

National Relationships Repair Month

How to Understand and Frame your Conflicts

This report is part of first Week of the
"National Relationship Repair Month".

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A New Perspective On Conflict

We all need relationships to develop and thrive. Human relationships serve the purpose of mutual nurturance and reciprocal confirmation of our worth as human beings.

In this give and take of acceptance and confirmation, we get to develop a strong sense of self. Confirmation messages convey to the recipient the assurance that he or she is accepted, loved and thus, integrated into and belonging to some collective: “our family,” “our marriage.”

People initiate conflict, not because they initially want to destroy the connection with their significant Other, but because they need some kind of confirmation from their significant Other. We are always moved by our needs, and the search for satisfaction of those needs....In the case of the need for love and connection, (supposed to be satisfied by the marriage contract itself), either this confirmation of the other person’s love and undying interest on us is spontaneously provided, and we thrive, or it has to be pulled out of the Other, by means of some confrontation. But we can’t avoid searching for elements of love that can feed our need!

Conflict is the activity that allows us to define our needs._

By confronting each other, we get to know what we want, what is that we reject, and basically to know who we are. Reciprocal confrontation helps us to know how others see us, and to compare that image with how we see ourselves, and manage the difference.

Fair or positive conflict is the activity that allows us to negotiate our inclusions without anger and doing so, reciprocally, we get to know who we are, how others see us, what is what they love and reject in us, how we are evolving as perceived by others, and basically, helps us know who we are becoming.

In short, this is what you need to know about conflict:

- Conflict is inevitable, so accept it in your life. Don’t be surprised or scared by it, **BUT LEARN HOW TO INCLUDE CONFLICT INTO THE SKILLS TO BE LEARNED.**

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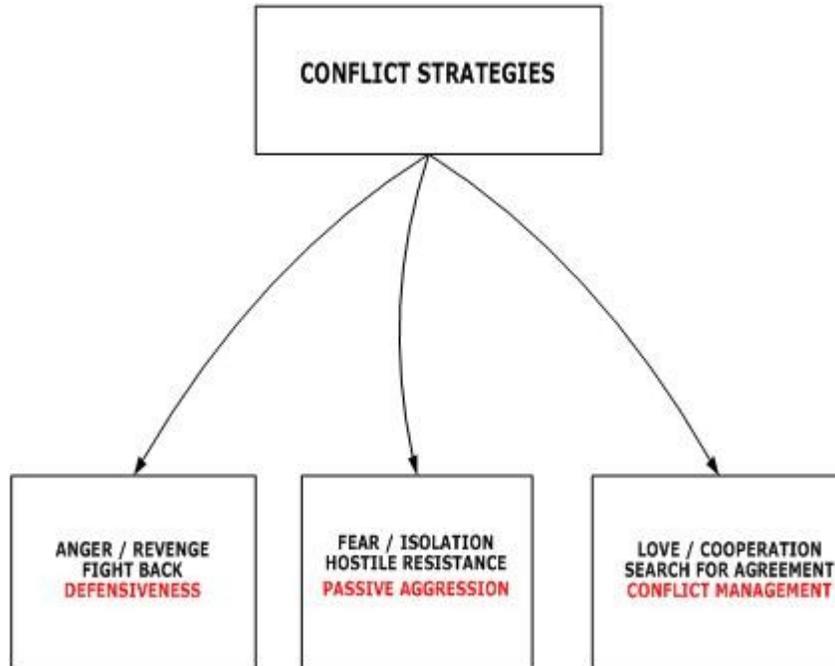
- Although inevitable, once accepted and planned for, conflict can be minimized, diverted, managed and/or resolved.
- Conflict develops because we are dealing with people's lives, jobs, children, money, pride, self-concept, ego and sense of mission or purpose.
- Early indicators of conflict can often be recognized, look for areas where people feel their needs frustrated.
- There are strategies for resolution that are available NOW and DO work.
- Even when forced to fight to defend your interests, you can always **fight fair**, and so build respect in the view of your partner
- Conflict can be used always as a way to determine what needs change in the couple or relationship.

REMEMBER: You can take a little time to change your perception of intimate conflict, from being perceived as a disaster to an inevitable and welcomed challenge, which will help both partners grow. If you still feel that the issue of learning how to fight better is worrisome for you, you can always ask for some strategic session at conflictcoach.me

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Conflict strategies

THE OPTIONS ORIGINATED BY A PARADIGM OF CONFLICT AS WIN/LOSE ARE:



Whatever your style of dealing with conflict - avoiding, denying, to resist passive-aggressively, or to fight back with a vengeance - the results will always be poor, as described by boxes Left and Center.

Of course, you have always more options, so you can analyze the situation and decide what is best: If there are less important issues at stake, perhaps you can afford to evade or deny, or if too important and you need to take a stand, then fight back....but if you need to keep a relationship going, then learning to negotiate your way by listening to the other person needs is what is more effective.

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We need to learn other ways to manage conflict in such a way that we can come out of it enriched, with a sense of satisfaction and an experience of relationship strengthening. In short, we need to **learn how to fight in a fair way**, showing the partner that we have needs to solve, but also that we care for the relationship.

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Change and conflict: twin sisters?

TIP: This is the game of love: to have a positive, creative view of conflict, you need to accept development and change within as a condition of the development of your love relationship, and in so doing let new aspects of both partners emerge. This means to allow both of you to change, adapt and learn new ways of negotiating your relationship, every day.

TRY THIS: Make a point in complimenting your significant Other with a gentle observation of the new behaviors s/he is displaying.

Conflict is always deeply personal, because it has a lot to do with who you are developing into. Conflict is not indifferent to character, and character has no existence apart from conflict. To be the particular woman or man you are becoming, with all your likes and dislikes, fears and hopes, faults and virtues and idiosyncrasies - in short, to be human - entails managing change and conflict throughout your entire life. In this light, one would think that we'd be striving to reinvent ourselves every day.

Indeed we should be continually changing and adapting, acquiring new and valuable skills which reflect who we are now, while shedding the old skin that no longer serves us and may indeed hinder our growth and development. We can learn what needs to be changed and replaced through our conflicts with others. When all of this becomes acceptable on the level of the individual, change in the context of the relationship becomes an exquisite act of mutual re-balancing.

Change can come both from the outside—from forces in our environment, our circumstances, or the people around us— or change can come from within— from our emotional and psychological traits and developments.

Change is a part of life. Children grow. People join together and then move apart. Projects are begun and completed, or begun and abandoned. We move to a new home, a new town, a new country ...all movement in our lives, even the very act of waking up in the morning, includes facing life's changes.

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Some of these changes are very small, like a new gray hair; or big, like a hurricane. In any event, whatever has changed is no longer the way it was yesterday, and in most cases, we have no control over this change. Our choices are either to go along with it or to deny the need to change and get stuck in a fantasy, frozen in time. Now, let's imagine that you could have an understanding with your lover, by which both could reciprocally help the other develop?

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How Couples Process Change Is What Matters

As long as we live, we are immersed in a social network that is continually evolving. If you don't want to live like a hermit in the forest, completely severing all ties with the outside world; if you don't want to play dead, doing whatever you can to avoid conflict, then you constructively and fearlessly have to deal with conflict in one way or another.

Even when it is not we who change, but someone else, it affects us, because we are interdependent people. Each person's choices affect another person in some way. So it can be taken as a given that if one person changes -especially someone near and dear, then someone else - most likely you - is going to have to accept that change, to go along with it, like it or not.

At times, out of fear and resistance, we decide that, no matter what, we will stick to the old rules of engagement. We'll continue to think and see things in the same way, because they fit within the limits of our comfort zone.

The perceived need, sometimes desperate, to avoid change welcomed in us the belief that everything was maintaining the status quo. And then, disaster strikes!

Those around us, continuing with their personal growth, either change mindsets and perspectives, becoming totally different people, or leave us, or begin to voice strong rejection of our ideas. Suddenly nobody shares the views that we hold dear.

At the end, if we remain adamant in keeping the old ways of thinking, the others will leave us alone. The price of resisting change is, in the end, being left alone in our bubble, by a world that has moved on and left us behind.... as hidden dinosaurs, survivors in a different world. Everybody is changing continuously, and they help us to go along with theirs and our change by confronting us.

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Case example:

Alice was getting more and more efficient in her job. It was as she was made for that position: intelligent, dedicated, and always coming up with creative ways of solving problems. Finally, a big promotion was offered to her, which entailed changing cities and a whole new life style. Her husband, totally confused about this unexpected turn of events, refused to consider any of the possibilities for the new situation. Upset and resentful, he tried to get her to either refuse the promotion or give up the job altogether. She began to see his attitude as selfish and destructive, and suddenly was confronted with a major crisis in her life.

Only after so much patient talk she was able to help him focus on the real reasons for his hard attitude, and pleading for his support allowed him to feel a little better (not left behind in this change), move on and realize how damaging his acting out of fear could be for the marriage....

Where do we learn how to wage this inter-personal war? It is within our family relationships where we learn how to create and manage conflict. This is where we learn how to deal with everyday “enemies” – our brothers and sisters and cousins. Within the family we develop both loyalty and treason as the brother or sister who may be an ally today, becomes the opponent tomorrow.

But the patterns are not solely learned among siblings. When parents engage in a downward spiral of conflict, the family landscape becomes a destructive environment. As the situation worsens other relatives withdraw, friends step aside and the immediate family winds up isolated. This results in emotional stress, which eventually burdens small children.

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Conflict Generated by Change Itself

The relationship between change and conflict is very real, and very big. Each unplanned change in our normal environment brings with it the potential for conflict. Personal changes challenge us to dedicate energy, resources, and our scarce time to deal with new possibilities. If we don't have the energy to deal with changes, situations may worsen. Some issues, left unresolved, will only get worse as they get postponed.

By our very nature, we are better equipped to deal with some changes than with others. We will gladly accept a promotion at work— but never a layoff! We might smile as we march to the altar on our wedding day – but we may grimace as we get dragged to divorce court. We will gladly build a new dream home and fill it with wonderful furniture, appliances, and keepsakes – but we will despair in watching it destroyed in a fire.

Any loss, even a planned and foreseen loss, brings a conflict within ourselves: specifically, between the person we were *before* the loss, and the person we are *after* the loss. We grieve for the lost things, even when we don't know if, in the future, we will replace them with better valuables. In short, each stage of life forces us to depart from who we once were, and welcome the new developments, expected or unexpected, in our lives.

Sometimes, people resort to an endless state of anger and dissatisfaction with themselves, their partner, and the state of the world or any obstacles in their way. It is easier to be angry with people or things, which we can attempt to control, than to recognize the inevitability of change and its demands on us. We can even be stuck in proving that others don't accept or understand us, instead of taking the steps necessary to have what we want.

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Case example: A COUPLE'S FIGHT:

A classic example is the tug-of-war between couple when both expect some kind of recognition from the other, which has to be given unasked for. Who will be the one who changes first and gives in to the Other's need? This bind: ***“show me that you love me, without me having to ask for it”*** is clear in this story:

Veronica: Can I talk with you about something that bothers me?

Ted: Of course!

Veronica: Six months ago we agreed on having a monthly discussion about expenses and how we'd save for the summer vacation.

Ted: Oh, yes, we did!

Veronica: And then what? You do not care a thing about our decision, right?

Ted: You are wrong! Of course I do care!

Veronica: but you have done nothing! You did not ask me for a time to evaluate our spending in the last six months...I have been watching you, and you did not mention it in six months!

Ted: well, I have been really worried with my job, had a lot of worries in my mind... But you have no right to assume that I don't care!

Veronica: Yeah, right, you do a lot of caring, without doing anything about it! It's because I proposed that we should be saving more. ... When you care about the car, you take it to the shop!!!

Ted: That's a lie! I care about our plans more than I care about the car.

Veronica: No, you don't, and this episode is proof. We have nothing saved, you don't talk about saving and when I remind you of the issue, you yell at me. I will not try again to plan together with a person that doesn't care!

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Here, the deal for both (as repetitive fights help partners to get stuck in same situations) is how not to change from being a passive spectator of other's actions, towards taking actions to fulfill our needs. He doesn't want to take control of the financial situation; she doesn't want to make decisions for herself... both are stuck, and resort to blaming each other.

Survival is achieved through adaptation and change; but because of our fears, we want to remain unchanged. Being in a couple means that we have an unconscious pact: **“as long as we are together, nothing changes.”** This is an imaginary deal that gives us a lot of emotional comfort; making more difficult to give up.

By clinging to our pre-conceived identities, and our notions of how our situations “are supposed to be,” we deny the challenge of growth and development that is ours. We don't accept change because it would mean dropping our cherished behaviors and points of view.

In short: you need to grieve your beloved bride (and the relationship you had with her then) in order to accept the mature spouse sitting at your side now....

In order to maintain our personal, internal status quo, we deny change, and in doing so, we enter into a conflict with our very lives and everything that is gearing towards adapting in them. Biologically and psychologically, we are always changing, adapting and transforming! By maintaining a fantasy of “the way we are” and “the way things are supposed to be,” we try to cheat the biological plan that would help us evolve and adapt, and in so doing we cheat ourselves of a rich and vital life.

Whatever we were doing that the other person found before so exciting; now it doesn't work any longer. We are not able to ingratiate the other with a smile: she demands real answers that perhaps we don't have. His way of life planning for the future is a new development that you resist angrily: why should you change if you are comfortable as you are now?

What wakes us up and gets us out of this rut? What rattles our cage and forces us back into a life of change and development? Only one thing: conflict. Who provides the initiative for this forced change? The spouse is, when he or she is changing faster than us, and becomes a challenge and a source of deep pain.

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Fear of being left behind makes us cling and control. Otherwise, we would take the challenge and develop ourselves....what if one is developing faster? Here is hidden the core of the contract in a couple: to change at the same time, and in the same direction, so not to leave one part of the couple behind.

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Clashing With Others

The “Ying” and “Yang” of Conflict

Ed hadn't had a very good day at work Friday. The sales presentation hadn't gone well, and even though the buyers had said they'd get back to him, he knew it wasn't happening. Afterward, Ed's boss, Ray, had chewed him out, said he should have been better prepared. As he worked on commission, Ed knew it would be a slim month.

Of course, if Ray had delivered to him the buyer's profile on Monday instead of going golfing and forgetting it until Thursday, Ed might have had a better idea what the buyer actually needed, and wouldn't had to improvise. But Ed kept his mouth shut; Ray was the boss.

When Ed got home, he noticed that Mary was wearing a new dress. It looked expensive. “Do you like it?” she asked.

“Great,” he replied. “You look like Carmen Electra. You must have got a raise you didn't tell me about, huh?”

“You're in a great mood, what your problem?” Mary said, biting off the words. “Christ, I can't even get something nice for myself anymore without catching crap from you. What about you, anyway, and your flat-screen TV you just had to have. And your damn expensive car?”

“Screw you,” Ed shouted. “I have a hell of a day and I have to come home and take your crap. I'm going to the bar.”

“Oh, fine,” Mary answered, “Just don't expect me to heat up your dinner when you wander in drunk at midnight.”

“I don't want your slop anyway,” he yelled on his way out the door. “I'll eat out.”

That night, he paid his tab with his credit card. He was hung over in the morning and an hour late for work, and Mary had left for the day before he'd made it out of bed.

To play the game of conflict we need an “other;” someone or something to act as our opponent or obstacle. Regardless of whether the source is a real person or group, or a figment of our imagination, we are always engaged in a dialogue with an “other.” The best counterparts in this game are usually the people that know you the best: a spouse, a sibling,

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a co-workers or old friend. Regardless of the actual source of our frustration, like Ed's job and boss, it's those closest to us - our Mary - who usually bears the brunt.

The two disputing players complement one another while playing their respective roles according to the type of conflict. Each player will be "*acting in self-defense*", despite the fact that this tactic is interpreted as "offensive" by the opponent. This dynamic allows both parties to defend themselves while simultaneously (and inadvertently) offending the other. As the exchange escalates, the dispute begins to destroy what was once a loving relationship.

If it is true that we need each other to play out our conflict dramas, always with different people about different issues, then we need an "enemy," someone that will willingly play the counter-role to our role, the oppositional one. If we attack, he will counter attack and so on, escalating the dispute. And, so sadly in the case of couples, lost in the fog of war is our previous loving, respectful connection.

Prior to the conflict there had been an understanding and agreement to love between two partners. What happened? Why is it so easy to forget that we are (or began as) love partners and not enemies?

FLAG: What do you really need right now? Does this relationship feel too constrictive? Does it allow you to be yourself? Are you progressively sad because you have outgrown it? At the same time, are you afraid to take action to change it, even though you are stuck in an unacceptable situation? Naturally, the only option is to have a big fight! If you can leave your opponent fuming beneath a mushroom cloud of anger and recrimination, then it won't hurt so much to say goodbye! And you will save yourself the pain of breaking up unilaterally, because you will be deemed "right" and your significant other will be labeled "wrong".

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The Emotional Core Of Conflicts

Some people carry a lot of repressed anger from their childhood, and tend to form relationships that reproduce abusive situations from the past in the present. The trick is that they are not clearly aware that their actual way of interacting with others is passive aggressive and sabotages the same bond they claim to cherish. To do so, they would have to also accept that they are now behaving in such a way (actively on others) as their parents did to them (passively, as recipients) years ago! Who wants to accept that they are behaving using the same core emotions as grown up children?

As we reach adulthood, our coping mechanisms become entrenched. Fear, resentment, anger, and hopelessness take over when we are dealing with conflict. The emotions are huge and seemingly uncontrollable.

Depressed people frequently find a release from these negative emotions by fighting. Conflict, in this case, reconnects the depressed party with another person. When resolution seems impossible, hopelessness leads to deeper depression and less hope. Fighting or arguing becomes the best outlet for self-expression.

While this response can be healthy, some problems often follow. Messages get misinterpreted, and those who don't know how to process confrontations can isolate themselves and experience some further consequences such as eating disorders, alcohol abuse, and increased aggressive behavior.

These responses reveal an ongoing hidden anger together with a subsequent inability to manage it. In adulthood the anger becomes aimed at the wrong targets: instead of family members we act out at colleagues, acquaintances, lovers, and partners. When we learn that others reject open aggression, then we begin using passive aggression as a means to vent anger.

Anger is at the core of our expression. The same anger is also at the core of passive aggression. Regardless of its labels, such as impatience or chronic hostility, passive aggressive behavior is rooted in anger, even when it is denied or repressed or called by another name. And it is always toxic to relationships, because prevents development of a good set of communication skills. Tragically, when they are more needed than ever, those

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skills disappear and leave us with the raw anger of the past, pushing us to fight, humiliate and break the other's self-esteem!

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Communication And Conflict

According to W. Wilmot, author of *Relational Communication* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1995), couples who don't communicate in respectful and satisfactory ways during the first year of marriage are more likely to divorce than couples who communicate well. *"What determines the course of a relationship... is in large measure determined by how successfully the participants move through conflict episodes"*

If they move through the confrontation with respect and a minimum of trust in the capacity of the other to listen and understand, then they will learn from conflict. If they can't process differences with respect, their failed communication will lead to more isolation, pain and anger. One partner makes claims on the other, who, in turn, is unable to respond positively to the hurt hidden beneath aggressive words. The only option seems to be to defend oneself and to counter-attack.

Naturally, a harsher conflict appears and escalates. In the end, damage is done, trust is lost, and neither party can take back the strong words much less repair the hurt. Whether appearing in marriage or the workplace, unresolved and escalated confrontation ends up with both sides isolated and moving in different directions.

Left unresolved, the inability to deal constructively with conflict gets transferred to new relationships. Our destructive patterns have been learned and established in our childhood.

New partners generally share and reproduce the same dysfunctional style of conflict management they learned as children. If the ways they use to manage it are constructive, including respect, or destructive using accusations, blame and heavy critique, the adult child will use those same styles with his own new family. This is the school where we learn to do conflict in a destructive or constructive way.

Of course, destructive conflict responses outnumber positive actions. It is easier to lash out in unbridled anger than to restrain yourself to weigh both sides. If we are only taught destructive conflict responses, we never learn how to fight fair.

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Some people when growing up develop the resulting belief that see painful conflict as inevitable, that you need to accept the grief of it, or otherwise stay alone by yourself....but this is short sighted. The common phrase they could use is: “All people prefer peace, harmony and calm interactions, but find themselves in situations that are tense, escalating in an uncomfortable way and very frightening”. This polarized thinking makes the appearance of conflict as a zero sum: either there is bliss or hell, because one wins and the other has to lose. Which is wrong: we will have all degrees of conflict in between, from the friendly challenge to the painful rift in love relationships.

Other people say that they prefer peace, but their actions show they need steady doses of confrontation to be happy! As they need the excitement generated by the confrontation, they constantly challenge others with behaviors that are shortsighted, inconsiderate, frustrating and mean-spirited. Over and over they want to test the parameters of their relationships to the degree that testing limits seems to be the only purpose of staying together! This can be really taxing for their partners, who find it problematic to see a search for love and confirmation going on under the guise of their partner’s obnoxious behavior.

Despite the previous examples, confrontation and peace are not opposites. Instead they are but parts of a continuum. Confrontation with respect happens when we yearn to understand the gap that lies between our partners and ourselves. To examine our differences we begin to prod with confrontation.

Peace is a transitive state that appears in the wake of conflict. Here, we find common ground after we express our dueling positions. We find ourselves reflected and understood by the other; we are equally stripped of pretense and accepted by one another. This ideal state of peace cannot last because is not a destination. Instead, it is but a moment in the change/development process: we can breathe and receive confirmation of our growth by the other person. In turn, the other rejoices in witnessing our latest stretch and our most recent development trait. But this is only temporary, because we eventually return to the conflict-laden process of self-development.

Humans toil in a perpetual cycle of transition. Conflict appears when we need to evolve to our next stage of awareness and we become stuck by resisting change. Fear of loss is one strong factor in this dilemma.

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As children we were never told about this constant state of flux and the likelihood of loss in all our relationships, due to death, separation or insolvable conflict. As a result we fail to learn positive strategies to manage our own change when due. We get stuck. But a good dispute helps to get our development cycle flowing again. Conflict can help us grow, and in turn we develop by being the “other” to our partner.

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Conflict in Relationships

TIP: CONFLICT IN COUPLES is a shared imaginary situation requiring mutual cooperation to deny, cover up or reject the essential loving unity. Conflict can be understood simultaneously as a push for differentiation or a call for unity, and partners play both at different times. This is the result of fear of excessive proximity or fear of intimacy. This fear can lead to permanent confrontation damage.

Conflict with a lover has the capacity to enhance or destroy one's self-image, the perception of one's role in the relationship. A partner is forced to face questions such as: "Who am I now?" "What are my needs?" "Why can't my lover understand my needs?" "Who do I want to become with his or her feedback?" Experiencing conflict is the engine for self-development...the more one is faced with what is not only "not me," but what is even "against me," the more completely does a unique self-image emerge.

One can adopt the following point of view: "As I am forced to face the reflection of my uncharted character by the pressure provided by my "enemy," I see more truly who I am. Once seen, I can hardly pretend to be otherwise. Of course, I can spend time denying what my partner sees in me, but it is a lost battle." Lesson learned: Sooner or later you will have to deal with it, to grow!

Communication is the key. If one gives signals of confirmation and acceptance to the other partner, but is not reciprocated by the other, frustration eventually sets in. In this instance we need to use confrontation as a tool to resolve the vacuum that this missed communication creates. Using small confrontations in an assertive and constructive manner, (even with a little humor) in which we grow and learn to fight fair:

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TIP: (when stressed out and in need of attention) “Dear, we both know how much we love each other, but now, precisely, I need to hear that again. My day at work has been especially rough. Can you stop whatever you are doing and give a big hug to this partner of yours, even if he doesn’t deserve it? It will be doubly appreciated because it is totally undeserved, but badly needed. ”

What would happen if we never challenge our lovers? It’s likely we will never know what we are capable of becoming. Without conflict we will never develop new skills or grow. When you engage your lover in positive conflict, you are telling them that he or she is important enough for you to invest some energy in improving the relationship by challenging the sore points between you two. A healthy argument, in this view, is actually a compliment.

At the same time, when we are in a love relationship we have to manage dual contradictory tendencies:

- The push for togetherness and
- The push for differentiation and individuality.

Paradoxically, while we are fighting for our independence, we crave attention and recognition from our partner!

Following this, we have a reciprocal duty to engage when our partner needs to play the game of “conflict”. Sometimes this individual is not even aware of the need to “play” and unconsciously starts to act out. When this occurs, our mate is usually prompted by internal emotional forces pulling towards individuation as the result of “feeling enmeshed.” If we can remember that the need to stand apart is the Ying, and that the push for intimacy is the Yang, then all be compensated in the end.

There is always a strong emotional need to decide to engage by ourselves. Either we express ourselves by confrontation, or repress our need until it flares up at the next opportunity. In other moments, the individual is aware of what he or she wants, decides to pursue it, and actively works at achieving the goal of engaging the other. Here is the moment in which we accept the “invitation” and engage in the fight. Now, if we could remember all along that it is an imaginary situation.....we could invite the other to calm down and listen.

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How Do You Battle Is Important

What you do and how you decide to engage in conflict has a major impact on whether the other will feel comfortable enough to express his or her anger in appropriate ways. Since expressing anger might frighten, embarrass or confuse us, we tend automatically to discourage its expression. We send a clear message that expressing anger is not acceptable, and we don't want to deal with it....We can do worse: we can retaliate and escalate the conflict by answering with sarcasm, irony, or contempt.

TIP: The presence of conflict in your marriage means nothing, but the way you conduct yourself in conflict means everything-because the way you and your partner deal with the conflict determines whether you will grow from it or be definitively wounded by it. Be very careful to show care and respect in all your interactions; even in the middle of a heated dispute, you need to keep saying: I hear you and your points, and you have a right to your opinion, and at the same time I would like you to listen to me....;

If a partner who still hangs into unresolved childhood anger needs to dispute with a loved one to release his or her anger, we have two choices here:

- a. either to take his or her aggression seriously, escalate and fight each other to the end:
-

Stan: (makes a threat) "Don't you ever think of walking away from me when I'm talking to you."

Susan (counter threat): "I'll walk away, and I'll walk right out of the marriage if I do. You can't stop me."

Stan: (intensifies threat): "Try it and see how you get to work without a car. It's in my name, so you don't have a car!"

Susan: (intensifies counter threat): "and you don't have children. End of story!"

- b. Or manage anger in such a way that it is processed and acknowledged. In this case we need to acknowledge the fear underneath the anger, **LIKE IN:**

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- A woman scolds her child after he has run away. (She fears her child will get killed by a car.)
 - A single parent overreacts to a child's misbehavior at a family reunion by raising her voice and ordering the child a time-out. (She is afraid that other family members will criticize her parenting.)
 - A woman is angry at her partner for calling her a name in front of her friends (she is afraid that this shows that her partner doesn't respect their bond and it might appear as if his not interested in her any longer)
-

Case Example:

Joe: (expresses concern) “Is there something bothering you? I could hear you telling your friends that you are about to explode, at the party.”

Alice's (counter threat): “No, there is nothing really”

Joe: (intensifies concern to overcome her fear): “Let's try again; I feel that there is something worrying you. Do you care to let me know?”

Alice: (relaxes defense) “Well, as long as you don't get all upset and scream at me, I would like you to hear what is worrying me sick in this relationship”

Joe: “OK, I see what you are afraid off, sometimes I don't control my temper; let me try again. If I see that I get too frustrated, I will ask for some time off, you should not be concerned about this, because I will get back here in five minutes. But I really want you to open up”

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Avoiding Destructive Conflict

Destructive conflict is conflict that has escalated out of control. It is a situation where the reversal of a relationship: reciprocal appreciation, turns into confrontation. The reversal of love is hatred; hybrid of love, frustration, and anger at the frustration. In this situation, the self is so hurt that it tries to destroy the loved person to avoid feeling what is perceived as rejection from him.

Conflict is destructive when it:

- Takes attention away from connecting with one another
- Undermines morale or self-respect or image of the other
- Polarizes couples against each other, reducing cooperation
- Increases or sharpens differences into irreconcilable ones
- Leads to irresponsible and harmful behavior, such as fighting, name-calling, isolating, or using violence against a partner.

Based on the type of communication used by the parties, there could be four kinds of negative conflict strategies. Each strategy or tactic can be reversed. If a party realizes what is going on and the toll the strategy takes on the long term relationship it can be stopped. Remember that the combination of the four is lethal to relationships:

Criticizing the Other: Bringing up negative aspects of the others' behavior, without acknowledging good qualities, in public or in front of friends and relatives;

Defensiveness: Not taking any responsibility for the dispute, but blaming or accusing the other. Sometimes, it appears together with reluctance to examine one's own responsibility. Of course, the possibility of a peaceful discussion of the difference is obliterated by this defensiveness.

Stonewalling: Produced by a strong negative to acknowledge the existence of the dispute; the person is hiding under a cover of "everything is OK," together with emotional repression and extreme resistance to face conflict.

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Contempt: It is deep disdain for the other's arguments, values and needs during a dispute. The other's motivations, and his or her actions are seen as despicable and the entire person is seen as less valuable than oneself.

Even if these actions reveal how much we are hurt, upset, angry or jealous, they are destructive because the attack the relationship, not the other person's behavior that is upsetting or damaging to us. The relationship changes only toward the worst alternative: more conflict escalation, deeper hurts and possibly the destruction of the love relationship.

In the heat of dispute, we run the risk of forgetting what we were fighting for in the first place. The purpose we wanted to achieve is lost in the struggle to "defend ourselves" and win. Instead we wind up destroying something more important to us: the very relationship within which gave from which the dispute emerged.

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Positive Or Constructive Conflict

is a learning experience. It is defined as a certain way of confronting others and fighting for what we perceive we need without unnecessarily hurting the other party. When the conflict is processed in a positive, fair way, people do not remain stuck in it.

The conflict serves its function of:

- bringing people together,
- defining the boundaries of a couple or family,
- clarifying feelings about issues and processes,
- bringing up the possibility of needed change,
- correcting an injustice
- or solving a hidden problem.

When it is resolved by some rules that prevent escalation and guarantee reciprocal respect, all involved parties move on to new situations. The conflict does NOT define who people are, but how they do manage things together. It's only a transitional stage, and other kinds of relationship take over once the cleansing is done.

Finally, Conflict is constructive when it:

- Results in clarification of important problems and issues
- Results in solutions to individual or common problems
- Brings people together in resolving important issues
- Creates authentic communication
- Aids in working through emotion, anxiety, and stress
- Builds cooperation between couples as they learn more about each other and their reciprocal limits
- Helps individuals develop interpersonal skills while gaining a better understanding of other's positions, interests, and needs.
- Provides recognition of each other's humanity.

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Workbook

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Here is an example of lack of conflict communication skills:</p> <p>I'm sick of you and your demands, you are selfish and inconsiderate, the only thing you care about is yourself!</p> | <p>Change to:</p> <p>"I care about you and our relationship, and at the same time need some help from you....can you listen to me for a little time, while I sort out my thoughts? Then I would like to hear your side!</p> |
| <p>Here is another:</p> <p>One person explodes in a show of screaming and yelling. The other either escapes the room, slamming the door or stays and yells back</p> | <p>Change to:</p> <p>When person begins to yell: I would appreciate if you tell me what makes you so angry, I'm here to listen, and please lower your voice"</p> |
| <p>Now, from your own life experiences:</p> <p>Identify your worst past discussion, remember the words, and change them here:</p> <p>From "You" focused accusations, to "I" phrases" : You are always obnoxious!" to :When you repeat your complaints for the hundred time, I feel overwhelmed"</p> <p>From absolute statements: You always are mad at me" to subjective perceptions: "from my side, I see you frustrated because multiple causes... can you let me know if I am one of those?"</p> | <p>MY SOLUTIONS</p> |

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Conclusion

We have reviewed a non-traditional approach to conflict in love relationships; provided a different frame and connected the process of managing differences with reciprocal growth.

In this way, we link reciprocal processes of growth in both sides with the negotiation of differences: these two happen at the same time, and need to be recognized together.

It's not fear of conflict what should stop couples from arguing; but fighting without concern for the other side's self-esteem and self-respect.

Conflict skills now are situated as the solution to the question: how can two people together develop (individual goal) at the same time they care for the relationship (common goal)?

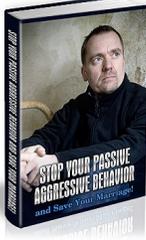
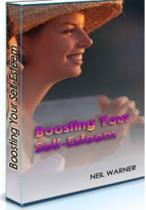
The answer is: doing confrontation with respect; separating the difference from the people involved and using fair fighting to get to a feasible solution.

For more information about the fair fighting method of processing marital conflicts, see:

<http://creativeconflicts.com/fairfighting>

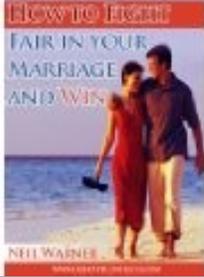
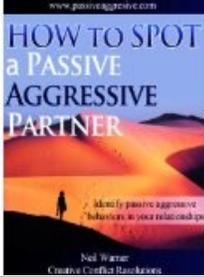
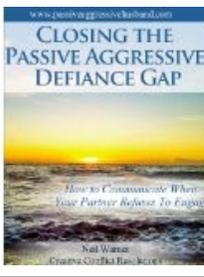
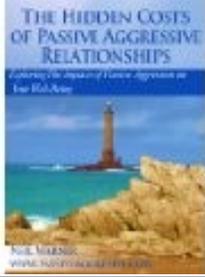
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