

How Does Your Conflict Style Impact Your Relationship?

5 Ways to Deal with Conflict



The chart above reflects the five major ways people approach conflict and negotiation, both inside and outside of marriage.

Notice, the five patterns reflect two larger axis of conflict: importance of outcome vs. importance of relationship. That is, which is more important, doing things the way you want them done or the well-being of the relationship?

More Detail

- My Way** I insist on doing things the way I want them done.
Outcome is of #1 importance
Relationship is #2
- No Way** I avoid dealing with what either of us wants.
Outcome is of 0 importance
Relationship is also 0
- Your Way** I yield and accommodate to what you want.
Relationship is of #1 importance,
Outcome is #2
- Half-Way** I try to compromise and find solutions mid-way between us.
Outcome and Relationship are important enough that we each get *part* of what is important to us.
- Our Way** I seek to work collaboratively so we both get what we want.
Outcome and Relationship are both of high importance. We strive for a “win-win.”



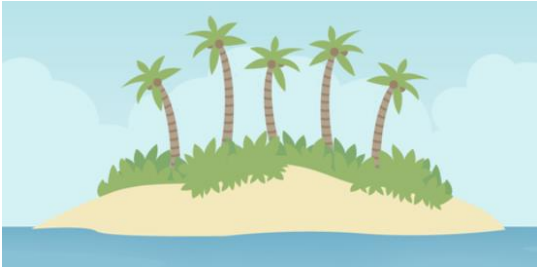
Discuss

1. On a piece of paper, write all five conflict styles from most used to least used in your relationship.
2. Then, on that same piece of paper, write the conflict style you perceive your mate uses from the most to least.
3. Switch sheets and review what your spouse wrote.
4. Are you surprised by what your spouse wrote in either section? Why or why not?
5. For your highest ranked conflict styles, discuss the advantage of that conflict style for you. What about its disadvantages?
- 6a. What style would you each like to use more and which one less?
- 6b. Name 3 concrete actions you can each take to make this happen.
- 7a. What style would you like the other to engage in more?
- 7b. How might proposed changes in your conflict styles improve your relationship?



Exercises in Collaboration

Survival Exercise



You learn that you and your spouse are going to be left on a deserted island for an undetermined period of time. You can choose only four items from the following list, with each of you selecting two. Collaborate to come up with an agreed list of four.

1. AM/FM shortwave world band receiver installed with new batteries
2. Walkie-talkie set with new batteries for on-island communications
3. Flint fire starter
4. New cigarette lighter
5. Propane stove with 1lb. propane bottle
6. One pot
7. One frying pan
8. Five days' worth of canned food
9. Animal trap
10. Two gallons of bottled water
11. Two (empty) canteens

12. Large single blade knife
13. Hatchet
14. Swiss army knife
15. Tent
16. Two blankets
17. Two sleeping bags
18. Large net
19. One change of clothing for each person
20. Map of region
21. Compass
22. Two Backpacks
23. Rubberized raft with oars
24. Two life preservers
25. Two Bottles of sunblock lotion
26. Flare gun with six flares
27. Loaded 8 shot revolver
28. Bow with 5 arrows
29. Twenty-five feet of rope
30. Two rolls of duct tape
31. Shovel
32. Ten rolls of toilet paper
33. Dozen novels
34. First Aid Kit
35. Bible
36. Two dozen condoms
37. Rx bottle of antibiotics
38. Extra pair of Rx eyeglasses (per person)
39. A pair of sunglasses for each person
40. Box of large plastic trash bags

Evaluate

- a. Did you complete the task?
- b. Did you work as a team?
- c. Which conflict style did you each engage in?
- d. Was your voice heard?
- e. Were your feelings hurt?
- f. Did you each give and take?
- g. Were you satisfied with the outcome?
- h. Was how you interacted a reflection of how you resolve differences in real life?
- i. Did you gain any insights from this exercise that could be useful in your marriage?

Resolve Problems by Brainstorming and Collaborating on Solutions

People have referred to **brainstorming** as rough-draft and out-of-the-box thinking. It brings to light ideas that are not yet fully formed. It also represents a shift in thinking from an “I-versus-you” to a “we-versus-the-problem” mind-set.

When you brainstorm, the immediate goal is to gather as many solutions to a problem as possible. Don't censor yourself or each other. Be creative in your thinking. Build off each other's ideas. Way-out ideas are welcome. Become like heated corn kernels just popping with ideas. The more ideas there are, the more

options and wider the range of solutions there will be. There should be no negative evaluation or criticism of any suggestion at this stage. Only when you finish brainstorming, evaluate which ideas make the most sense.

Illustration: Thinking Outside the Box



The story is told of a rich Bedouin sheik who owned several camels. He had three sons of 20, 18 and 12 years of age. Due to his advanced age, the sheik wrote his last will and testament. It read, in part, “I will that my oldest son shall inherit $\frac{1}{2}$ of my camels as he will have to be responsible for all our clan. My middle son, who will serve as his brother’s assistant, shall receive $\frac{1}{3}$ of my camels. My youngest son is still a child and the older sons will have to care for him; he shall get $\frac{1}{9}$ of my camels.” Months later, the father died.

The sons had difficulty carrying out their father’s wishes. There were 17 camels at the time of his death. How would the brothers divide the camels? After discussing the matter at length, to no avail, they went to a judge for his counsel. The judge suggested the sons sell all camels and split the money. But the oldest son said, “I will respect the will of my father who did not want us to sell our inheritance. The judge said to the sons, “why don’t you rent

your camels to a merchant and share what he will pay? This way, you keep the property and have an income that you can share in the designated amounts.” But the second son objected and said, “I am a merchant myself. I need my camels for my work.” The judge grew impatient and declared, “the only solution, then, will be for you to slaughter the camels and eat or sell their meat. But the youngest son wept. He said, “I have grown up with the camels. I love each one of them. They must not die.” The frustrated judge then said, “I cannot resolve your case.”

The sons went back to their tents. As they discussed their plight, the conversation became more agitated. Suddenly, over their raised voices, they heard a camel approaching.



Looking up, they recognized the rider as one of the wise men of the region, one to whom people would turn with their problems. The sons asked this man for his advice.

After they had told him about their dilemma, the wise man sat and thought. Eventually, he declared, “I will give my camel to your father’s estate. That will give you 18 camels. Following your father’s wishes, half shall go to the oldest son: 9 camels. One third shall go to the middle son: 6 camels. One ninth shall go to the youngest son: 2 camels. 9 plus 6 plus 2 makes 17 camels. That leaves one camel left over, which I would ask that you give back to me.”

The sons were happy to do so. In fact, they not only gratefully gave the wise man back his camel, but loaded it with gifts of appreciation.

Lesson


Sometimes solutions to problems seem insurmountable but are not. The practice of coming up with ideas (thinking creatively) has been widely successful for various groups and even married couples. Try it for yourselves. You have nothing to lose except a problem.

The Groan Zone



There is a phenomenon known as the “Groan Zone.” It has been defined as *a critical phase in group decision-making where conflicting viewpoints and discomfort often arise. While it may seem challenging, this phase is essential for breakthroughs and building trust within teams.*

In other words, we often have to go through a confusing and frustrating phase of discussion on the way to a solution. This concept is important to keep in mind when working on problems in your marriage.

 **YouTube** To better understand the concept, watch this 2 ½ minute [video](#).

Although the presentation refers to groups at work, the concept applies to groups of two. In my practice, I have often observed that the best ideas and solutions emerge near the end of

a difficult two-hour conversation, that is, after engaging in groan-zone like conversation. Staying engaged with good intentions is key.

Levels of Agreement

Not every solution requires wild enthusiasm for its acceptance. As the chart below shows, there are different levels of support for an idea.

- I am 100% supportive of the idea.
- ◐ I agree with the idea and have only minor concerns.
- ◑ I agree with the idea even though I see some problems with it.
- ◒ I do not have an opinion and will go along with the idea.
- ◓ I dislike the idea, but I will go along with it.
- ✗ I dislike the idea and will **Not** go along with it.
- △ I prefer another idea altogether.

These different levels of support reflect one's ability to stay connected to your spouse even if you are not 100% behind an idea. They reflect one's ability to collaborate with your mate by making accommodations while not sacrificing your values. Sometimes love and

the desire for peace supersedes getting one's own way. Being aware of these various levels of support, you may experience more "agreement" for an issue arising in the future compared to what you experienced in the past.



Discuss

Collaborate and Analyze a Recent Dispute to Prevent History from Repeating Itself

It is not unusual for couples to fall into the same cycle of conflict over and over. Over time, the groove of this repeating cycle deepens and becomes the primary, if not the only way, couples handle their disputes.



By taking the time to analyze a recent conversation that went "south," you can be more conscious of how to alter the course of your future disputes. Let's look at what happens during a typical argument. This should only take a moment or two.

Part One

Select a recent dispute the two of you had that didn't end well. We want to make it a case study for this exercise. The goal of this exercise

is NOT to rehash the argument, but to learn from it.

- a. Think back. Describe the moment your spouse's words elicited a response from you. What exactly did s/he say?

You may find it enlightening to question if anyone other than your spouse has elicited a similar response in the past, including during your childhood. If so, with whom, and why? This self-reflection may shed light on your current response, in that your reaction may be historic as well as situational. If your reaction is “over the top,” understanding this connection may help you regulate your response in the future.

- b. What did you then say in response?
- c. Many times when we get upset, we say or do things in the heat of the moment we later regret. How did your response make things worse?

Part Two. Now begins the real work.

Review the chapter, “Does Your Communication Connect or Divide You?”

Compare this conversation with the five positive aspects of communication that help couples stay connected, even during a heated conversation.

Analyze how you each communicated using the following checklist. To the extent you fell short, you want to focus on making improvements in those areas.



Here are questions that can help in this endeavor.

✓ 1. ___ Did you make it clear to your spouse that you understood what s/he said? If your answer is yes, how did you do that? Does your spouse agree with you? If not, or if your answer is no, what could you do in the future so that you can both answer yes to this question?

✓ 2. ___ Did you make it clear to your spouse that you understood and empathized with his/her feelings? How? Does your spouse agree with your assessment? If not, or if your answer is no, what could you do in the future so that you can both answer yes to this question?

✓ 3. ___ After my spouse shared his or her thoughts and feelings, did you say, "Tell me more"? Did you dig deeper for more details and insight? Did you show you were interested?

If your answer is yes, how did you do that? Does your spouse agree with you? If not, or if your answer is no, what could you do in the future so that you can both answer yes to this question?

✓ 4. ___ Did you express yourself without attacking your spouse? Were you respectful to your spouse? If your answer is yes, how did you

do that? Does your spouse agree with you? If not, or if your answer is no, what could you do in the future so that you can both answer yes to this question?

✓ 5. ___ Did you diffuse the situation by agreeing with your spouse? Did you share with your spouse that you found truth in what s/he was saying? If your answer is yes, how did you do that? Does your spouse agree with you? If not, or if your answer is no, what could you do in the future so that you can both answer yes to this question?

Summary

It is hard for repeated patterns of behavior to change during conflict. It requires forethought.

What changes can you both decide on right now to change your negative cycle in the future? By working together and focusing on these areas before your next "conversation," you may be amazed at how connected you remain.



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