.

Five common myths about anger

- If you don't look angry, you're not.
- If you ignore anger, it will go away.
- If you vent, it will go away.
- Holding anger in will not harm you.
- Expressing anger or hurt will harm your relationship.

Physical or Verbal Anger

- I am forceful when things don't go my way.
- If I am upset, I'll hit something.
- If things are bad enough, I'll throw something.
- I swear loudly to blow off steam.
- I feel like hitting someone who makes me very angry.

Suppressed Anger

- I avoid or withdraw from people.
- I overeat, drink, or take drugs.
- I try not to let my anger show.
- I feel uncomfortable expressing my anger.

Passive Anger

- I complain about people behind their backs but not to their faces.
- I pout and feel sorry for myself.
- I use sarcasm to make people look or feel bad.
- I become silent to make it obvious I am unhappy.
- I get depressed/moody.

Active Anger Management

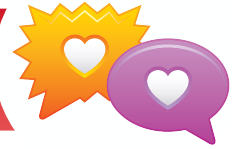
- I disagree with others without attacking on a personal level.
- I disagree with others without being defensive.
- I don't hold grudges or seek revenge when problems cannot be resolved.
- I take time to calm down before talking with others about disagreements.
- I politely, but firmly tell others when I am angry.
- I look for mutually agreeable solutions when people disagree with me.

Did you check mostly physical or verbal, suppressed, or passive anger behaviors? If so, work on using more active anger management techniques. This approach includes identifying the original cause of the anger, expressing the anger in appropriate ways, and having strategies to calm down.

Managing conflict well requires managing your anger well.



How Our Bodies Respond to Stress



Stress is something that impacts our entire body. When faced with certain stressful situations, our bodies respond by releasing certain stress hormones. These stress hormones cause us to either “flight” (e.g., turn or walk away and avoid conflict) or “fight” (e.g., engage in an unhealthy, possibly physically or emotionally violent, way). Understanding what is happening inside our bodies can help us know when we need time to calm down before addressing important issues.

Here is a quick three step guide to help you remember how stress can affect us.



Step 1: *Clear plastic water bottle – calm, glitter resting on the bottom.*

- This represents the “normal” state of stress hormones in the brain when we are calm. During these times, we can hear others more accurately, perceive things more clearly, and process information more calmly.



Step 2: *Pick up and shake bottle, so the glitter is swirling around.*

- This represents the “stressful” state (when we are in a conflict, argument, etc.) when the brain has released stress hormones throughout the body.
- As you can see, it is much more difficult to see through the bottle. These stress hormones in our bodies can hinder our ability to think clearly and process information before we speak, which puts us at risk of saying things we may later regret.



Step 3: *Bottle returned to undistributed position, with glitter re-settling to bottom and water becoming clear.*

- This represents a return to the “normal” state, when we are able to see more clearly and process information more calmly.
- In order for the glitter to settle, the bottle cannot continue to be swirled but needs to be set down. Similarly, our bodies need time to calm down.

**Being calm = Clear bottle = Clear thinking
Good time to MANAGE conflict and stress.**

**High stress and conflict = Fuzzy bottle = Fuzzy thinking
Bad time to MANAGE conflict and stress.**

What does this mean for couple relationships?

During a disagreement, if you are beginning to lose your cool, step away and take some time for yourself. Once you and your partner are calm, you may continue the conversation. It takes time for our bodies to “cool” down and the amount of time this takes may differ for each person. During this time, do something that will help you relax and take your mind off the conflict to help your body to return to a calm state.

Knowing the right (and wrong) time to deal with a conflict can help in being able to manage it.



Getting Worked Up

Recognizing Anger Signs

Our bodies react when we have strong negative emotions, such as anger. Getting angry is not something that just occurs in our heads, but it impacts the entire body. Knowing the types of things that signal our anger can help prevent times of intense anger from spiraling out of control. Which of the following signs or symptoms do you experience most when you are angry?

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased breathing rate | <input type="checkbox"/> Nausea | <input type="checkbox"/> Increased appetite |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart pumping faster | <input type="checkbox"/> Shortness of breath | <input type="checkbox"/> Tapping fingers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Higher blood pressure | <input type="checkbox"/> Dizziness | <input type="checkbox"/> Cramps |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sweating | <input type="checkbox"/> Feel like you're in a "fog" | <input type="checkbox"/> Backaches |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cold hands, sweaty palms | <input type="checkbox"/> Neck tightens up | <input type="checkbox"/> Grind teeth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Face feels hot, flushed | <input type="checkbox"/> Legs get shaky | <input type="checkbox"/> Headaches |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tightness of chest | <input type="checkbox"/> Upset stomach | <input type="checkbox"/> Fidgeting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of appetite | |

Anger Triggers

Different people get angry about different things. These can be thought of as "triggers". What are some specific situations or behaviors that are common anger "triggers" for you? How angry (a little upset versus *really* angry) do you get?

Event or "Trigger"	A little upset										Very, Very Angry	
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹
_____	☺	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	☹

Times of intense anger can cause us to say or do certain things we later regret. Recognizing times when we are starting to get angry and worked up can help us know when we need to find ways to calm down. Being able to prevent these situations from spiraling out of control is a benefit to individuals and their relationships.

***The more we are aware of when we are angry,
the better we can manage it.***



Keeping Your Cool

Everyone gets angry, "worked up," "hot," "ticked off" – whatever you want to call it. If we are not careful, problems or conflicts can lead to negative outcomes. When we are really angry or frustrated, there are different ways to think and act that can help us manage those emotions.

Strategies for Individual Anger

Which of these do you currently do? Which of these do you think would work best for you?

Thinking Strategies

- Talk to yourself – Talk through why this is happening, what you are feeling, why it is impacting you in this way.
- Change perspectives – Try to look at the situation from a different point of view. What might you be missing about what happened? Why might the other person be behaving that way?
- Think about a solution – Consider possible solutions, both immediate and long-term. Think about the possible impact of each solution. What are the pros and cons of each choice?
- Are there any other personal thinking strategies that work well for you?

Behavioral Strategies

- Controlled breathing – Take long, deep, steady breaths.
- Walk away – Remove yourself from the situation for a moment.
- Work out – Do a physical activity or exercise to help relieve tension and anger.
- Do something relaxing – Read a book, watch a movie, listen to music, or take a nap.
- Talk to someone – Turn to a trusted friend or family member who can listen and offer advice.
- Are there any other things you do when you are upset or angry that work well for you?

Your turn: What is one thing that often makes you angry? What strategies could you use?

Situation: _____

Strategy: _____

If we do not learn to control our anger, it can control us! Knowing – *and using* – specific strategies to calm down will help us better manage our anger and conflict. Being in control will benefit you as an individual and your relationship.

When you manage your anger, you improve your relationship with others.



Keeping it Cool Together

All couples have conflict. If it is not managed well, conflict can build up, get out of control, and lead to saying and doing things that hurt the relationship. Below are four strategies that can help you manage conflict.

Establish clear rules – Each couple can decide on specific actions, words, and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable during disagreements. What are your rules? Below are a few examples to get you started.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Talk one at a time | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't bring up past problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listen with full attention | <input type="checkbox"/> Be open to your partner's ideas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don't talk over each other | <input type="checkbox"/> Share what you are feeling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not judge or interrupt | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't try to guess what the other person is thinking or feeling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ask questions if you do not understand | <input type="checkbox"/> Say what you need and be specific |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Think before responding | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on one topic or issue | |

Are there other rules you have or want to follow when conflicts come up?

Use repair attempts to deal with conflict – Repair attempts are actions that help keep conflict from getting out of control. Which of the following do you use, or think you could use in the future?

- | | | |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Speak in a soft voice | <input type="checkbox"/> Give partner a hug | <input type="checkbox"/> Smile |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use humor | <input type="checkbox"/> Apologize | <input type="checkbox"/> Say something caring |

Are there any other examples that you would be likely to use?

Take a "time out" – Taking a break allows time for each person to calm down before returning to talk about the issue. Here are a few important "Time-Out" reminders:

- (1) Both partners agree to take a time-out.
- (2) Both partners agree to come back later and work through the issue.
- (3) During the time-out, partners do not dwell on their anger or plan the next "attack."
- (4) During the time out, both partners should do something that helps them calm down.



Use "soft" start-ups – Individuals can begin conversations without blame and accusation. Starting the discussion in a calm (versus harsh) way prevents the other person from becoming defensive. Here are a few examples. How would you "soften" them?

Harsh start-up

You never help take care of our child.
I can't believe you did that again!
You are the most irritating person ever.
I knew you were going to say that.

vs. Soft start-up

Would you mind watching the kids? I really need a break.
It frustrates me when you do that. Could you try not to?

Application: Think about a recent conflict. How could you have used some of these strategies?

Conflict is normal. Managing conflict in healthy ways keeps relationships safe and strong.



Managing Tough Talks

It is not the absence of conflict that makes a relationship better — it is how we manage conflict that matters. Communicating during conflict can be very difficult. Though no one approach or method can be applied to every situation, certain skills and techniques can be helpful.

Speak Clearly to be Understood

The “W.I.N. Formula” allows a person to more clearly address the real issue, state how s/he is affected by it, and express what s/he would like to change or improve.

W	<i>stands for WHEN...</i>	When you...	State the specific behavior you don't like
I	<i>stands for I...</i>	I feel...	Express your feeling or thought
N	<i>stands for NEED...</i>	I need/want...	Specify what it is that you want to change

Example:

When you make jokes about me in front of your friends, **I feel** hurt and upset. **I would like** you to stop telling those jokes and would love to have you talk respectful and build me up around your friends.

Your turn:

When you... _____
 I feel... _____
 I would like... _____

Listen Carefully to Understand

Listening carefully and well does not always come naturally to us. Listening takes work! Here are a few things to remember.

- Listen with full attention – Do not interrupt, disagree, or judge.
- Paraphrase what you hear – Start your response by making sure you heard the other person correctly. “So what I hear you saying is...”
- Seek to understand and ask questions if you do not understand – If you are confused or need clarification, politely ask for it.

Communication is a two-way street. It involves both speaking clearly and listening carefully to reach understanding. Following these steps can help you better manage conflict.

Speaking clearly and listening carefully can help manage conflict in relationships.