

Healthy Techniques to Help Resolve Conflicts

Objective

To increase your use of healthy tactics to effectively resolve conflicts.

You Should Know

Conflict is inevitable in relationships, but it does not have to be emotionally distressing or damage the relationship. Couples can disagree and even engage in heated arguments, yet still show compassion, kindness, and respect for each other.

Frequent hurtful conflict can erode intimacy and may eventually lead to divorce. You can have conflicts with your partner in a constructive way, without either of you engaging in unhealthy tactics. Research has found that expressing anger to your partner might cause short-term discomfort but it can also lead to honest conversations and enhanced intimacy that benefits the relationship over the long term.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) identifies five things each partner can do when experiencing conflict:

1. Stop acting in ways that make things worse.
2. Clarify and act on your values. In other words, be more like the partner you ideally want to be.
3. Accept what is out of your control.
4. Notice and reward behavior you appreciate in your partner.
5. Manage conflict through effective negotiation and communication skills.

A key message of ACT is to accept what is out of your control and commit to action that enriches your life. The best outcome is more likely if both partners follow these steps.

What to Do

Make a copy of this worksheet and give one copy to your partner. Write down the tactics you and your partner use during arguments. First, describe what you do during conflict – both fair and unhealthy conflict resolution techniques.

When I want to win an argument, this is what I do:

When my partner wants to win an argument, this is what he/she does:

When we are arguing...

I'd like you to accept me doing this:

I want to stop myself from doing this:

I am willing to accept you doing this:

I want you to stop doing this:

Within some relationships, there is a runner/chaser dynamic that impacts conflict resolution. The "runner" wishes to avoid arguments and may flee when conflict occurs. If you or your partner has identified as the "runner" please answer the following question.

Can you identify when or why you “run?” How do you feel immediately before you run?

How do you feel when your partner chases you?

This question is for the “Chaser” in the relationship: When do you chase? How do you feel when your partner “runs?” Why do you pursue? How do you feel when you are chasing?

Next, put yourself in your partner’s shoes. Describe what you imagine it must be like for him or her when they are running away from conflict, or when they are “chasing” you.

Referring back to the list of five suggestions, what can *you* do when you and your partner are experiencing conflict? Be specific.

Now share your responses with your partner.

Reflections on This Exercise

Discuss how each of you might use healthier techniques to resolve conflicts.

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

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?
