

Manage Conflict: The Six Skills

When you are committed to sharing thoughts and feelings, you also need to understand and apply skills for managing conflict in an effective way.

Dr. Gottman's, a researcher and expert on relationships, proposes **six skills for conflict management**. Many of us connect all too well with comedian Mitch Hedberg's feelings when he quips, "I got in an argument with a girlfriend inside of a tent. That's a bad place for an argument, because I tried to walk out, and had to slam the flap!"

While his commentary on the frustrations all couples feel in the face of conflict may hit close to home, or deeply amuse us, we know that problems in real relationships are rarely solved through stand-up comedy. In the interest of finding more constructive solutions, we would like to direct you to a different quote, that lovely old adage: *Love is saying "I feel differently" instead of "you're wrong."*

Dr. Gottman has discovered that in all conflict, the creation of constructive conflict management includes the development of the following six skills:

1. Soften Startup
2. Accept Influence
3. Make Effective Repairs During Conflict
4. De-escalate
5. Psychological Soothing of Self and Partner
6. Compromise

As his research has revealed, discussions invariably end on the same note they begin. If you start an argument too harshly by attacking your partner verbally, you will end up with at least as much tension as you began with. What we will share with you today will give you a few tools to avoid falling into this trap.

Today we will share only how to have a soft start up. I have a whole program on how to manage conflict that explains in detail all six skills.

Soften Startup, which involves how a partner raises an issue in the first three minutes of the conversation, is crucial to resolving relationship conflicts. If most of your arguments start softly, your relationship is far more likely to be stable and happy. Here is how to do this:

Complain but don't blame. No matter how "at fault" you feel that your partner is, approaching them with criticisms and accusations is not productive. According to Dr. Gottman, it's all about approach!

- Instead of blaming your partner with "You said you would clean the backyard today and it's still a mess," try a simple complaint: "Hey, there are still some fallen leaves in the gutter and tennis balls everywhere. We agreed you'd rake and clean up after Buster. I'm really upset about this."

Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You." When you start sentences with "I" you are less likely to seem (or be!) critical, immediately putting your partner into a defensive position. Instead of saying "You are not listening to me," you can say, "I don't feel like you are listening right now." Instead of "You're so careless with money," say, "I think that we should try to save more."

- Focus on how you're feeling, not on accusing your spouse! Both of you will stand to gain something from the conversation – the two of you will likely feel that you are hearing and understanding each other more.

Describe what is happening, but don't evaluate or judge. Instead of accusing or blaming your partner, simply describe what you see in the situation. Though you may be at the end of your leash, keeping yourself in check will be worth it in the end! Instead of violently attacking with accusations, such as "You never watch the baby," try saying, "I seem to be

the only one chasing after Charlie today. I'm really exhausted – could you help out with him?”

- Instead of lashing back out at you, your partner is more likely to consider your point of view and deliver the results you are hoping for with this approach. Be clear. No matter how long you have been with your partner or how well they know you, no matter how convenient it would be, you cannot expect them to read your mind.

Be polite and appreciative. Just because you are in conflict with your partner, does not mean that your respect and affection for them has to diminish! Adding phrases such as “please” and “I appreciate it when you...” can be helpful to maintaining warmth and emotional connection even during a difficult conversation. Which is, of course, exactly where you need it most.

Don't store things up! We've all been there: exhausted and overwhelmed, feeling like we are drowning in a whirlpool of problems... in this state, one issue leads to another, and we suddenly find ourselves bringing up a laundry list of issues (which all somehow feel related!)

Generally, the issues we bring up in such conversations don't feel so related to our partners. Flooded with emotion, both partners are entirely incapable of reaching a resolution. That's why it's important to know how to de-escalate and take responsibility for our emotions. As we all know, not doing the laundry regularly leaves you with an enormous mess. Don't wait forever to bring up an issue with your partner, and your conflict discussions will be far more productive. Don't let the situation escalate!