

1.1 Relationships can provide a lot of happiness and joy in our lives, but they can also be very difficult to navigate at times. Conflict is a natural part of every couple's relationship. Let's face it...it's not easy for two people to come together and join their lives!

My name is Christine Murray, and I'm the Director of the Healthy Relationships Initiative, as well as a professor of Couple and Family Counseling in the Department of Counseling and Educational Development. Our HRI team is so excited to bring you this program to help you learn more about how couples can more effectively manage conflict in their relationships. Conflict is a natural part of relationships, and how couples handle that conflict has a big impact on the overall health of their relationships.

1.2 Animated quotes:

"Relationships can be so hard sometimes!"

"I love my partner, but sometimes they drive me crazy."

"Sometimes, I'm afraid of what might happen if we can't work through a conflict in our relationship."

"When we're in the middle of a fight, my relationship feels really dark and lonely."

1.3 Each person is a unique individual who has their own thoughts, feelings, values, and perceptions of the world around them. It would be unrealistic to think that partners in a couple relationship would agree on every possible issue under the sun! The health of a couple's relationship isn't determined by *whether* they have conflict, but rather how they handle the conflict that arises.

This educational program from the Healthy Relationships Initiative is designed to offer you new ways to view and manage conflict in your romantic relationship. We'll look at some key findings about what research tells us about conflict in couple relationships, but more importantly, we'll talk about how you can use this information to improve your relationship and address the conflict issues that arise for you in your relationship.

You'll get the most out of this program if your partner is willing to go through it with you. However, if your partner won't participate with you, you can still benefit from the information we'll cover! Even just one person changing how they manage conflict can have a transformative impact on couple relationships!

1.4 Here's what you can expect from this program.

- First, we'll ask you to reflect on your current thoughts and feelings about how you manage conflict in your relationship.
- Second, we'll take a look at some important research findings that give us clues about how couples experience conflict in their relationship.
- From there, we'll look at a case study to see if you can identify some of the ways that the couple in the case study are struggling in their conflict.
- Next, we'll walk through some research-based suggestions for managing conflict in couple relationships.

- You'll then have a chance to map out a plan with strategies to improve your conflict management in your relationship.
- Finally, we'll ask you to provide feedback about your experience with this program and how it's influenced your views about conflict.

1.5 The whole program will take about an hour to complete, but you may find that it takes you more or less time, depending on how quickly you go through the material. So, let's get started! Click Next below to start out with a self-reflection activity to get you started thinking about where things stand now with your conflict management in your relationship.

1.6 "Let's get started with an opportunity for you to take some time to reflect on how you typically handle conflict in your relationship with your partner. If you're not currently in a relationship, think back on conflict in your most recent relationship. Take a look at the list of words below, and check off any that reflect how you typically feel or act during conflict. And be honest! The only wrong answers here are the ones that aren't truthful. The more you can accurately look at how you

How you feel or act during conflict		
peaceful	aggressive	sad
loud	quiet	patient
volatile	regretful	scared
respectful	hurtful	frustrated
calm	nonchalant	lonely
angry	attentive	critical
violent	embarrassing	withdrawing
avoidant	nervous	logical

Now that you've looked at how you typically feel and act during conflict, take a look back at the list of words that you checked off. Are there any on that list that you wish you could change? Well, I have good news for you! You can learn to handle conflict in your relationship differently, but it'll take some work and intentional practice. The rest of this program is designed to help you get there.

1.7 Before we move on, I want to point out one important thing about conflict. If you checked off **violent** or **aggressive** in the list above, or if you would describe your partner as violent or aggressive, or if there are ANY aspects of how conflict is handled in your relationship that make you or your partner feel unsafe, please understand that any sort of violence or abuse – including physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or

psychological abuse – is never a part of a happy, healthy romantic relationship. If you know or suspect that your relationship has any form of abuse in it, please reach out for help from a local domestic violence agency or the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) for additional assessment and support for the safety of your relationship before you consider continuing this program.

1.8 What do you and your partner fight about? Research, clinical experience, and even just plain old common sense tell us that couples can fight about many things. In one study of couples in therapy, researchers identified high, moderate, and low conflict topics. This list is useful because it illustrates that not all topics that create conflict in couple relationships may lead to the same level of conflict. Of course, some of the topics that might not cause as much conflict in other couples' relationships could cause a LOT of conflict in your relationship. Take a look at the list these researchers identified, and consider which areas lead to high, moderate, and low levels of conflict in your own relationship:

1.9

- **High Conflict**
  - Sex
  - How much partners demonstrate affection
  - Big decisions the partners have to make
- **Moderate Conflict**
  - Religion
  - In-laws
  - Values and goals
  - Finances
  - Friendships
- **Low Conflict**
  - Household tasks
  - How much time partners spend together
  - Partners' views about life
  - How to spend leisure time

What topics would you add or take away from this list in your own relationship?

1.10 To some degree it *is* useful to look at the topics that lead to conflict in couple relationships. But – ***Listen closely to this next point*** – The impact of conflict on couple's relationships is LESS about WHAT they fight about, and more about HOW they manage that conflict.

This point is widely-known by couple and marriage therapists, but it's one that somehow often escapes people in their everyday lives. We often hear talk show hosts say things like, "Money problems are the number one reason couples fight," or "Couples today are most likely to divorce because of Facebook and other social media problems." And, it is important for couples to understand the issues that cause struggles for them, especially so that they can plan ways to solve problems in those areas.

But don't get too caught up in the specific topics related to conflict for couples, at least not at first! I want to teach you one of the most important ideas that couple and family counselors learn every early on in their training:

### 1.11 PROCESS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONTENT

This means that, in order to truly work through conflict in couple relationships in ways that are most likely to help the couple grow and move forward, we need to spend more time and attention looking at HOW they work through the challenges and disagreements they face.

1.12 In fact, research tells us that how difficult a topic is for couples actually has very minimal influence on their communication behaviors during conflict. This means that couples tend to use similar conflict management styles whether they're discussing relatively easy or difficult topics.

One of the hardest aspects of this notion of processing being more important than content is that it forces us—at least for some time—to set aside that natural human desire to be right. When we're in the heat of conflict, it's SO important to us to be right and show why our position is the right one. We dig in our heels to try and convince our partner to come on over to our side. The more frustrated we get, the more likely we are going to start letting our emotions override our kindness and positive feelings toward our partner. And when this happens, problems tend to spiral quickly out of control. Before long, many couples forget what they're fighting about and just end up mad at each other and feeling completely disconnected.

Later in this program, we'll offer some strategies you can use to improve the conflict processes in your relationship to make it more likely that you'll be able to effectively manage the conflicts that you and your partner face. For now, though, let's consider what healthy conflict looks like as compared to unhealthy conflict for couples.

1.13 Let's look at healthy conflict first! Here are a few important points about healthy conflict in couple relationships:

- First, conflict itself is healthy! This is hard to grasp on some level, because conflict can feel so uncomfortable and difficult for couples. But, keep in mind that you are two different people, so it's natural that you are going to have differences between you. Expressing those differences and working through them is an important and healthy part of couple relationships, so long as the conflict is managed well.
- Second, healthy conflict involves both partners staying committed to respect and positive processes throughout the difficult conversations. Again, process is more important than content when it comes to couples' conflict, so if you find yourself facing conflict with your partner—no matter what it's about—commit to using positive conflict management strategies.

- Third, healthy conflict involves resetting the course when you do go off track! You're human, and so is your partner. So, it's likely that one or both of you will get overwhelmed by emotions at some points during conflict, and you may say or do things that aren't helpful to solving the conflict and may be hurtful to one another. So, healthy conflict involves learning to recognize when things go awry and learning to correct course when this happens, such as by offering a sincere apology or taking a brief moment to calm down when feelings start to take over.
- Fourth, couples who have healthy conflict consider each other's unique background characteristics that can influence how they experience conflict. For example, in some families, people avoid conflict, whereas in other families, people tend to fight loudly and passionately! Partners who successfully manage conflict understand what is comfortable and what comes naturally to the other person and can adapt their conflict management styles in a way that works for both people.

1.14 That concludes the first part of our program. Next up, we'll review with a quick knowledge check. Then, in section two, I'll introduce you to the Four Horsemen, negative behaviors that may happen during conflict which are highly predictive of divorce.

#### 1.15 Review:

Which of the following statements reflect the principle that process is more important than content when it comes to conflict in couple relationships:

- A. There are certain topics that create more stress than other topics for nearly all couples.
- B. The impact of conflict on couple's relationships is less about what they fight about and more about how they manage that conflict.
- C. When couples disagree on their values, their relationship is doomed to fail.
- D. Couples' fights usually look different based on the specific topic they are discussing.

#### 1.16 Review:

Select which of the following conflict strategies represent healthy ways of managing conflict in couple relationships (pick as many as apply).

- A. conflict is ignored
- B. conflict is addressed
- C. respectful community
- D. disrespectful tone
- E. easily gets off track
- F. stays focused on the current issue
- G. gets back on track when things go awry
- H. accounts for each person's unique background
- I. partners expect each other to manage conflict in exactly the same way

1.17 Reflect:

Consider the issues in your own relationship that seem to give rise to the most conflict. Next, arrange the topic below in order from highest to least/no conflict.

- A. In-laws
- B. Friendships
- C. Big decisions the partners have to make
- D. How much partners demonstrate affection
- E. Other
- F. Religion
- G. Finances
- H. Household tasks
- I. sex

Answers (1.15 B; 1.16 B, C, F, G, H)