

**Conflict is inevitable in relationships but it can be so badly managed that sensitive issues become a recipe for an argument or are avoided completely. Instead you can manage conflict conversations in ways that won't drive you apart.**

#### ◆ Where did the love go?

"I'm sick of all the arguing. It has to stop. We just end up arguing over nothing". This is something I hear often in my work as a relationships counsellor and mediator. Unfortunately couples often come to counselling only after they become very skilled in the art of pulling apart the threads of their relationship! This means that I witness couples attempting spectacular arguments, airing their dirty laundry - waving smelly socks in each other's face.

Within a first appointment I ask how a couple met and fell in love. Sometimes they struggle to find that old good feeling as they retell their own love story and there can be tears for what has been lost.

People are complex and relationships are more so. In addition to the romantic history, a story emerges including major life events, family history, personality, interests, friendships, careers, parenting, illnesses, daily routines and how a couple spends time together. A broader perspective emerges - rising above the 'battleground' of conflict. I hear a human story with a background of hopes, dreams, good times, stresses, disappointments and well-intentioned failed attempts.

I am often saddened by how patterns that are so easily avoided, mistakes which are fixable and stresses that can be managed better have built up so that conflict is such an easy trigger point. The sadness I feel as an outsider only touches on what the couple feels.

#### ◆ Distancing and the Downhill Slide

Not all couples will experience entrenched conflict. They do have conflict but manage to avoid a down-hill slide. Leading relationship researcher John Gottman calls this process the "distance and isolation cascade" which is found between partners who have become conditioned to look for negatives and will be aroused easily in a negative way. Discussing issues seems hopeless

and the couple begins to avoid each other and spends less time together. The bond between them weakens and loneliness can emerge.

In addition to conflict, the general climate of the relationship is important. Another key risk factor is when a couple gradually creates fewer and fewer positive experiences together in peaceful times.

#### ◆ How the Slide Gets Slippery

How conflict is managed is a main contributor to a couple becoming hyper-sensitive and negatively reactive. Gottman has observed hundreds of couples discuss differences and engage in conflict in a series of long term studies. The research highlights certain behaviours that have proven to lead to relationship dissatisfaction or break up. When it comes to conflict the most damaging behaviours are:

**Criticism** refers to comments that make a negative judgment about the partner's character.

**Defensiveness** is behaviour that attempts to ward off a perceived attack and also has the result of denying personal responsibility for the problem.

**Contempt** is behavior that belittles your partner, either through words, body language or behaviour.

**Stonewalling** refers to ignoring and avoiding. Men do it more far more often than women.

**Belligerence** is acting in a hostile way to provoke a fight or to intimidate another into backing off.

This collection of behaviours is given the formidable label "The Horsemen of the Apocalypse". Even happy couples will experience conflict with a number of these types of behaviours but rarely will there be contempt and belligerence. Contempt and belligerence are significant predictors of relationship break up.

Fortunately there are proven ways for dealing with conflict in ways that aren't destructive. Gottman highlights several key skills.

#### ◆ Start Gently

If you are frustrated or upset about a situation there is a risk that your words and body language will be harsh. It is important to get off to a good start and it is crucial not to start with strong words, personal attacks or criticism.

It can also be helpful to set the scene in a positive way. For example, “I appreciate you sitting down to talk this through. I don’t find this easy and am worried I’ll say the wrong thing, but I know it needs to be discussed.” This helps the other person to understand your intention.

### ◆ Repair the damage

Pay attention to how the conversation is going and if it gets off track it is important to start repairing before the damage worsens. You can say something to remind each other that you don’t want conflict but that you do still need to discuss the issue. Ask for a gentler approach if you feel that would be more helpful and talk about how you feel about the discussion.

If you regret something you’ve said, say so. If you’ve crossed a line you shouldn’t have, apologise. When you have made a strong complaint you can also soften this with words of appreciation. When your partner makes a gesture to repair the situation it is also very important to respond to it positively.

### ◆ Taking Care, Taking Time Out

Gottman’s experiments include asking a couple to have one of their favourite arguments while being videoed. Just as the couple is getting really worked up, one of the researchers enters the room saying that they need to repair the microphones. The researcher fiddles with the mikes for a few minutes and asks the couple to put the argument on hold and read a magazine. When the “technical issue” has been resolved the couple is asked to resume but they struggle to get as worked up as before.

The simple “time out” and taking their mind elsewhere was effective in lowering their physiological arousal such as quickened heart rate and breathing. These elevated ‘symptoms’ make it harder to listen and express your feelings.

This reinforces a simple message that most people are aware of and that is to take care of your self in conflict by stepping back when you get too upset. Partners should agree on a process for taking a time out. This break of at least 20 minutes should be respected by both partners. During the break you should soothe yourself and not rehash the conflict or dwell on the situation (e.g. “How dare they?”). Time out works incredibly well as a

strategy provided there is an agreement to resume the discussion. Without this follow up it can become an avoidant strategy that controls communication.

### ◆ Accept Influence and Compromise

The problem solving part of conflict requires partners to be open to “accepting influence” from their partner. This refers to making compromises and looking for common ground to meet your partner’s needs. Rejecting your partner’s influence increases the likelihood of conflict escalating as they feel a lack of acknowledgment and don’t feel they count. Resentment builds and the other person is more likely to start up a discussion harshly or with a criticism which of course just makes it more likely that will not only be rejected again but further criticised and counter-attacked. Gottman’s research showed that men who accepted influence had less conflictual relationships and the relationship was less likely to break up.

### ◆ From Conflict to Acceptance

The negativity that is built by ongoing arguments takes its toll on couples –emotionally, mentally and physically. It can mean that issues are never really dealt with or it becomes almost impossible to have a conversation on a sensitive issue that doesn’t spiral out of control.

Once you learn how to disagree without escalating to conflict or distancing from each other, a challenge is how you discuss issues that seems to have no solution. Acceptance plays a key role and there are also strategies to make your “unsolvable issues” less stressful.