

Conflict Management Skills

Biblical Principles

CONFLICT WILL HAPPEN

Occasional conflict in marriage is both normal and inevitable. However, how the two of you handle conflict determines the health of your relationship (*1 Cor. 7:28, John 16:33*).

ACTIVELY LISTEN

Active listening is a key skill to understanding each other and dealing with conflict (*James 1:19, Prov. 18:13*).

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Avoid speaking quickly and angrily. Criticism, sarcasm, and put-downs are hurtful to your marriage (*Prov. 15:1, Eph. 4:29*).

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN A LOVING MANNER

Working through conflict successfully takes honest and truthful communication done in a loving manner. Love is a very considerate awareness of the other person (*Eph. 4:15, 4:25*).

RESOLVE ANGER

Deal with anger and hurt proactively. Don't deny it, "stuff" it, or let it turn to bitterness (*Eph. 4:26-27, Heb. 12:15*).

FORGIVENESS IS ESSENTIAL

The ongoing practice of seeking forgiveness and being forgiving is essential to a healthy, Christ-centered marriage (*Eph. 4:32, 1 Peter 3:8-9*).

Is Conflict Always Bad?

Conflict isn't automatically good or bad. Rather, how it is handled makes the difference. There may be times when one spouse needs to lovingly approach the other or point out areas that need to be improved upon. However, destructive conflict causes division and is harmful to the relationship.

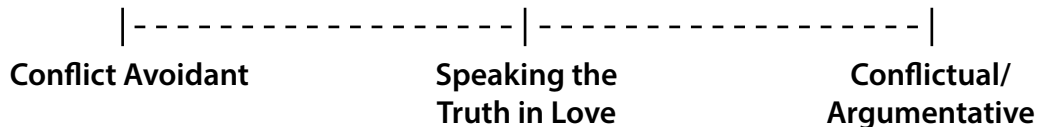
Sometimes couples worry that having conflict means they have a bad marriage. While we all would prefer to have no conflict in our marriages, occasional conflict provides you with an opportunity to work together, learn from each other, and to love each other through the differences. Interestingly, having no conflict in a relationship may be an indicator that a couple is avoiding issues that need to be discussed.

AVOID THE EXTREMES

Jesus provided us with a perfect example for dealing with conflict. Some-times he was silent or said few words (see *Matthew 27:11-14; John 8:3-11*), while other times, he spoke quite firmly and directly (see *Matthew 23*). Jesus always spoke to the heart of the matter and always focused on the other person's eternal good (see *Matthew 10:17-22*). He did not avoid conflict due to fear of man; however, he did not seek to be argumentative (see *Matthew 15:1-12*). Thus, no right answer exists for every situation. Match your response to the needs of the situation and to the needs of your spouse.

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People who are “conflict avoidant” in marriage will do just about anything to avoid an argument. While this may be a good quality in many situations, those who avoid conflict may also avoid bringing up important spiritual, emotional, and relationship issues. Those who are “conflictual/argumentative” in marriage may tend to provoke arguments from time to time. While you will always know where these individuals stand on an issue, they may speak words harshly and put others down. Consider the continuum below. If you tend to be “conflict avoidant,” you will need to practice speaking in a firm and direct manner, whereas, if you are more “conflictual/argumentative,” you will need to practice holding your tongue. Growth towards speaking the truth in love also requires healthy emotional regulation.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Where do you fall on the continuum from “conflict avoidant” to “conflictual/argumentative”? Compare with your spouse. What do you think this says about how we are likely to respond to conflict as a couple?

BE CAREFUL HOW AND WHEN YOU TALK TO EACH OTHER

Research shows that 96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation during the first three minutes of talking.¹ This means harsh words early in a conversation can turn the discussion into destructive conflict. To avoid this problem, use the model provided in *James 1:19-20* where it says, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

Be swift to hear: When working through a conflict, remember your spouse wants to be listened to and understood just as much as you do. Listening to each other and trying to understand where the other person is coming from is a practical way to show love, honor (*Romans 12:10*), and submission to each other (*Ephesians 5:21*).

Be slow to speak: The words we speak hastily when frustrated or angry often hurt others deeply. In the end we often regret what we have said and wish we could take the words back. Remember when you hurt your spouse, you hurt yourself. *Ephesians 5:28-29* reminds us, “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.”

Many people think they need to “vent” their anger to deal with it. However, venting often leads us to spew out words or to take actions that are neither Godly nor healthy. Rather than venting your anger, first rate your level of anger/tension from 0 to 10 (see the scale below). As our tension level goes up, our ability to think clearly and solve problems effectively GOES DOWN. However, most couples try to work through their most difficult problems when they are in the Red Zone. Remember, Satan has a much harder time getting an advantage with us when we deal with anger appropriately (*Ephesians 4:26-27*).

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Don't try to talk out any problems if your level of tension is in the Red Zone (7-10). Rather, take steps to calm down such as going for a walk, writing out your feelings, and taking deep breaths. If you are in the Yellow Zone (4-6), be aware you can quickly move into the Red Zone. Ideally, we would always talk to each other from the Green Zone (0-3) with a prayer on our heart and our spouse's best interest in mind.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

How do you know what zone (Green, Yellow, or Red) you are in? What types of things get your anger/tension level into the Red Zone? What do you do to calm down? Share your calming activities with your spouse.

Slow to wrath: When conflicts occur, pray and ask for God's help in dealing with your feelings, understanding your spouse, and sharing your feelings. Anger is often referred to as a secondary emotion. Thus, it comes because of another issue or emotion. When you are angered by something, try to identify which of the following categories likely triggered the anger:

- Emotional hurt (e.g., embarrassment, feeling of rejection, humiliation)
- Fear
- Physical pain
- Injustice/sin (e.g., righteous anger)

Issues Vs. Events²

There are essentially three layers to most conversations:

1. **Event**: the triggering situation for the conflict.
2. **Issue**: the topic of conflict and "under-the-surface" feelings, meanings, and goals.
3. **Core Needs**: unmet expectations or needs (e.g., care, acceptance, trust, recognition, control).

Many conflicts are never solved because the spouses are actually arguing about different hidden issues or unmet core needs. Healthy, helpful communication occurs when



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discussion is on the same issue and addresses core relational needs. A loving action (though often challenging) is to work at understanding why your spouse is reacting to an issue the way he or she is. For example, if you are a private person you may prefer minimal displays of affection in public. When your spouse is being overly affectionate at a family gathering (the “event”), this may leave you uncomfortable or embarrassed. The “issue” underneath the surface is how intimacy is expressed in public, and this public display may violate the need to respect the spouse’s wishes. Always seek to communicate on the same issue and identify core needs.

Types of Conflict

SOLVABLE VS. PERPETUAL CONFLICT³

When choosing to marry a particular person, you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems which you will be dealing with for the rest of your life. One researcher suggests that 69% of conflicts within marriage are unsolvable. While perpetual problems cannot be solved, it is important to manage this conflict, or it will lead to gridlock and emotional disengagement within the relationship. The table outlines the differences in these types of conflict.

Solvable	Perpetual
Situational	Centers on fundamental differences in personality or lifestyle.
Less intense, simply about the topic.	Generally more intense, deeper meaning behind the position.
A solution can be found and maintained.	The conflict keeps coming up.
Solvable topics for one couple can be perpetual for another.	

Financial management is a common area of perpetual conflict for couples. For example, one spouse may be a spender whereas the other spouse is a saver. Additionally, spouses may have different hidden meanings when it comes to the area of finances. Being aware of the perpetual conflicts within your relationship can be helpful. Simply labeling and identifying such conflicts as perpetual relieves tension in the relationship. In addition, consider the following as you work through perpetual conflicts:

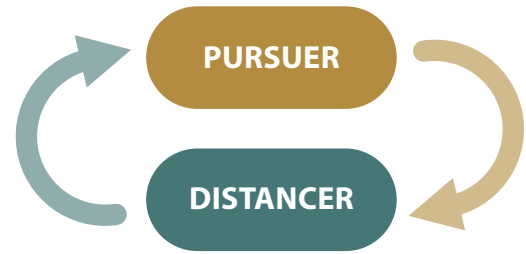
- Acknowledge the problem and talk about it.
- Remember negative emotions are important & may help identify unmet needs or disappointments in your spouse’s life.
- Seek to understand each other’s perspective.
- Seek to approach the problem with good humor.
- Communicate acceptance of your spouse.
- Don’t forget to continually build friendship within your marriage.
- Learn to accept that difference doesn’t have to be painful. It can simply be present.

THE PURSUER-DISTANCER CYCLE

Spouses often have different ideas as to what is the best way to resolve conflict. Many times, one of the spouses wants to talk about problems right away while the other spouse wants time to think about it and talk later. This arrangement often leads to the pursuer-distancer cycle.

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For example, a wife may want to talk about why her husband has been working so many hours. However, when she says, “Why are you working so much? You never have time to help me around here,” he says he wants to talk about it later and goes into his office. This, in turn, causes the wife to become more frustrated and anxious. She then follows him into his office showering him with additional questions. In response to these continued questions (which he most likely perceives as criticism), the husband gets frustrated, becomes angry, shouts, “I work hard all day, and this is all the thanks I get!” leaves the room and goes up to bed.



Both the pursuer and the distancer contribute to this cycle. When the pursuer (the wife in this case) puts pressure on the distancer (the husband in this case) to talk when he or she is not ready, the distancer withdraws. However, because the distancer does not attempt to address the problem in any way, the pursuer becomes worried that the problem will never get solved and pursues more intensely. The goal is to be respectful of each other by doing the following:

- **If you tend to be a pursuer:** Be careful not to be too pushy – just because you feel like talking through an issue doesn’t mean the timing is right to discuss a conflict. Instead, let your spouse know you have something you want to talk about and you want to know when you both can talk about it.
- **If you tend to be a distancer:** Be careful not to withdraw without providing your spouse with a plan as to when you are going to discuss the issue. If you aren’t ready to talk, let him or her know you are aware that he or she wants to talk and now is not a good time. HOWEVER, negotiate a time in the near future that both of you can address the issue.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Do you think you are more likely to be a “Pursuer” or a “Distancer?” In our marriage what patterns do you think we should be guarding against? What could we say to remind each other when we get caught in this cycle?

SYMPTOMS OF DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Every couple, no matter how good their marriage, will have occasional disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflicts. Thus, when you have occasional conflict, don’t be alarmed. Rather, take the time necessary to work through the issues and move on. However, researchers have found several types of conflict that you should be aware of and work to avoid.

1. **Escalation** - occurs when spouses, “respond back and forth negatively to each other, continually upping the ante so the conversation gets more and more hostile. In escalation, negative comments spiral into increasing anger and frustration.”⁴
2. **Invalidation** - “is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other.”⁵
3. **Negative interpretations** - “occur when one partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case.”⁶

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4. **Withdrawal and avoidance** - occur when one or both of the spouses, “shows an unwillingness to get into or stay with important discussions.”⁷ Withdrawing refers to “shutting down” and trying to get out of a conversation, whereas avoidance is an attempt to keep the conversation from starting.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Are there any topics that you avoid bringing up because you are afraid they will cause a conflict or hurt my feelings? If so, what topics are they? What needs to happen to make sure that these issues get worked through?

Another researcher has identified types of conflict that can be so poisonous to marriages that he calls them the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”⁸

1. **Criticism** - global negative statements about your spouse’s character or personality. For example, “Why do you keep putting your friends ahead of me? I always come last on your list. Are you avoiding spending time alone with me?”⁹
2. **Contempt** - words or gestures that show your spouse you are disgusted and repulsed with him or her. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about your spouse. Sarcasm, cynicism, ridicule, name-calling, mocking, rolling your eyes, etc. are examples.
3. **Defensiveness** - instead of listening to your spouse’s position and talking through it, defensiveness is a way of denying responsibility or blaming your spouse and often involves pointing out flaws in his or her behavior, opinions, etc.
4. **Stonewalling** - avoiding your spouse by shutting him or her out and not communicating. Stonewalling includes giving your spouse the “silent treatment.” While the intent of this is generally to avoid fighting, it also avoids the marriage.

Note that the chronic presence of the four types of conflict listed above predicts divorce by 82%.¹⁰ When you notice any of the above, try to find ways to resolve the conflict in a Christ-honoring way. Calming down and taking time to pray and talk through conflict can usually resolve it. However, if you find that you cannot seem to work through the conflict on your own, don’t hesitate to seek support and guidance from an elder, minister, mentor, counselor, etc.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

If you start to notice any of the eight types of destructive conflict in our relationship on a regular basis, how do you plan to respond? Who is someone that we can reach out to for help?

Special Note: Emotional abuse (also called verbal abuse) and physical abuse are never acceptable and should not be tolerated in your marriage. These types of abuse are sins that strike at the very heart of the marriage and provide Satan with an opportunity to destroy the marriage. While physical abuse may cause visible bruises, emotional abuse crushes a person’s spirit

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(Proverbs 18:14). Examples of emotional abuse include a chronic pattern of using hurtful words, angry outbursts, silence, isolation, gestures, threats, etc. to control and manipulate another person.^{11,12} If emotional and/or physical abuse occur in your relationship, seek help immediately.



For more information,
scan or click to view the
Relationship Spectrum:
Healthy, Unhealthy, Abusive.

Good Conflict Resolution

ADDITIONAL GROUND RULES FOR GOOD CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

1. **Stay on one topic:** Trying to resolve multiple issues in one conversation can add confusion and more misunderstanding.
2. **Don't dredge up the past:** Bringing up past words, actions, etc. can be very hurtful to your spouse and damage trust.
3. **Avoid "You" statements:** Starting sentences with accusations (even if they are true) will put your spouse on the defensive ("You never listen.").
4. **Use "I" statements:** Speak from your perspective. "I feel frustrated when the garbage isn't taken out after I have asked you to take care of it."
5. **Control the tone of your voice:** *"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."* (Proverbs 15:1).
6. **Seek first to understand:** Negative emotions hold important information about how to love your spouse better.
7. **Don't lecture each other or treat your spouse like a child:** Remember we are *"heirs together of the grace of life"* (1 Peter 3:7) and we should treat each other as such.

THE STEPS OF GOOD PROBLEM SOLVING

When you have an issue that isn't solved through communication alone, go through the steps below. For minor issues, you can move through the steps quickly. However, for emotionally charged, difficult issues you should move through the steps slowly and deliberately.

- Find an appropriate time & setting to discuss the issue (*Ecclesiastes 3:1*).
- Decide what issue is going to be discussed.
- Define the type of conflict – solvable or perpetual.
- Define the problem clearly from both points of view.
- State what you can agree on.

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- Brainstorm together for possible solutions.
- Summarize, compromise, and agree upon a plan of action to try.
- Pray to God for help to take the necessary steps and to make progress.
- Identify a time to meet together again to evaluate your progress.
- If you continue to have difficulty or cannot find a way to solve the issues on your own, seek counsel from an elder, minister, mentor, or counselor.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

If we were having trouble solving a problem, at what point do you think we should seek out counsel from someone else (elder, counselor, etc.)? Who would you be most likely to go to for help?

Further Couple Exercises

EXERCISE 1 - WHERE IS OUR CONFLICT?¹³

This exercise will help you put your finger on those issues that are especially prone to cause conflict in your relationship. Listed on the next page are the common relationship issues that most couples will encounter from time to time over the course of the relationship. Rate how much of a problem each issue is for you right now. If you wish to add other areas not included in the list, please do so. Do this exercise on your own before discussing it with your spouse.

After you have completed rating the issues, share the results together. What issues are a problem for both of you, and what issues are a problem for one or the other of you? Next, discuss which issues might become more troublesome in the future and what you can do to calm the conflict before it erupts.

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	Not at all a problem					Very much a problem
Careers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Chores	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Communication	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Friends	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Illness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
In-laws	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Jealousy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Money	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Priorities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Recreation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Relatives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Religion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sex	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sleep habits	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

EXERCISE 2 - DO YOUR PART ¹⁴

For all too many couples, the hidden issues never come out. They fester and produce fear, sadness, and resentment that erode and eventually destroy the marriage. It just doesn't have to be that way. When you learn to discuss deeper issues openly and with emphasis on validating each other, the issues that had been generating the greatest conflicts can actually become means of deepening your oneness and drawing you closer together.

To help you look at your own relationship, we recommend that you first pray for your relationship and for your spouse. Hidden issues are hidden because they are difficult to think and talk about. Instead of allowing anxiety

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or fear to build barriers, ask God to help you build and maintain a deeper connection. God is eager to hear your requests about everything (*Philippians 4:6*)—including your marriage.

Work through the following questions on your own, then plan a time to talk together about your impressions.

1. Take some time to reflect more on why there is no need for hidden issues with the Lord. Meditating more deeply on who Christ is and what he has done for you is the most powerful basis we can imagine for breaking down barriers in relationships.
2. Think about the signs of hidden issues. Do you notice that one or more of these come up in your relationship? What do you notice happening most often: Wheel spinning? Trivial triggers? Avoidance? Scorekeeping?
3. Consider which hidden issues might be triggered most often in your relationship. Note if there are certain events that have triggered or keep triggering the issues. Make a list of the common triggering events for the issues of power and control, caring, recognition, commitment, and acceptance.
4. Set aside time to talk together about your observations and thoughts. Most couples have certain hidden issues that come up repeatedly. Identifying these can help you draw together as you each learn to handle those issues with care. Also, as you discuss these matters, you have an excellent opportunity to get in some more practice with the Speaker-Listener Technique.

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REFERENCES:

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

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