

# Conflict Resolution for Couples

Susan M. Mumm, M.A, *Licensed Professional Counselor*

I need to preface this whole discussion about conflict resolution for couples with some disclaimers. The information I am going to present about conflict resolution can only help couples who have bad relationship skills; it cannot help save a bad relationship. The sad fact is, some people, for a variety of reasons, make bad relationship choices. Some people choose partners from a position of low self esteem and a lot of fears and insecurities. Some people come from emotionally damaged families of origin and choose partners when they are in a lot of emotional pain and in a great state of neediness. If the relationship itself is not a healthy choice for one or both partners, studying conflict resolution will not make the relationship work. Even marriage counseling cannot save a marriage where there is not a good "fit"; where there is not enough compatibility regarding values and life goals, or where that mysterious, ever so important, element of romantic passion is missing. In other words if you choose the wrong person, you can do all the "right" things but it still won't feel right. Lee Santiwan, a great therapist, whom I trained with many years ago, told me, that when she does counseling with couples she tells them in the first session:

"In a sense, I don't do marriage or couples' therapy. I do therapy with individuals. Part of that therapy can be

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working on your relationship or marriage. However, it sometimes happens that the process of therapy leads to a decision that ending your marriage and relationship is the best thing you can do for your mental health and happiness. I don't want my competence as a therapist measured by how many marriages I save, but rather how well I help my clients make decisions that lead them to happy and fulfilling lives."

I want to make one other disclaimer. Conflict resolution will not work if there is not a basic mutual respect in the relationship. Each person, in their heart must respect the other person's needs, rights, and desires. Both people must have **good intentions** even though they may lack the skills to create the kind of relationship they want. If both people do not have this basic attitude, conflict resolution techniques will not work. The couple will continue to end up in one fight after another. If there is a basic injustice in the relationship where one person's needs and rights are continually subjugated to the other person's, resentment will continue to surface and play out in a thousand different skirmishes. Any energy put into such a relationship will be like pouring water into a bucket with a hole in it. So—having laid out my disclaimers, let me move on to the topic of Conflict Resolution.

I like to break down the idea of conflict resolution into attitudes and techniques. Let me start with a

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discussion of **constructive attitudes** for conflict resolution.

## Having the Right Attitudes

Having the right attitudes helps reduce the number of conflicts and helps you get through the conflicts you do have more quickly and painlessly.

1) One important attitude to have is to **keep the broader perspective of the relationship** in mind at all times i.e. the ratio of good points to bad points. Do not get reactionary over a bad day or difficult issue. Try not to get overly upset about insignificant issues. This is also referred to as "Don't sweat the small stuff." The relationship will burn itself out if you get into screaming matches or "processing marathons" over little issue. You need to "Choose your battles", as the saying goes. Be able to say to yourself "I really dislike this quality about my partner but, overall, he or she has lots of qualities that I love.

2) **Let go of the fantasy that if you just talk about an issue long enough you will resolve your differences of opinion.** If you can agree on most of the big things, and enough of the little things to not be constantly annoying the hell out of one another, agree to disagree on the rest. People who have been married for fifty years do not see eye to eye on everything.

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3) **Remember that a lot of compromising is necessary in any relationship.** Though sometimes it makes sense to end a marriage or relationship because of irreconcilable differences, do not be too quick to jump to that conclusion. Always keep in mind that if you leave your current relationship, you will be confronted with different issues and problems with any new person.

4) **Try to approach conflicts with a win/win philosophy.** Have a faith that there is a solution that will be agreeable to both parties. If you enter a discussion exuding negative vibes, the discussion will tend to head in bad directions.

5) Another good attitude to have is to **keep in mind the outside stressors that are impacting your partner which may be making him or her extra irritable or volatile.** Try to give him or her a little slack and overlook bad moods during high stress periods (as long as they don't stretch for long periods of time.)

Now let me talk about the specific **techniques** necessary for successful conflict resolution.

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## Constructive Techniques for Conflict Resolution

1) **Do not initiate discussions about controversial subjects at bad times** i.e. when there are time constraints, when one or both people are tired or hungry, not fully awake, stressed out, when other people are present etc.

2) **Be open to feedback and be willing to admit you were wrong.** This is crucial and will encourage your partner to do the same. Try as hard as you can to not get defensive. Be open to what your partner is trying to tell you, even if it is hard to hear. If he or she is right, and you were acting like a "jerk" admit it, and apologize. Refrain from counter accusations that attempt to take the attention away from what you did wrong and find fault with your partner. This will only further infuriate him/her. This is not to say that you have to accept all the blame for a bad incident; usually both people made mistakes and contributed to the misunderstanding or bad interaction. However, if each person will focus **FIRST** on what he or she did wrong and offer an apology, and **THEN** move on to expressing what he or she thinks the other person did wrong, things get resolved, bad feelings dissipate, and you find something better to do with your evening than bicker and yell at one another.

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3) **Try to keep in mind the emotional baggage and scars your partner carries from his/her experiences in his/her family of origin or other life experiences that affect how he/she responds to conflict.** Try not to push those old buttons. Be aware of how your partner reacts to swearing, yelling, physical proximity, breaking things, particular phrases, threats of leaving, door slamming, sleeping on the couch, etc., as a result of his/her history. Make sure you make one another aware of your histories regarding fighting early in your relationship so, before you are both mad, you know where one another's vulnerabilities are, and can work around them.

4) **Make sure that both you and your partner have an on-going commitment to work on your personal issues so they do not inflict undue stress on the relationship.** If necessary, be willing to talk with a professional mental health counselor. If you are bored and unhappy with yourself, insecure, spiritually unfulfilled, etc., these personal issues will continue to have a detrimental effect on your relationship. Likewise if either partner is grappling with a serious mental health issues such as depression, Attention Deficient Disorder, drug, alcohol, spending, gambling, or eating addictions, or other psychological problems, these need to be resolved before the relationship has any chance of long term success. As I mentioned

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above, it's good to be sensitive to the emotional baggage your partner brings to the relationship however, the goal should be for each person to get rid of as much of his/her baggage as possible instead of carrying it around for the rest of their lives.

**5) Identify the REAL issues you are fighting about rather than fighting about bogus issues.** It is a common problem in relationships that people are not in touch with the real issues that are causing the tension and flare-ups in their relationship. This is a big problem because you cannot really solve a problem unless you know what it is. Oftentimes the real issues are avoided because they are scary, or uncomfortable. Sex-role programming also comes into play. Men are socialized to not admit when they are feeling scared or sad but are told it's ok to be angry. Women are sometimes socialized to not feel angry but told it's acceptable for them to feel sad. As a result of this sex-role programming men and women are said to have "racket" feelings as in counterfeit feelings. Men's racket feeling is anger; they tend to say or believe they are angry when they are actually sad or scared. Women's racket feeling is sad; they say or believe they are sad when they are actually angry. What this all boils down to is that often when two people fight, they do not know what the hell they are really fighting about!!

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The way to unravel the confusion is before a fight starts to really escalate each person needs to spend a little time alone with pencil and paper and ask him/herself the following questions:

- 1) What am I upset about?
- 2) Is there any other issues underneath this top layer issue for me?
- 3) What feeling(s) am I feeling about these issues and why?

Once each person knows what he/she is feeling and why, they are ready to talk to each other.

Each person then needs to practice a special kind of communication called ' "I" statements'.

The format is simply:

**"I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."**

This idea of "I" statements has been used by marriage and family counselors for decades, and is an amazingly powerful technique. It seems overly simplistic, but if you practice it even briefly I think you will find it very helpful.

When the first person makes an "I" statement, the person hearing the direct expression of feelings needs to listen without getting defensive. He/she then

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should express his/her response back in "I" statement form.

If you both use this technique you can really get to the real issues that are troubling each of you and then make a game plan for solving them. Going round and round about counterfeit issues leads only to more frustration.

**6) Be willing to compromise about day-to-day operating procedures of your household.** There are a million little details involved with living together. How clean will you keep the house, who will do what chores, do you put the cap on the toothpaste, the toilet seat up or down, turn the thermostat down when you leave in the morning, leave clothes in the dryer a couple days or remove them immediately, how often will you invite relatives to visit, will you let the dog on the furniture, what kind of food will you eat, will you wipe your hairs out of the sink, --the list goes on and on and on.

If you want to be in a couple relationship, you have to compromise on these things; especially if it is a second marriage because it's hard to change habits in mid-life. I offer the following compromising principles:

a) Figure out whose desires are strongest about a particular issue. Let the decision go his or her way. Then he or she can do the same for you in return. The end result will hopefully be that you have the things that are most

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important to you the way you want them, and likewise with your partner.

b) Give your partner some space to forget to do things he or she has agreed to do. We all juggle hundreds of details in a given week. For people with complex jobs it may be several hundred details in a day. We must allow ourselves and our partners a reasonable margin for errors. We all need to be allowed to “space out” about a few things, even though we agreed to remember them because it annoys our partner. Within this reasonable margin, we should be exempt from criticism, derogatory remarks, nagging etc, and we need to grant our partner the same exoneration. If the level of mistakes, forgetfulness, or neglect becomes significant and one-sided, then it needs to be addressed as a problem.

I’ll add my usual disclaimer here too. If you and your partner disagree constantly on a huge number of things regarding living together, you may not be compatible enough to live together. You might both be happier finding a partner with whom you have more natural “living together” compatibility. You can only compromise so much. If Mary really wants to have a big fluffy dog and two cats and let them sleep in the bed, be a vegetarian, let the house be messy because she’s a writer who likes to follow her creative moods, and George hates animals and wants a

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clean, well-decorated home in which he can entertain business associates with steak dinners, these two may need to throw in the towel and look for new compatible mates in the personal ads. In other words, don't compromise away too many of your desires to hold on to a mismatched relationship.

**7) Use constructive rather than destructive forms of criticism.** Where the line between constructive and destructive criticism lies is a very tricky question. Let me see if I can offer some guidelines for distinguishing the good kind from the bad kind.

**Criticism tends to be constructive when it meets the following criterion:**

a) When it is given about things you know the other person wants to change about him/herself, or things that he/she has specifically agreed to be confronted about.

b) When it is given in a calm, non-loud, non-derogatory, non-bitchy tone of voice.

c) When criticism is phrased such that you are criticizing the behaviors not the person.

d) When you explain how and why the behavior is having a negative impact on you.

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e) When you are giving the other person feedback about self destructive behavior patterns you see him/her engaging in, or ways you believe he/she could become a happier/healthier person as long as it does not violate rule (f) below:

f) When the amount of the criticism given is within an acceptable level.

I think items (a) through (d) above are fairly self-explanatory. It is my sense that where most people go wrong is on (e) and (f). How much criticism is acceptable? Constructive criticism is a necessary part of a couple relationship. It helps each person to become more self-aware and to grow and evolve into a better person. However, it has to be doled out in reasonable portions or it becomes destructive. It may well be that the criticism you are offering your partner is given with constructive intentions i.e. you're just trying to get your partner to be healthier, happier, more competent, better organized, etc. But you have to keep in mind that people can only work on so many self-improvement goals at once. People can, and do change as a result of feedback and constructive criticism; but rarely do our partners change as quickly or as dramatically as we would like them to. If you do not recognize this fact, you will quite likely end up with a lot of yelling matches, withdrawal, a decrease in closeness and

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usually sex, and a possible breakup of the relationship. If you start hearing complaints like "I'm never good enough for you am I?" , "All you do is criticize me", "Maybe you should find someone who can live up to your standards" "I feel like all you ever do is bitch about the things you don't like about me, is there anything you do still like?" or other such statements, you should consider the possibility that you are engaging in excessive or destructive criticism. If so, you need to back off and dole out your feedback in smaller portions and less frequently. Nudging works better than pushing. Patience is the magic ingredient for bringing about change and growth in your partner.

I do want to point out that sometimes people have irreconcilable differences regarding personal development. If one partner is continually closed to feedback and constructive criticism while the other is open and willing to work on him/herself, they may well have a gap in self-improvement initiative. The sad fact is some people are much more committed to personal growth and self improvement than others. Sometimes these gaps in personal development may not actually be a deliberate choice: It just seems that some people get psychologically stuck and are unable to overcome self esteem issues or fears and insecurities that keep them from growing and moving forward. If the situation develops where you feel your partner is engaging in a lot

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of self destructive behavior or he or she is stagnant and not growing as a person, you may have to consider the possibility that the two of you have a serious personal development gap. You may need to end the relationship and find a partner who is more committed to personal growth and self-examination, and who has more of his/her personal issues resolved.

**8) Make sure that other areas of your life are not infringing on your couple relationship.** Sometimes couples are actually bickering and fighting because they are structuring their lives such that they do not have ample fun and relaxation time with one another. If you and your partner seem to be doing lots of fighting and snapping at one another and you see no real cause for the tension, take a look at your time structuring. Even if you are raising children, you must structure fun time into your life. Find other couples to exchange childcare hours with. Ask willing friends and relatives for free babysitting—lots of people with no children actually enjoy spending time with children once or twice a month. Likewise, do not let your career dominate your life. Make sure you are not working too many hours. If your job is demanding too much of your time and energy, make every effort to find a new job. Be willing to cut back your expenses and take a lower paying job if necessary. If you let careers, children or other responsibilities

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"suck you dry" you have nothing left to give to your couple relationship.

**9) Try very hard to avoid "dumping" angers and frustrations from other areas of your life onto your partner.**

Most people are subject to bad interactions in their workplace, sometimes on a daily basis. Many bosses treat their workers disrespectfully, and many companies and organizations are run in ways that leave the average worker filled with frustration, on many a day. Often times you are not free to express your anger in the workplace, because you would suffer serious negative consequences. You need to find ways to dissipate these bad feelings besides yelling or snapping at your partner. Likewise, with other general frustrations of life. If you're feeling bad physically, just had a miserable, nerve wracking drive home, are upset that you lost money on the stock market, mad at your mother, etc, let your partner know right away that you're in a bad mood and that you don't want to take it out on him/her. Then figure out what you need to do to let out your steam. Go for a run, scrub the kitchen floor, ask your partner to let you vent about your horrendous boss, call a friend and have a bitch session; play your guitar; whatever method works for you.

**10) Refrain from delegating responsibility and then questioning or criticizing your partner's decisions or judgment.** This is a real common

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problem. It can flare a partner's temper in two minutes flat. It's high on the list of bad relationship etiquette.

## **Here are some classic examples:**

Husband asks wife to pick out a birthday gift for his mother and then criticizes her choice.

Wife sends husband to grocery store to buy things and criticizes that he didn't get the right products even though she did not make clear what the specifics were.

Partner #1 asks Partner #2 to pick out a restaurant for Saturday night dinner. After acting as though he or she was comfortable with that choice, complains that he /she wishes they had gone somewhere else.

Husband says he doesn't want to help pick out the curtains, or new chair or lamp or artwork for the house and then makes snide comments inferring that he doesn't like whatever was purchased.

Wife delegates to husband to make their vacation plans and travel arrangements because "Anywhere he wants to go will be fine with her" and then whines about the decisions.

**If you want to avoid this dangerous landmine for conflict, remember the golden rule:**

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If you abdicate responsibility and delegate a task to your partner, do not question his/her judgment or criticize his/her choices and decisions.

**In more blunt terms:** Participate or keep your mouth shut.

There can be a few exceptions to this general operating rule. If you really feel it is important to override your partner's decision, recognize that you are treading on tricky ground and make your request apologetically, and with great gentleness. For example:

"I know I delegated picking out Mom's gift to you and I really appreciate you doing it for me, and I don't want you to feel bad, but unfortunately Mom doesn't like scarves. I'll take responsibility for returning it and I'll pick out something else for her after work tomorrow."

"I know I said I'd go anywhere to eat but would you be too mad if we went somewhere else? I just don't feel in the mood for Mexican food."

"Whoops I forgot to tell you to buy Breyers' ice cream not Meijers brand. My sister only eats health food brands. It's not your fault. Tell you what, let's put this ice cream in the freezer for us—you can never have too much ice cream in this family. I'll run up and get some Breyers while I'm picking up

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Debbie from soccer. I'm sorry I wasn't clear, I really appreciate you going to the store for me."

11) **Dealing with anger.** This is the "biggie" part of Conflict Resolution. The first step is to recognize that anger is a necessary part of even the best and happiest of relationships. Anger is not a bad emotion. It is a necessary part of the feedback system of the human organism. It says "Something is wrong, I'm not getting my needs met". Most people find anger scary, and try to avoid it. Some people have very negative experiences from their family of origin where anger led to violence, or divorce. Some people are afraid to express their anger because they feel insecure about their relationship "i.e. "If I express my anger he/she will leave me." Some people think anger is a bad emotion because of their religious or cultural training, particularly women. So, for a variety of reasons, a lot of people tend to deny their own anger and try to avoid evoking anger in their partner. Couples often slip into a "Don't rock the boat" mode of operating. Denying your anger is not a workable strategy. You and your partner need to find healthy and constructive ways to express and work through your anger and frustrations with one another.

The first rule for expressing anger is to be **direct** with your anger. To do this, you yourself need to be in touch with what you are angry or upset about. You need to be in touch with what is going on

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inside of you. It makes it real difficult to resolve a conflict if the real issue is not out on the table. If you repress the real reasons for your anger, your anger usually becomes passive-aggressive. This means you are passive i.e. don't express your anger in a given situation. Then a few hours or days or weeks later you become aggressive and pick a fight and lash out about something else; not the real issue you are angry about. Or your anger comes out in indirect ways like making snide comments, being sexually unresponsive, unaffectionate, withdrawn etc. Your partner will not respond well to these indirect expressions of anger. When the anger is indirect and misplaced it is very hard to understand or accept.

To express your anger in a direct way you need to use the "I" statements I referred to earlier.

" I feel **angry** because \_\_\_\_\_."

Feelings and thoughts should be expressed as immediately as logistically feasible. i.e. not in the middle of a dinner party but after the guests leave, or the next morning, not three or four days later.

Another rule is to avoid using questions as veiled expressions of anger.

**For example rather than saying:**

"Why is the thermostat at 72 degrees?"

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## **Try saying:**

"I wish you would remember to turn the thermostat down in the morning like we agreed. I hate wasting money and resources"

## **Instead of saying**

"Why have your clothes been in the dryer since Monday?"

## **Phrase it directly:**

"I'm frustrated that you're not keeping up on our agreement to not leave clothes in the dryer."

## **Instead of:**

"When do you think you might get around to fixing vacuum?"

## **Try:**

"I really need for you to make looking at the broken vacuum a top priority. I need to have time to go out and buy a new one if necessary before Mom visits next weekend."

It goes without saying that all this can sound really good on paper but be a lot harder to actually do. It takes a lot of practice to train yourself to use direct communication techniques. They are not what most of us learned to do in our

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families, and rarely are people open and direct about anger in the workplace because of power imbalances. Even once you get pretty good at it, there will still be plenty of times that you and your partner will forget all your great couple communication skills, and find yourself losing it and screaming and yelling, saying mean and nasty comments, etc. There are some strategies for recovering from bad interactions that can help you to move through and recover from conflicts quicker and easier. Let me outline them.

When you catch yourself slinging mean and nasty comments or find yourself getting really, really loud, call a time out on yourself before you have said too much. You can do a lot of emotional damage to your partner in the heat of anger, and it is hard to repair. Try to count to ten before you blurt out anything more in anger. When you are very angry, you respond out of the "wounded child" part of your personality. This part of the personality is very vindictive, mean, nasty, selfish, and impulsive. It has no thought of the consequences of actions. When you let this part of your personality attack your partner with no restraint from your rational mature self, it can inflict a lot of pain on loved ones within minutes; kind of like a hurricane! Hurtful words can be forgiven but they are never totally forgotten. When you feel your anger rising to intense levels, try to remove yourself from the situation and cool down. Then, when you are rational, express the frustrations, dissatisfaction or anger in

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ways that do not maliciously strike out at the other person. DO NOT STUFF THE ANGER DOWN, just find constructive ways to communicate it.

When you slip up, as everyone does, and yell out hurtful things from the wounded child part of the personality apologize **as soon as possible**. Tell your partner that you would like to retract the statement. Offer an alternative statement that expresses your anger or hurt in a straightforward way:

"I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and  
I want \_\_\_\_\_ format.

If your partner does explode at you and say hurtful things, or make you angry in other ways, try hard to not hold grudges about it. We all make mistakes and exhibit poor relationship behavior at times. If you can see that your partner is genuinely trying as hard as he or she can to do better about problem areas in the relationship, let go of your anger and hurts and move on after a fight, disagreement, or bad interaction. If your partner has offered you a heartfelt, genuine apology about a bad incident and given you a promise to do better in the future, consider that "restitution" has been made for the "crime". Do not continue to punish him or her for the same crime. If you can't forgive the offense, i.e. an affair or serious lie, then admit that to yourself, and your partner and end the relationship. But do not accept apologies and then hold onto your

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grudges.

Some couples find the idea of "restitution" helpful. You can either ask point blank, "Honey how can I make this up to you?" or you can just present a peace offering so to speak. You need to be clear what kind of restitution each of you finds desirable. Some examples are: Cooking a favorite dinner, taking the person out to eat, giving flowers, candy, a massage, accompanying your partner to an event your don't particularly like just to be extra nice, etc. Be careful about accepting restitution if you are not ready to forgive the crime. This will only escalate the bad feelings.

If you get into a really bad fight be willing to take a day off work if you can, or cancel plans, in order to have time to talk things over so the bad feelings don't fester. However, it's important to negotiate, ahead of time, when you are not in a fight, about each person's preferred style of working through disagreements. Some people like to stay up as late as necessary and/or take the next day off work in order to keep talking until the issue is resolved. Other people need days or hours of cooling off time to sort out their thoughts and feelings before they are at all open to processing. If you and your partner have opposite styles, which is often the case because opposites attract, you both have to compromise. One person may have to talk a little sooner than they would like to, and the other person may have to wait longer than they would like before talking, in

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order to give the other person time to psychologically prepare for the discussion.

If you are the person who needs to wait before talking, explain to your partner that you need time to sort out your thoughts and feelings. Make a specific time a few days in the future for the discussion to take place. If you simply look and act reluctant to talk, your partner may think you are just trying to sweep the whole issue under the rug and get angrier.

Also be aware when you are in the process of working through a disagreement of when you need to take breaks from the discussion. Some issues are not one-time discussion kind of issues. You might need to take a break for a couple days. Figure out how you want to deal with one another during the interim between the discussions. Some people prefer to take space from one another. Other people prefer to just suspend conversation and continue spending time together doing things like going to a concert or movie where conversation is limited.

**12) Get feedback from friends regarding difficult issues in your relationship.** However, make sure to present your partner's side of the story fairly and accurately. Try to talk to people of both sexes and people with different personality types so you can see the situation from a variety of viewpoints. If you just go out and talk to someone

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you know will agree with your side, will not do much good.

13) **Re-open issues for discussion if necessary.** If you think you have an issue resolved, but weeks or months later you find you still have bad feelings or concerns about it, you need to do more talking. Don't wait till another incident touches off the unresolved feelings

14) **Some Basic No-No's.** Let me end this discussion with a mention of some real "**No-No's**" which hopefully none of you ever do:

Do not deliberately twist facts, misrepresent, or omit information to make it look like the other person is the "bad guy" in the situation.

Do not withdraw affection if your partner brings up controversy or expresses anger. This is not to say you can't say you want to go into another part of the house and be separate for awhile or to not touch if you are feeling the need to do so. But some people deliberately act cold and refuse to be touched as a means of control; they use it as a way to discourage their partner from bringing up issues or expressing their anger.

Do not tell lies or mistruths to deliberately hurt or humiliate or anger your partner.

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Do not expose to others what you have agreed to keep as private information.

Avoid retaliating with inappropriate, unwarranted or cruel and unusual levels of punishment. Trying to purposely hurt your partner worse than he/she originally hurt you will destroy a relationship very quickly. However, I personally think a little "punishment" or discipline, can be useful in a relationship, if it is appropriate. It may be necessary at times in order to communicate how hurt you are by your partner's behavior and that you don't want this offense repeated. For example, refusing to cook dinner and taking yourself out to eat, or sleeping on the couch for one night," if your partner has done something inconsiderate to you are "fair fighting". Refusing to have sex for a month because someone forgot to call when they were late, or going out and spending \$500 on the credit card just to repay for some small mistake is being overly vengeful.

Refrain from profane name calling unless you both agree this is an acceptable way to express anger.

**In summary**, conflict is a part of all couple relationships. No matter how in love two people may be, disagreements develop when the "honeymoon period" ends. It is crucial to develop healthy

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techniques for resolving problems, because without proper skills, and the right attitudes, mole hills tend to become mountains.

It takes hard work and self-discipline to establish and stick to workable conflict resolution methods. Both people need to make a conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls I have mentioned in this lecture: repressing anger, lashing out from your wounded child self, dumping outside frustrations on your partner, overloading your partner with too much criticism, getting overly upset over the small stuff, holding grudges, second guessing, being vengeful etc.

Conflict can be a catalyst for personal growth. It is also a sign that a couple is invested in the relationship. There's a saying which says "If your wife/husband stops bitching at you beware; He/she is probably having an affair or planning to divorce you!"

However, fighting is only beneficial when you fight in fair and healthy ways. Hopefully each fight leads to a greater understanding of what each partner needs and wants in the relationship, and a set of compromises to meet those expressed needs.