

How Conflict Can Improve Your Relationship

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Work on your listening skills. Communication is key to resolving conflict. The bedrock of good communication? Fully listening to your partner without building a case in your head of how your partner is wrong. Don't let small stuff turn into big stuff by avoiding talking about it.

Participate in shared problem solving. Brainstorm solutions together, instead of each partner arguing his or her point. Think of problems as issues for the relationship to address, not one partner's problem.

Address specific behaviors. Address specific behaviors rather than personality traits.

Talk when you're calm. "The atmosphere has to stay emotionally safe enough so that both people can put out each of their ideas/feelings/experience about the conflict and then they can have a respectful conversation about it without attachment to who is right or who is wrong," according to Solley. It's important to think about what you want to say in a thoughtful way.

If emotions run high, take a break. Again, it's vital to be calm while you're talking about the conflict, but realistically someone is bound to become upset, frustrated or irritated. If you find yourself getting emotional, take a break to calm down. If you can't calm down, "table the discussion for another day," Batshaw said.

Create boundaries. "Have some boundaries about what is acceptable behavior and what isn't, [such as] no cursing, no physical interaction, no yelling or screaming," Batshaw said. "Just like on a soccer field, as soon as people go out of bounds, the play stops," Heitler added.

Start with side-to-side conversations. In her research, Orbuch found that "men are much more likely to be able to communicate more clearly, easily and effectively, when talking about a difficult topic" when they're doing an activity such as walking, biking or hiking." Side-to-side conversations may be a good way to start.

Apologize. Heartfelt apology can go a long way. It's important to take responsibility for your part in an upset. Be specific about what behaviors you regret in a given situation.

Seek counseling. If you're stuck on a specific conflict or one of you doesn't want to talk about it, even when pressed, consider seeing a couples therapist, Batshaw said. "The sooner you get [help], the easier, more cost effective, and the longer you can enjoy a happier relationship together!" Solley said. Avoiding conflict can actually lead to more troubles.

Also, Solley added that "John Gottman's research shows that about two-thirds of a couple's problems actually never go away. In successful couples the difference is that they learn to talk about the problems in a flexible and considerate way, with perspective and without blaming each other for their differences."