

Navigating the Three Phases of Conflict

Your best approach to conflict is to keep it regulated.

- ❖ A regulated conflict is constructive and results in the couple feeling closer.
- ❖ A dysregulated conflict is destructive and results in the couple feeling disconnected.
- ✗ It should not be hostile or aggressive.
- ✗ It should not involve yelling, put-downs, threats, or ultimatums.
- ✓ It should be respectful, calm, and considered.
- ✓ It should result in a deeper understanding of your partner.

1. IN CONFLICT

An issue has come up that requires an intentional and considered conversation

a) Remember your locus of control

Accountability is your best friend at this stage. Your focus must be on what you can control; leave responsibility for your partner's behaviour with them. If you each take this approach, you will find that conflict will remain constructive.

You are in charge of precisely 5 things in this interaction:

- What you say
- How you think
- What you do
- How you feel
- How you respond

Reminder: Your partner's behaviour and communication are not responsible for your behaviour and communication; they are mutually exclusive. You are both learning new skills and it is very likely that you will have days where you peak and trough at different times. This may mean that when you are feeling confident and competent in the new skills, your partner may be having a rough time with it (this may be due to a number of things). Be the change you want to see in the relationship and model calm conflict even when your partner is struggling. We all have our days where the patience is low, and we would all appreciate kindness when it's our day.

b) Identify what type of problem are you facing

This identification will help guide the approach you take. Is it:

SOLVABLE – A situational issue, frustration, minor annoyance. The problem will be easy to identify and simple to address – the complications are likely coming from the poor communication, not the problem itself.

- ✓ You can look for solutions
- ✓ You can ask for compromise
- ✓ You can negotiate
- ✓ You can state your needs and make requests
- ✗ You should not avoid the topic just because it's difficult

PERPETUAL – These are fundamental differences in personality and lifestyle and cannot be solved; they simply are. When you find a way to accept the perpetual issues as things that can't be changed, you learn to accept your partner for precisely who they are. Caveat: the acceptance of perpetual problems does not mean they topics should be avoided. I encourage you to talk to each other about it and use it as an opportunity for connection and possibly compromise.

- ✓ You are looking for compassion, understanding, and acceptance
- ✗ You should not judge your partner or try to change them
- ✗ You do not need to like it or agree with it. If it's not hurting anyone, it is simply different

GRIDLOCK – The cycle that develops when you are trying to solve a perpetual problem, or there is an unwillingness/inability to commit to a solution. These conversations can trigger feelings of rejection, hurt, and resentment. The longer you try to solve an unsolvable problem in a relationship, the greater the distance between you becomes. Appreciating each other for the similarities *and* differences will build intimacy and trust, because you are demonstrating that respect is not conditional upon you both seeing things the same way.

- ✓ You should reflect on the topic of discussion and carefully consider the type you are dealing with: perpetual or solvable?
- ✓ You should adjust your approach accordingly: Are you working towards a solution or understanding?
- ✓ You should ask yourself if you are
- ✗ You should not expect to solve the issue in one conversation. This may be possible, but it may require multiple conversations depending on how long the issue has been present and how complex the issue is.

e) Message vs. delivery

MESSAGE – What you want your partner to know. The message will remain constant, but it can be warped if it not delivered appropriately. Take time to consider what you want your partner to know; you want it to be specific without being rigid.

- ✓ One topic at a time
- ✓ Break more complex topics into smaller parts and choose a focal point. This will make the message easier to deliver and easier for your partner to understand.

DELIVERY – The way you communicate the message. Poor delivery of your message can result in your partner receiving a message completely different to the one you intended. The delivery may be the difference between a constructive conflict conversation and a destructive argument, so it is incredibly important.

Consider this and how it relates to your communication with your partner: You have one sentence written with three different points of emphasis; same message, different delivery. This exercise demonstrates the importance of *how* you communicate your message, not just the importance of the message itself.

- Are you going to eat that? → Shock or disgust
- Are you going to eat that? → Surprised that it's edible
- Are you going to eat that? → I thought it was for me

c) Familiarise yourself with the 4 Horsemen

CRITICISM – Are you criticising or attacking your partner. Are you using a lot of “you” statements and accusatory language; blaming them for how they made me feel, what they have done wrong, etc.

Do this instead: Raise a complaint about an issue – one at a time – and propose a solution where possible.

DEFENSIVENESS – The person defends themselves against the attack (i.e., justifying their behaviour, dismissing the claim as false/misunderstood, blaming the other person)

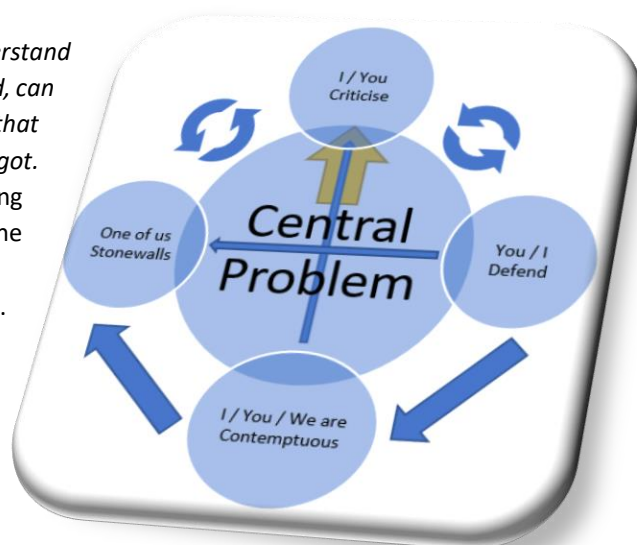
Do this instead: Seek clarity and take accountability. “So, if I understand correctly, what you’re saying is... Is that right?” or “I’m not sure I understand, can you please help me understand what you mean?”, and “I can see how that would be upsetting/frustrating/disrespectful” or “I’m sorry, I completely forgot. Thank you for reminding me, I’ll do that now.” Remember that taking accountability for your actions does not mean that you are to blame for the conflict.

CONTEMPT – This adds fuel to the fire and is the greatest predictor of divorce. Contempt belittles your partner and places you on a pedestal of superiority. Scoffing, sarcastic comments, eye-rolling, cynicism, mockery, hostile humour, and dismissive comments are all examples of contemptuous behaviour.

Do this instead: Short-term (in the conflict) Describe your feelings and state your needs “I feel ___ about/when you _____. Can we please find a time to talk about this” or “_____ is very important to me. It would mean a lot to me if you could help me with that.” Long-term (consistently throughout the relationship) use the Magic Ratio 20(+):1(-) to create a culture of respect, kindness, and strength. Small things consistently: a kiss, a hug, a kind word, thanking your spouse for their support; choose to focus your energy on Recall the good times you have shared as well as the hard times that you have overcome; your relationship can withstand the discomfort of addressing this conflict, and it will be stronger for it.

STONEWALLING – One of the individuals shut down and withdraw from the conversation, physically or psychologically.

Do this instead: Call for a pause. It takes at least 20-30 minutes for the brain to reengage after reaching the point of escalated/heated conflict. Let your partner know that you need a break. This break can serve two functions: 1) it allows both of you to regulate, which will make the return to the interaction more considered and constructive; 2) it is an exercise in trust – “I trust you to give me some space; my partner trusts me to return.” In order for the break to be effective it must be discussed and agreed upon between both partners in a low-tension setting (i.e., during neutral conversation, perhaps during to check in or in therapy). This discussion should include the timeframe of the break (no more than 60 minutes), general phrases that may be used to call for the pause, and the commitment to honour the request.



2. DURING THE PAUSE

The conflict became dysregulated; Time to reflect and regroup

a) Toggle

As an adult you are capable of filtering your emotions through with logic and reasoning. The fact that you have called for a pause means that one, or both, of you feels that you are losing, or have lost, control of your emotions. Typically, if you've had the capacity to call for a pause, you're still regulated; you had the ability to foresee the consequences of continuing the conversation. Where control has been lost, the foresight is not available because the 'thinking brain' has disengaged.

THE THINKING BRAIN – The pre-frontal cortex is responsible for focusing attention, anticipating consequences of your actions, managing the emotional responses, controlling impulses, and planning for the future.

THE EMOTIONAL BRAIN – The limbic system is like the alarm system for the body and is responsible for emotional and behavioural responses, as well as storing and retrieving memories.

toggling is the ability to switch between both areas of the brain to ensure the actions taken are regulated by logic and reasoning, and not just the emotions you're reacting to.

b) Emotional maturity

EMOTION – Event driven, and can be measured using physiology (blood flow, brain activity and facial expression). They are illogical, irrational, and unreasonable, and are produced as a response to a particular stimulus. Emotions will usually last seconds or minutes.

FEELING – An individual's conscious expression of an emotion. Feelings are subjective ways that we interpret the emotions according to the situation we find ourselves in. mental associations and reactions to an emotion, shaped by individual experience.

Event = You get a promotion at work → Triggered emotion = Joy → Associated feeling = excitement, satisfaction, relief

Event = Your first child is born → Triggered emotion = Joy → Associated feeling = pride, love, overwhelmed, hopeful.

OVERREACTION – You have a birthday candle (1/10 Event), and you call the fire department to put it out (10/10 Response)

UNDERREACTION – Your kitchen has gone up in flames (10/10 Event), and you try to blow it out (1/10 Response)

PROPORTIONATE – You have a birthday candle (1/10 Event), and you blow it out (1/10 Response). Your kitchen has gone up in flames (10/10 Event), and you call the fire department (10/10 Response).

An event occurs that triggers an automatic emotional reaction (i.e., The kitchen has gone up in flames, 10/10) → This leads to an emotion (i.e., fear) associated with automatic physiological responses: (i.e., racing heart, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, nausea, etc.) → Leads to an associated feeling/s: (i.e., worry, afraid, desperate, frightened, horrified, etc.) → Which leads to a behavioural response that is either considered and respectful (regulated), or based on the fight/flight response (reactive).

c) Are you blocking your calm with...

RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION – To believe that you are without fault, and that you have the moral high ground in the argument.

INNOCENT VICTIMHOOD – To deny responsibility, "It's not my fault...", or reject the claim entirely, "What are you talking about?... You're crazy, that never happened."

Remember: *You are not at war with your spouse; they are not your enemy! "Just because I don't understand doesn't mean that he/she is wrong. It is important that a) a speak to them with kindness or b) that he/she feels heard and understood. I am going to breathe and calm myself so that I can go back and try to a) explain myself differently or b) try to understand where he/she is coming from. I don't need to feel heard in order to listen; my turn will come."*

d) Are you addressing the issue appropriately based on its type:

This part is a reminder. It may not offer anything new if you're both already on the same page, but it may be the step that pulls you back together. See definitions in section 1 if needed.

PERPETUAL – Is this something that is linked to who I am or what I believe?

Solution: *I want to help my partner to understand why this is important to me. I want to understand why this is important to my partner and see if I can accept it.*

- ✓ Accepting this aspect of my partner will help to bring us together ✗ Accepting this aspect of my partner will mean sacrificing or compromising my values and beliefs.

You must be true to who you are. Flexibility in relationships is imperative, but it should not result in a break. The future of the relationship should not depend on either of you becoming someone you are not. If you have concerns that it does, it is critical that you make the time to discuss it.

SOLVABLE – Is this an issue driven by an external situation? Can I see a solution, or the potential for one?

Solution: *What does the solution look like? What can I do to be a part of the solution? Is there anything my spouse can do; if so, how do I ask them?*

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| ✓ I am making my point clear | ✓ I am mindful of both my message and the delivery | ✓ I am listening to understand my partner's point |
| ✓ I am asking questions to gain clarity | ✗ I am making assumptions | ✗ I am offering more criticisms than solutions |
| ✗ I am unwilling to compromise | ✗ I am looking to be right | |

GRIDLOCK – Are you revisiting the same topic over and over, with no resolution, and building resentment?

Solution: *Seek understanding*

3. RETURNING TO YOUR PARTNER

You have calmed your thoughts. Time to address the topic that started it all.

If you take the time to reflect on the conversation thus far, you may struggle to identify the issue that started it all. It is important to figure out what this issue was, as this is the primary topic that must be addressed. You will likely find that a number of other concerns were thrown into the conversation, however they ought to be considered red herrings, or secondary issues, to the intended discussion. Yes, they are important, but they are not the reason this interaction began. These issues will need to be discussed eventually, but now is not the time.

a) Who initiated the interaction?

One of the many ways that your conflicts can spiral is by engaging in defensiveness. This approach introduces topic distractors in the form of unresolved issues; initially on behalf of the respondent, but ultimately both partners are likely to make contributions.

COMPLAINANT – The partner raising the primary concern. It is up to you to present your issue dispassionately, remember that you are raising a complaint (not attacking/blaming/criticising your partner), and there is likely a simple solution. If your partner becomes defensive (remember, this is not about blame, but personal accountability), you can gently redirect the conversation, reassuring them that you can address their concerns later). It is not helpful to retaliate or engage in the defensiveness, as you will simply get farther away from the primary issue. If it appears as though a calm discussion is not achievable, shelve it for another time.

“When you [the specific action (Don’t help with clean up)] ... I feel (Taken for granted) ... I imagine [consider your partner’s perspective (You must be really tired from work)] ... I need/want [state the desired outcome (To feel like we are working together as a team)] ... Would you please... [present a possible solution (help me tidy the kitchen before going to your office.)]”.

RESPONDENT – The partner listening to the concern. It is your responsibility to remain calm and look for the message that your partner is trying to convey; this may, or may not, involve filtering out their delivery. There are a number of helpful statements listed below that can help you navigate these conversations, but your main priority is to listen to understand, rather than listening to respond.

b) Time to get curious and gain perspective: Is it a 6 or a 9?

It will be almost impossible to reach any healthy and respectful resolution unless you are both on the same page. There is nothing less constructive than a couple trying to

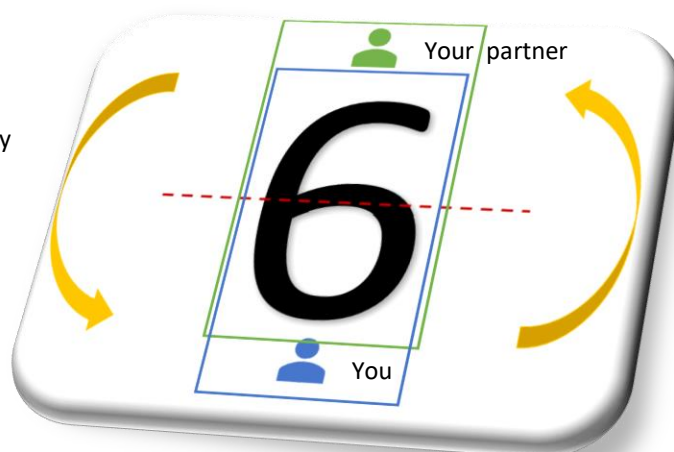
Helpful Statements

COMPLAINANT

- “I don’t think I’m explaining this very well. Let me try again.”
- “Perhaps now is not the right time to have this discussion. Let’s shelve it and discuss it at the weekly check in on Saturday.”
- “I feel like there is a solution to this, and I really need us to work together to find it.”
- “I don’t think there’s a solution; I just need to feel heard and help you to understand.”

RESPONDENT

- “If I understand correctly?”
- “Is that right?”
- “I really want to hear what you have to say, but I’m not comfortable with how you are speaking to me.”
- “I can tell that this is important to you, but I don’t think I’m in the right headspace to talk this through at the moment. Can we discuss this another time?” (NOTE: Important to set a time to revisit this)
- “I think we may have gone off topic. There was something that you wanted to talk about; let’s try again.”
- “I think we may have gone off topic. There was something that you wanted to talk about; let’s try again.”



Refer back to point 1 for tips that can be used in general conversation that will reduce the chances of intense conflict occurring in the first place.