

4.1 By this point in this program, I hope you've learned some useful information about how conflict plays out in couple relationships. Remember: When it comes to conflict in couple relationships, **PROCESS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN CONTENT**. With this in mind, it's time to turn to looking at the types of processes that can help you manage conflict in your relationship more effectively.

To help make this as simple as possible, we'll look at three phases of conflict in couple relationships: Before and Starting Conflict, During Conflict, and After Conflict. At each of these phases, there are strategies you can use to help the conflict go more smoothly and have a more positive outcome.

4.2 Healthy conflict management in couple relationships starts before the conflict even begins! In fact, taking time to prepare *before* you engage in a conflictual conversation with your partner can help you to set the stage for handling the conflict in the most positive way. Here are a few strategies you can use before conflict ever starts, and in the earliest phases of starting conflict, to help get things off to a good start.

4.3 **1. Take time for self-reflection before raising a concern with your partner.**

If it's at all possible, take some time to go inward for self-reflection before you engage with your partner. I know it can be tempting to jump right in to try and get things resolved as quickly as possible. However, you'll be in the best position to resolve things if you start first by turning inward for self-reflection, and *then* taking your concerns to your partner.

If you have the opportunity for self-reflection before entering into a potentially conflictual discussion with your partner, here are a few good questions to consider:

4.4 (list of questions to consider before and starting conflict)

What am I feeling now? How might those feelings influence how I interact with my partner in this discussion?

What is my intention for this discussion? What do I hope to be different when the discussion is over?

What, if any, part of the issue(s) I'm concerned about might be impacted by my family or cultural background?

To what extent have I previously talked with my partner about my expectations on the issue(s) I'm concerned about? Is it possible that my partner doesn't know what my hopes or expectations are in this area? Are any of my expectations unrealistic related to this situation?

How can I prepare to respond if my partner reacts in an unhelpful, dismissive, defensive, or angry way when I raise my concern?

What would be the best possible way to explain my concern(s) to my partner in a way that gets my needs across but also is respectful to them?

2. Find a good time for both partners to talk.

4.5 Some conflict issues need to be addressed right away, and it's a good idea to address difficult issues as soon as possible, before they grow out of control. But, it's also important to find a time to talk when it's most likely that both partners will be able to be ready and willing to work toward resolution. To some extent, there's almost *never* a really perfect time to get into conflict! Nobody really likes to do this, and it isn't fun! So, sometimes you just need to dig in and get into a discussion, even if there are many other things you'd rather be doing. But, if you keep in mind that working through conflict can be a very healthy thing for your relationship, it'll be easier to approach the time you decide upon with a positive spirit.

Some signs that it's NOT a good time for conflict are as follows:

- You don't have a lot of time; You're in a rush.
- One or both partners are overwhelmed with anger or other emotions, making it difficult to be able to listen to the other's concerns.
- You're not in a safe and private setting.
- It's a surprise to one of the partners.

4.6

Instead, when considering a good time to engage in a conflictual conversation, consider the following:

- First, find a time when you have enough time to fully engage in the conversation. You want to leave time to hear each person's perspective and work through possible solutions.
- Second, if one or both of you are overwhelmed, allow some time for "cooling down" before delving into conflict. Just be sure that the person needing this time is actually working on calming down and getting in the right mindset for the discussion, and not simply delaying the conversation.
- Third, consider what the best environment for the conversation will be so that you'll have the safety and privacy you need for a positive discussion. Some people prefer the privacy of being at home, but for others, it may feel safer to be in a public place (e.g., a park or a coffee shop) where they can have a quiet conversation, and the presence of other people will help keep the discussion under control. Think through what would work best for you and your relationship.
- Fourth, consider asking for an appointment to schedule a time to talk, rather than just surprising your partner out of the blue. You might say, "I have a concern that I'd like to talk about with you. What would be a good time for you?" Your partner likely will want to know what you'd like to discuss, so be prepared to provide a

general description, but consider the level of detail to share when you're asking for the appointment so that you provide them with enough detail so they won't feel ambushed, but also you're not getting too into details at a time that may not be good for them.

3. Commit to using positive conflict and communication strategies.

4.7 Take some time to review some of the materials in our HRI Toolkit for Couples to learn some key conflict management and communication tools (<http://www.guilfordhri.org/community-resources/toolkits/toolkit-for-couples/>). The more you can learn about and practice these skills before things get intense or difficult in your relationship, the more you'll be equipped to handle the challenging times when they arise. Even without extensive practice in positive relationship skills, however, you *can* make a decision and commitment to yourself to engage all the positive skills you have as you enter into a conflict discussion with your partner.

4.8 4. Begin with a "soft startup." (<https://www.gottman.com/blog/weekend-homework-assignment-softening-startup/>)

Earlier in this program, we learned about Dr. John Gottman's research on the Four Horsemen. Gottman's research also has shown that one of the best ways to avoid destructive conflict in couple relationships is to practice "soft startups."

To help understand the importance of a soft startups, let's first look at the opposite of a soft startup. Imagine a partner initiates conflict with "fires ablazing." Right out the gate, they're in attack mode, approaching their partner with a loud voice, harsh words, and accusations that don't at all take into account the other person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. In the first few seconds, this conflict has already turned ugly, and there's a good chance it's going to stay that way.

4.9 So, instead of a harsh startup, set your intention to begin difficult conversations using a soft startup. Use a gentle tone of voice, infuse kindness into your words, and use language that takes ownership of your experiences instead of taking a blaming or accusatory tone. Remember the old saying, "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?" When it comes to conflict in couple relationships, approaching difficult conversations with honey instead of vinegar will help start the discussion off in a way that's more likely to lead to a positive resolution.

Now that we've discussed some of the positive ways to prepare for conflict before the conversation even begins, let's turn our attention to some positive strategies you can apply *during* difficult conversations with your partner. Conflict-related conversations in a relationship can be very sensitive, so it's important to be very cautious with your words and actions during the heat of conflict with your partner. Keep the following strategies in mind to help you do this.

5. Practice mindfulness toward your feelings and responses.

4.10 When people experience stress, they often experience what's called the ["Fight or Flight" response](#), which means that their body's systems go into overdrive to prepare them to either fight back or run away. These responses are useful if you're facing a risk to your physical safety, but in the context of couple's conflict, they can lead to heightened arousal in your body that can lead you to react in over-exaggerated ways.

Two things can quickly spiral out of control--your own inner landscape, and the conflict between you and your partner. You're most likely going to be able to keep both of these things under control if you commit to staying mindful of your inner experiences during conflict with your partner.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is a leading thinker on the subject of mindfulness defines mindfulness as "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally...It's about knowing what is on your mind."

Staying present with your thoughts and feelings during conflict will help you be more aware of the responses you're having, and you'll then be in a better position to respond in a thoughtful way that will help you move toward a more positive outcome from the conflictual conversation.

4.11

6. Manage "flooding" emotions.

Now, let's say you're practicing mindfulness and start to notice that you're becoming overwhelmed by your emotions. You may be getting very angry, sad, frustrated, or some other emotion that's starting to take over. Again, according to Gottman's research, emotional flooding that's not regulated or addressed can be very toxic to couple's relationships. So, if you notice that you begin to be flooded, do your best to calm yourself down. It may help to take a brief pause to collect your thoughts, start taking deep, calming breaths, or ask for a brief time-out (we'll talk more about timeouts in a few minutes).

It's normal to feel overwhelmed by emotions when you're involved in conflict with your partner. However, if these strong emotions go unchecked, they have the potential to derail your progress in the conversation. So, when you start to feel overwhelmed with emotions during conflict, be careful to manage them and stay as calm as you possibly can.

7. Keep using positive communication and conflict management strategies, even if your partner doesn't.

4.12 What happens when you do all you can do to stay positive and on-track during conflict with your partner, but your partner starts sliding into what you recognize to be unhealthy patterns? As best you can, stay the course! It will certainly be harder to keep using positive communication and conflict resolution strategies if your partner isn't doing the same. However, remind yourself that "two wrongs don't make a right," and your best is to stay focused on your own behaviors and reactions. You may even be able to model positive behaviors in a way that will help your partner change courses as well.

I do want to add one important point here--Conflict is *uncomfortable* for most of us. However, it should never feel *unsafe*. If at any point you feel unsafe--emotionally or physically--based on what your partner is doing, then the most important thing for you to do is take steps to promote your safety. This may mean ending the conversations and taking time away from your partner, doing anything you can to de-escalate the situation, and/or reaching out for help from a family member, friend, or professional. As we discussed earlier, 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.

4.13

8. Take time-outs effectively and only as needed.

Earlier, we talked about how stonewalling--or physically or emotionally withdrawing from one's partner--is one of the most toxic conflict behaviors in couple relationships. However, we've also just seen that sometimes conflict can escalate to a point where continued discussion becomes counter-productive, so is there ever a place for taking a "timeout" during conflict in couple relationships?

The answer is yes, but it's important for timeouts to be used effectively and as sparingly as possible during conflict discussions. How can you do this? Consider the following tips for using time-outs effectively during couple conflict:

First, make sure the purpose of the timeout is clear to both partners. For example, a partner needing a time-out might say, "I'm feeling overwhelmed right now, and it's hard for me to think clearly enough to listen to you. Would it be okay to take a short break so I can get my head cleared so we can have a more productive discussion?" Notice the difference between this type of constructive way of asking for a timeout, as compared to something like this: "I can't deal with you right now. I'm done with this conversation for now!"

Second, set a time-limit on your timeout. A partner who needs a timeout should provide a timeframe in which they think they'll be ready to revisit the conversation, rather than leaving the other person hanging. This may be 15 minutes, 30 minutes, a couple hours, or even a request to wait until the next day. But, the time-frame for the timeout should be reasonable and not distressing to the other person. It's possible that one or both of you still won't feel ready after the originally designated time-frame, so if that happens, then discuss an updated time-frame. Keep in mind that you can practice good communication and work toward rebuilding trust by honoring the agreed-upon time-frame for a timeout during conflict.

9. Develop strategies to get back on track.

4.14 Despite even the most valiant efforts, and even when both partners are doing their best to use positive conflict management strategies, it's likely that all couples will go "off track" in handling conflict in their relationship at some point.

When you go off track during conflict with your partner, don't despair! It's possible to get back on track toward positive conflict management! It'll just take some intentionality and work to get back in a more positive direction. When you find yourself slipping into unhealthy conflict with your partner, here are three things you can do to start heading back in the right direction:

4.15

a. First, NOTICE when things have taken a turn for the worse. Things may start to slide slowly or quickly. You may notice that you've gone off track in several ways. Some of these ways are glaringly obvious, such as if one person says something extremely hurtful. Other times, going off track can be more subtle. Pay attention to your feelings and intuition. If you start to feel increasingly uncomfortable or distressed, that's a sign you may be heading into difficult territory. Recognizing when things are heading off track is the first step to being able to turn things around.

b. Second, NAME it. Practicing positive, constructive communication, say something to your partner to let them know that you're concerned that the conflict has taken a turn for the worse. For example, you might say, "I'm getting concerned about the direction of this conversation. Could we take a moment to regroup and get back on track?" If it would be helpful, describe the behaviors that have occurred that are raising your concerns. For example, you might say, "I realize that I've said some things that are hurtful to you, and I apologize. I want to get this conversation back in a positive direction." Or, you might say, "I hear you raising your voice, and it is making me feel uncomfortable with continuing this discussion in this way, since it's hard for me to really be able to listen when I hear that tone of voice." Of course, sometimes, you might be able to "name it" just by acknowledging your concerns internally, without raising your concerns to your partner. In this case, you may say to yourself, "Okay, I feel like we are heading off track here. Let me try using more calm, positive words to see if I can change the direction of this conversation." In either case, the more clear you can be that you're going off track, the more likely you'll be able to move to the next step....

c. Third, take intentional NEXT STEPS to get back on track. After you've noticed and named your concern that the conflict has started to get derailed, you and your partner can begin to work intentionally to create a more positive context for addressing the issue before you. Think of this like "hitting the reset button." A brief, time-limited time-out might come in handy here to give one or both of you a chance to calm down. Whether or not you use a time-out, this is the time to re-engage your best communication and conflict management skills as you move back into discussing the issue in a more constructive way.

10. Focus on intentionally rebuilding and reconnecting.

4.16 Let's face it...Even when you've done your best to manage conflict in a positive way, most conflict doesn't leave you feeling lots of warm and fuzzies inside! Depending on whether and how the issue was resolved, one or both of you may be left feeling a little unsettled or uncertain about what the future will look like as you implement new solutions in your relationship.

Once you've reached the end of a conflict, it's important to work toward rebuilding and reconnecting. Failing to do this might leave you more susceptible to conflict again in the near future, especially if one or both of you can't move past lingering negative feelings toward each other or the relationship.

When you're ready to start reconnecting, talk about what would be most helpful to each of you. One trick for starting to reconnect is to do something together that doesn't require much talking. Now, I know you may think I mean physical intimacy--and that may be helpful! But, there are a lot of other fun and non-threatening ways to start reconnecting that don't require much conversation.

But first--why is it helpful to try and reconnect in ways that don't require much verbal communication? Well, immediately in the aftermath of a conflict, many couples find it difficult to avoid re-hashing the details of the conflict all together, so it's easy for them to slide back into talking about the conflict, which may make it difficult to move forward.

Now, I'm not suggesting you shouldn't continue to discuss conflict-ridden issues! If there are pieces of the issue that remain unresolved, you should continue to re-address it using the good conflict management skills we've discussed so far.

But, if you're ready and serious about moving forward after a conflict has been settled, then taking time to do something fun and relaxing that doesn't involve much talking can help to start infusing positivity back into your relationship. A few examples of the types of activities that could be helpful include talking a walk or jog together at a local park, going bowling or dancing, or watching a romantic movie together.

This isn't about glossing over conflict. But, instead, it's about being intentional about starting infuse positive emotions and a stronger connection back into your relationship.

This will help you strengthen your relationship and begin to repair any potential damage that the conflict caused.

11. Take time to consider what you can learn from the conflict.

Most people don't like engaging in conflict with their partners, but the truth is that conflict can be one of the *best* things for couples' relationships, but only if it's managed well and you take time to learn and grow from it.

One of the best things about conflict for couples' relationships is that it provides you with clues for areas where you can continue to strengthen your relationship and where you may need to learn more about your partner. Think of conflict issues in your relationship as clues into the inner workings of your relationship, your partner, and yourself!

Relationships are a constant work in progress. So, when conflict arises, it allows you to see the areas where you might need to grow, as well as issues that you can work together to address. After a conflict is settled, take time for personal reflection and discussion with your partner about the following questions:

- a. What unresolved issues did this conflict reveal that we may not be managing as well as we can yet?
- b. What did this conflict teach me about my values for our relationship? What did it teach me about my partner's' values for our relationship?
- c. What healthy and positive behaviors, words, and patterns did I see during our conflict?
- d. What unhealthy behaviors, words, and patterns did I see during our conflict?
- e. If we could go back in time and re-do that conflict, what would I hope we could do differently?
- f. The next time we face conflict in our relationship, I would like to work on _____.

Over time, as you continue to work on learning and growing from each conflict, you'll continue to strengthen your relationship, as well as build more tools for better managing conflict and difficult issues in your relationship.

4.18 That concludes the content we wanted to share, but the most important part is still ahead—we'll walk you through the steps to create a *personalized* action plan you can use to begin improving the conflict strategies you use with your partner. But first, a final quick review session.

T/F: When a conflict issue arises in a couple's relationship, it is important to jump in as soon as possible to address this issue.

4.19-4.22 T/F: A soft startup is illustrated by the following quote: "You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?"

T/F: If one partner starts using hurtful or negative conflict or communication behaviors, the other partner should respond with a similar tone to give the first partner a taste of their own medicine.

T/F: Conflict can help couples grow if they take time to learn from it.

Answers (False: If at all possible, take time to prepare before raising conflict in your relationship, True, False: It's important to continue using positive communication strategies during conflict, even if your partner doesn't do so, True)

4.23-4.26

Developing an action plan: Participants will walk through the following self-reflection activity to apply the information they learned in the second mini-lecture to think through situations that occur in their relationships and planning which strategies they could use.

Step 1: Identify 2-4 common sources of conflict in your relationships

Step 2: Answer the following questions to help you understand each conflict issue in greater depth:

What are the underlying reasons for/influences on the conflict (e.g., different values, different family history, different personality characteristics)?

What usually happens during conflict on this issue?

What would be your ideal way for this conflict to be resolved?

4.27 Step 3: Which conflict management strategies did you learn in this program that would be most helpful to apply to this issue in your relationship?

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this program. While conflict can be stressful, it is a normal part of being in a relationship. We hope you will use the information and strategies you've learned for managing conflict to help your relationships grow to be happier, healthier, and safer.

Before you wrap up this program, please take a few moments to provide us feedback using the following form. And please stay in touch! We maintain an active presence on Facebook. Find us at Guilford HRI.