

Marriage & Family

Conflict Resolution

I. PLANNING FOR CONFLICT.(1)

- A. Obviously, we cannot always plan for conflict in marriage.
 - 1. Sometimes it creeps up on us before we realize what's occurring.
 - 2. However, if we are going to bring up some issue likely to create conflict, these steps are wise to take.
- B. The steps:
 - 1. *Define the issues.*
 - a. Try to look at the conflict from the other party's point of view.
 - b. See if you can determine his/her major and minor.
 - 2. *Assemble the issues.*
 - a. Are there issues from the other side that need to be added, based on your understanding of the other party's position?
 - b. You may want to come back to this step as you discuss the issues. You may also have to reevaluate your own issues in light of the new information your partner gives you.
 - 3. *Define underlying interests.*
 - a. What are the interests and needs underlying the other party's issues?
 - b. Try to think about not just the other person's point of view per #1, but try to think about why the other person does things in this manner, and why (or if) it's important to him/her.
 - c. The reason for looking at the underlying issues from both parties is to invent solutions that speak to those interests rather than the overt objectives.

4. *Set goals for the process and outcome.* What do you hope to accomplish and why?

II. RULES OF CONFLICT.(2)

- A. Describe your feelings, using “I” instead of starting with “you” Starting with “you” usually puts the person on the defensive and may start to get him/her emotionally upset.
- B. Focus on the specific and current behavior, and don’t label the other person in a bad way.
 1. Labeling a person can make that person defensive and upset very quickly.
 2. See the difference:
 - a. “You’re such a slob,” versus “I’d like it if you’d remember to put the wet towels in the hamper.”
 - b. “You’re thoughtless,” versus “I feel really sad that you forgot our anniversary.”
 - c. “You never help with the children,” versus “I’d feel much less stressed if you helped with the children’s bedtime routine.”
- C. Don’t be so focused on winning. Be able to apologize. Usually, an apology is almost immediately soothing to your spouse’s upset feelings. it’s a very powerful response.
- D. Use kind words and a kind tone of voice.
 1. Isn’t it amazing how kind and polite we are to friends, acquaintances, and even strangers? Do you speak to your spouse with kindness?
 2. Consciously work on adding polite, genuinely kind words and phrases to your dialogue with your spouse, such as “please,” “thank you,” and “I so appreciate when you”
- E. Express some kind of appreciation before offering a complaint.
 1. There’s a management style that recommends several positive strokes for every one complaint or critique given, making it more likely that the complain will be listened to.

2. Even in the midst of conflict and strong emotions, you can find something about your spouse that you appreciate, and you need to verbalize this. it can go a long way in soothing upset feelings.
- F. Don't keep things inside until you feel filled up and then dump everything out at once.
1. If you carry around your complaints and hard feelings and then dump them all at once on your spouse, it's more likely that it will be too much for him/her to handle and he/she will be automatically defensive and not hear what you have to say.
 2. Say what you're thinking and feeling as soon as it's appropriate. Don't wait for things to build up.
- G. Avoid ultimatums.
1. Statements that begin with "You better do this or else . . ." are not helpful in resolving conflict.
 2. They limit options and really back your spouse into a corner, forcing him/her to make a choice neither of you may be happy with .
- H. Listen to what the other person has to say.
1. Each person involved has his or her own point of view and should have the chance to express it.
 2. Don't interrupt each other. Take turns, and *listen*.
- I. Always check your perceptions. Don't assume you know what's going on or how your spouse thinks or feels. Check and recheck for understanding.
- J. State wishes and wants clearly and directly.
1. Don't beat around the bush or make your spouse guess what the problem is.
 2. A technique that can work is W-I-N: **W**hen you . . . **I** feel . . . **I** Need . . .
- K. Don't use sex to smooth over an argument.
1. Sex can be a great part of making up after you've worked through a conflict with your spouse, but it's a poor substitute for really understanding each other on a difficult issue.

2. Also, don't withhold sex as a threat or use it in a manipulative way.

L. Don't fight dirty.

1. Don't be physically, emotionally, or verbally abusive or manipulative.
2. Don't intentionally say or do things that you know are upsetting to your spouse. Of all the people in the world, you probably know how to hurt your spouse most effectively. Respect your spouse enough to refrain from dirty fighting.

M. Don't give the silent treatment. The silent treatment is a form of quiet aggression. It will not help you resolve anything and only prolongs the agony of the conflict for both of you.

N. Call time-outs and fouls.

1. Sometimes it's necessary to take a short break to cool down if things get heated.
2. Be sure to come back to the issue, though.
3. Also, set up a way to call a foul if your spouse begins fighting dirty or breaking your rules for fair fighting.

O. Don't take it out on your spouse.

1. If you're made at your sister, don't yell at your spouse.
2. You can share your sad or angry feelings with your spouse, but be careful not to make your spouse feel like he or she is the target.

P. Use humor.

1. Humor can be a good way to deal with conflict as long as it's not sarcastic.
2. Loving humor can break the tension of an argument in a split second!

Q. When the fight is over, drop it.

1. Forgive and forget.

2. Don't keep bringing up the right or hold on to your anger once an argument is over, even if it wasn't resolved the way you wanted.
- R. Write down your feelings.
1. Sometimes direct confrontation is not the best way to talk to your spouse about an issue.
 2. Written words don't carry quite as much emotion as spoken words sometimes do. Your spouse may be more willing to listen to what you've written.
- S. Use these important phrases: "Now I understand," "Maybe you're right," and "I'm sorry."

(1) This material comes from Roy J. Lewicki, Alexander Hiam, and Karen Wise Olander, *Think Before You Speak* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 33-35.

(2) *Alabama Marriage Handbook*, 15-16.

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