



RELATIONSHIPS

Handling Conflict with Your Partner and Staying Emotionally Connected

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Introduction

You are on your cellphone, talking to someone, when all of a sudden the line goes silent. You know the call was dropped or disconnected.

Sometimes relationships with people we care about can feel like that, especially when there is conflict in the relationships. You may wonder if your partner can still hear you. You may wonder if you are still emotionally connected to your partner. Sometimes you may feel like you have been dropped.

Conflict is normal in all relationships, but it can cause intimate partners to feel emotionally disconnected from each other. When it happens in your closest relationships, you may worry. Learning better ways to communicate will help couples stay connected and build a better relationship. This fact sheet will help you with that.

There are three steps to better communication:

1. Understand emotions

Emotions are a part of being human. Emotions help people feel connected to others. They help you notice danger. They help you notice when things are not going right. And they help you know when things are going well.

People experience emotions at two levels. First, there are feelings that come fast and are on the surface.

The second level involves feelings that are under the surface. It usually takes longer to become aware of those feelings.

- **Level 1 – Surface feelings:** These can be emotions such as anger, irritation, and frustration. These feelings often come up first in a conflict. Showing these feelings may make you and your partner feel disconnected. These feelings usually provide incomplete information to your partner about what you are experiencing. For example, when a person is angry, he or she may also be experiencing other feelings, such as hurt or disappointment.
- **Level 2 – Underlying feelings:** These are feelings that are deeper and may be

hidden. They can be emotions, such as sadness, hurt, or disappointment. These are “softer” feelings, and your partner may be more open to hearing these from you than feelings such as anger or frustration. Becoming more aware of the Level 2 feelings and communicating them to your partner can help increase connectedness.

Feelings are not good or bad; they just are. The important thing is what you do with your feelings.

2. Connect with your own emotions

Become aware of your own feelings. Pay attention to your body. How does your stomach feel? Is your neck tight or relaxed? Are you making fists? What about your heart rate? Know how your body reacts to emotions.

Take a “timeout.” You may feel some strong emotions. Some strong Level 1 emotions may lead you to do something that will push your partner away. Cool down your feelings. Take some deep breaths. Count to 10. You might feel as though you want to do something mean. Think of a bright red “Stop” sign and take a short break from the conflict. Maybe you could take a short walk. Then come back and talk with your partner.

Think about all the feelings you are experiencing. Think about the surface Level 1 feelings and the underlying Level 2 feelings. Sort out which feelings you want to communicate to your partner. Will talking about the feelings help your partner understand you better? Or will it make your partner feel more distant? Which underlying feelings could help your partner understand you better? How can talking about your emotions help you feel closer to each other? For example, talking to your partner about your feelings of hurt may help him or her understand you better and bring you closer to each other.



3. Communicate and connect with others

Make choices. Think about what you want your partner to know about your feelings. Make some choices about how you can say those things. Think about your tone of voice, the words you want to use, and when and where is best to say it. For example, yelling angrily at your partner after he or she gets home from a long day of work is not effective. Your partner may become defensive or angry and not be willing to listen to you. Choosing a calmer tone of voice, less angry words, and a time to talk when your partner is not tired or preoccupied with other concerns may help your partner respond differently. You might not be able to say things exactly as you planned, but making some choices will help you focus on what is most important to you.

Take responsibility for your own feelings. Do not say, “You made me ... (angry, mad, etc.)” That puts the blame on the other person. Emotions are your own. Try statements that begin with “I feel ...” These help you take responsibility for your own feelings. They also help your partner understand you better.

Provide information. Give your partner information about your feelings. This will help your partner understand you better. For example, maybe your partner spent a lot of money without asking you. You could say, “I felt disappointed when all that money was spent without asking me because it appears that my input is not valued.” This gives your partner information about your feelings. It also identifies the behavior that bothers you. Finally, it provides your partner with an explanation of why you feel the way that you do.

Keep your expectations realistic. You are responsible for your own feelings and reactions. You do not have control over another person’s feelings and reactions. It is important to feel hopeful that your partner will respond in a caring and understanding way. But it is also important to know that he/she will make his/her own choices about how to respond. After stating how you feel, state your hopes and expectations, such as “I would like for us to consult with each other before a large purchase is made so we can keep our finances in order.”

Making connection a habit

Try using these ideas the next time you talk with your partner. But one time will not be enough. Use the skills over and over to stay connected over time. It will get easier as you practice. The skills will help you feel connected and close with your partner.

Activities to help you express your feelings

The following exercises/activities will help you start thinking about how to implement the suggestions and strategies from this fact sheet.

- Think of a situation or conflict with your partner that caused a strong reaction in you.
- List some of the “Level 1, surface” feelings that came up for you immediately in that situation.
- Now list some of the “Level 2, underlying” feelings that might have also been present below the surface during the same situation.
- Write down some of your immediate responses during the situation.
- Rewrite the same responses in a way that helps you take responsibility for your own feelings, expresses those feelings clearly, and provides your partner with specific information.
- State your hopes and expectations of what you would like to occur before the situation occurs again.
- List some ways that you could take a “timeout” the next time you are in a conflict with your partner.

Online resources

www.gottman.com/

The Gottman Institute: A Research-Based Approach to Relationships. Website provides information on John Gottman’s research on couple relationships, media resources, books, workshops, and training for the public and for professionals.

www.smartmarriages.com/

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. Website provides information on strengthening marriages and on marriage-related issues such as domestic violence and effective communication.

www.aamft.org/

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Website provides links for professionals on issues related to family and couple relationships. Provides information on resources, current issues, and professional development opportunities.

References and resources

Gottman, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.

Gottman, J., Schwartz Gottman, J., & DeClaire, J. (2006). *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (2015, Second Edition). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country’s Foremost Relationship Expert*. New York, NY: Harmony Books.

Johnson, S.M. (2020, Third Edition). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.M. (2010, Third Edition). *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Successful relationships with an intimate partner require nurturing and attention. There are no quick fixes or fast-track methods to satisfaction and happiness in a long-term relationship. Most strategies for enhancing your relationship require repetition and practice over time. Six fact sheets from Purdue Extension – Health and Human Sciences address six areas of couple relationship challenges. The information in the fact sheets is based on research by prominent marriage and couple researchers such as John Gottman, Sue Johnson, and Howard Markman.

The titles in this series are:

HHS-742-W, *Handling Conflict with Your Partner and Staying Emotionally Connected*

HHS-743-W, *Making Time to Talk With Your Partner*

HHS-744-W, *A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Relationship*

HHS-745-W, *Increasing the Positives in Your Relationship*

HHS-746-W, *The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing*

HHS-747-W, *Sharing Dreams and Goals: Creating an Emotional Connection*

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