

3.1 To further examine the impact of healthy and unhealthy conflict strategies in couple relationships, let's take a look at a fictional case study to see the story of how conflict plays out for a couple we'll call Tanya and Tim.

3.2-3.3 Case Study: *Tanya and Tim are a married couple in their mid-40s. They have been married for 15 years and have two children, ages 12 and 8. Both partners work full-time outside the home, and their lives are very busy between work, keeping up with their kids' homework and after-school activities, and, managing their household. They recently moved to Guilford County from South Carolina, where they left behind friends and family members, but Tanya had a job opportunity here that they couldn't pass up.*

However, since the couple moved here about 3 months ago, things have been very tense between them. Tim found a job here, but he doesn't like it very much. Tanya, on the other hand, is loving her job, although it keeps her working late a few nights a week and often requires at least some time on weekends.

With the tension building between them, Tanya and Tim find themselves fighting over what they describe as "little things," although their fights are more than just "little" disagreements. Consider one of their recent arguments, for example:

A few days ago, Tanya had to work late again, leaving Tim on his own to get dinner ready for the kids and take each of them to separate sports practices. He'd had a bad day at work already, and he felt more stress when Tanya texted him to say she'd be working late.

By the time Tanya arrived home from work, the kids were asleep, and Tim was fuming mad at Tanya for working late yet again, making this the fourth evening in a row she worked late. As soon as Tanya walked through the door, Tim started speaking to her in an angry tone. He said, "You are so selfish. Can't you see that I'm doing everything around here? Of course you can't! You're always at work!"

Tanya felt badly that she was working late already, and she had very little patience when Tim greeted her in this way. She responded to him by saying, "Tim, now is now the time to talk about this. I'm tired and want to go to bed." She began to walk up the stairs to their bedroom. This made Tim even more angry, and he said, "Of course you don't want to talk. You're so wrapped up in this new job that you could care less about this family anymore. I'm so disgusted by you right now!"

Tanya became angry, too, and she replied, "Tim, I do care about this family. I can't believe how selfish you're being by being so unsupportive of me and my new job! I'm not talking about this right now. I'm going to bed. If you don't want to be near me, you are welcome to sleep on the couch!" With that, she stormed away, and Tim gave up and decided not to follow her.

3.4 Wow, things aren't looking great for Tim and Tanya right now, are they? Before we look at where this conflict went wrong, can you identify any strengths in the way they are relating to each other?

Well, we didn't see too many in this part of their story, but we can say that they seem to be committed to their relationship, especially since they made the decision to move away together. Also, another strength appears to be that each partner is comfortable expressing their feelings, even if the way they do it may not be helping their relationship very much right now!

It's important to start by trying to identify strengths, as they can build upon those if they decide to work on improving their relationship.

Let's go back through the case study now. You can click to view my notes on their interaction. Then, we'll take a moment for YOU to reflect on the conflict behaviors exhibited in this case study.

3.5-3.7 Case Study: Tanya and Tim are a married couple in their mid-40s. They have been married for 15 years and have two children, ages 12 and 8. Both partners work full-time outside the home, and their lives are very busy between work, keeping up with their kids' homework and after-school activities, and, managing their household. They recently moved to Guilford County from South Carolina, where they left behind friends and family members, but Tanya had a job opportunity here that they couldn't pass up.

However, since the couple moved here about 3 months ago, things have been very tense between them. Tim found a job here, but he doesn't like it very much. Tanya, on the other hand, is loving her job, although it keeps her working late a few nights a week and often requires at least some time on weekends.

*With the **tension building** (It's always a good idea to address difficult topics and concerns as they arise, rather than letting them build up over time.) between them, Tanya and Tim find themselves fighting over what they describe as "little things," although their fights are more than just "little" disagreements. Consider one of their recent arguments, for example:*

*A few days ago, Tanya had to work late again, leaving Tim on his own to get dinner ready for the kids and take each of them to separate sports practices. **He'd had a bad day at work already** (We know Tim doesn't love his new job. However, it seems he allows his stress from work to put him in a bad mood that carries over into his home life.), and he felt more stress when Tanya texted him to say she'd be working late.*

*By the time Tanya arrived home from work, the kids were asleep, and **Tim was fuming mad at Tanya** (Tim allowed his anger to build up. He probably got caught in a negative cycle of thinking bad things about her and stopped considering her feelings or perspectives while he waited for her. He may have even been saying things to himself like, "She doesn't care about me." Global statements like this make people more angry*

and make it more difficult to see the positive in the other person.) *for working late yet again, making this the fourth evening in a row she worked late. As soon as Tanya walked through the door,* (Raising the conflict as soon as Tanya walked in the door started things off badly. She may have been ready to apologize, but he would never know since he started in right away!) *Tim started speaking to her in an angry tone.* (By using an angry tone, Tim set the tone for their conflict in a negative way.) *He said, "You are so selfish. (This is criticism by making a global statement about her in a negative way.) Can't you see that I'm doing everything around here? Of course you can't! You're always at work!"* (Again, more criticism and even a hint of contempt by saying that she isn't even capable of noticing what is happening in their family.)

Tanya felt badly that she was working late already, (Tanya could have communicated this to Tim earlier so that he could have known that she WAS considering his feelings and experiences.) *and she had very little patience* (Tanya also responded out of her frustration and impatience, making a constructive response more difficult to create.) *when Tim greeted her in this way. She responded to him by saying, "Tim, now is now the time to talk about this. I'm tired and want to go to bed."* *She began to walk up the stairs to their bedroom.* (This is stonewalling. She decided she wanted to withdraw and didn't provide an alternative for when they could discuss Tim's concern.) *This made Tim even more angry, and he said, "Of course you don't want to talk. You're so wrapped up in this new job that you could care less about this family anymore. I'm so disgusted by you right now!"* (Contempt has entered the conflict in a big way now!)

Tanya became angry, too, and she replied, "Tim, I do care about this family. I can't believe how selfish you're being by being so unsupportive of me and my new job! (Defensiveness. Tanya's now leveling additional complaints toward Tim without fully addressing his concerns.) *I'm not talking about this right now. I'm going to bed. If you don't want to be near me, you are welcome to sleep on the couch!" With that, she stormed away, and Tim gave up and decided not to follow her.* (More stonewalling from Tanya, and this time it was the end to the conflict.)

3.8 In Tanya and Tim's case study, you saw an example of couple conflict that went pretty badly. You can imagine how their conflict could continue to escalate after that fight we read about. But what if there was a different way? What if they could learn new approaches to managing the difficult issues in their relationship in a more positive and constructive way?

I have good news for you: It IS possible to learn to manage conflict in a healthy way that not only helps you work through difficult issues, but also helps you to learn how to grow through the conflict that you face.

In the final section of this program, we'll take a deeper look at the stages of conflict and discuss strategies to help you manage conflict in your relationship more effectively.