

Chapter 1
Developing a Happy Family: Resolving Couples Conflict
Dr. Karen Davies

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Understanding Couples Conflict

If we find ourselves in adulthood as part of a couple, then clearly we have made a choice sometime during our lives that we wish to share our day-to-day lives with another person. If we are a member of a family with children, then we have made an even bigger decision to share our lives completely with a small social group! In either case, we have come through our adolescence and early adulthood and concluded that we do not wish to live completely on our own.

Living with others provides us with countless opportunities to learn about ourselves, and also about the people with whom we live. Our lives can be dramatically enriched through our participation in the development of our children. Likewise, since we as adults never stop developing and changing, living with another gives us the opportunity to share in this process with another significant person.

If we can experience our partner as a 'best friend', most of the time, as we live through all the exciting, sometimes trying and difficult adventures of adulthood, then this very special 'other person' can be a constant source of comfort and support. Likewise, we can provide that same comfort and support to our partner.

At the same time, however, living with another person inevitably means that there will be times of disagreement, argument and perhaps serious conflict. If we find ourselves engaged in ongoing, seemingly irresolvable conflict with our partner, then day-to-day life can be difficult and stressful. When faced with serious problems, we can feel quite alone, overwhelmed and unable to explore possible solutions and make good decisions.

Differences of opinion and points of view are normal and healthy in relationships. We come together as two separate people, each with our own unique set of ideas, values, needs, wishes, expectations, beliefs and personality styles. Because we are separate people, there will inevitably be times when some of these are different from those of our partner. The existence of differences does not automatically mean that there will be conflict.

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However,

- how we express our differences,
- how we respect these differences in one another; and
- how we find acceptable resolutions to differences,

can all affect whether or not we will experience serious conflict in our relationships with our partners.

The general emotional tone in a home and in a family is largely determined by the manner in which the adults conduct their lives. The more we are able to create an atmosphere of mutual trust, support and cooperation, the more likely it is that our children will feel safe and secure in their own lives with us. Children are particularly sensitive to the 'feel' of things, and if there is a constant underlying tension between their parents, children will inevitably perceive it and respond with behavior that, in some way, reflects their own feelings of discomfort and anxiety.

Just as we teach our children how to tie their shoelaces, ride a 2-wheeled bicycle, get along with their brothers, sisters and friends, and the innumerable other tasks of life, so too do we teach them how to work out differences between themselves and others. As they watch us argue, debate, discuss and resolve disagreements, our children learn how to listen, respect, negotiate, and consider different ideas, points of views, wishes and needs.

Likewise, in our own families as we grew up, we were all exposed to the ways in which our parents resolved their inevitable differences. Some of us were fortunate enough to have good role models for conflict resolution, and we learned throughout our childhood how to deal with differences. However, for many of us, our parents were not particularly skilled in this regard, and thus we have come to adult relationships with a lot to learn!

What Distinguishes Healthy Conflict from Destructive Conflict?

Most of us have memories of arguments or debates in which we tried to defend our own personal point of view in opposition to that of another person, perhaps another family member, a co-worker, a friend or even just a passing acquaintance. Healthy arguing or debating is a way in which we can clarify some of our own beliefs and values about different things. If you have to discuss and defend something that you believe in, you have to think about it, and do your best to organize your thoughts and then put them into words.

It is not required that the other person agree with you on every point in order that your views be considered valid and important. In many instances, agreement isn't necessary at all, and sometimes the resolution to the difference is simply to agree to disagree. Such a resolution allows for a mutual respect between partners that each person has a right to their individual views and beliefs. Such respect is a fundamental building block

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for any relationship between two individuals, whether they be intimate partners, friends, family members or co-workers.

Sometimes, though, agreeing to disagree just isn't possible in an intimate partnership. Sharing a life with another person requires the sharing of many different things:

- the many details of the day-to-day running of a household, including meal preparation, housecleaning, tidying, general household chores inside and out;
- taking care of children and children's activity schedules (if there are children);
- continuing the relationships with parents and other extended family;
- maintaining relationships with individual friends and friends of the couple;
- career development plans and needs of each person;
- various work-related issues;
- day-to-day financial management as well as longer term financial planning; and
- individual needs for 'free-time', fitness, physical affection and intimacy,
- some couples and families also have significant medical issues to cope with as well.

Many of us have very busy lives, and sometimes it seems as though there just isn't enough time to fit everything in! When we experience any significant conflict with our partner, the task at hand seems to grow ever larger, and the energy available to deal with it seems to diminish. While 'many hands' can make most tasks go more quickly, 'fighting hands' slow everything down and make the completion of even simple tasks much more difficult.

Simple arguments and disagreements about 'who does what when' may come and go, particularly when people are tired or overwhelmed by 'too much to do in too little time'.

If these are settled quickly, and both people continue to feel that their views are listened to and respected by the other, there is no long-lasting consequence. However, when these same disagreements and arguments rise up over and over again, and no satisfactory solution is found, therein lies the beginning of more serious conflict that may begin to erode some of the good feelings in the relationship.

Some couples are quite able to identify the 'same old arguments' that inevitably end up 'the same old way', like running into the proverbial brick wall! Sometimes the argument is so familiar that it feels as though one could just slip in a tape recording after the first line or two, and play out the same responses and counter-responses that have been made so many times before.

If such a pattern of struggle continues over an extended period of time, eventually the predominant emotional tone in the relationship will be one of frustration, helplessness, discouragement, disappointment, and anger. Even the moments of 'good times' together will become overshadowed by the lingering sense of bad feeling. If such a situation persists, then it is only a matter of time before the relationship begins to falter, and one or both partners may find themselves actively searching out any number of distractions from the turmoil.

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Such distractions may take the form of extra time spent at the office, more and more events planned alone away from the family setting, more time spent with friends, increased use of drugs or alcohol, or even possibly the searching out of another more seemingly understanding and compassionate 'significant other'. Certainly, many extramarital affairs begin when one partner feels more and more isolated and alienated from the other due to unresolved lingering feelings of anger, resentment and helplessness.

These are times of serious conflict in the relationship that are potentially very destructive for both members.

What Do You Do Now?

The very first step that needs to be taken en route to resolving any ongoing conflict within a couple is for some kind of open, non-accusatory acknowledgment of the existence of the problem. Sticking one's head in the sand and hoping that it will all go away just doesn't work! Besides, when your head is stuck in the sand, you will inevitably miss all kinds of other things that are going on around you and also in the relationship, including some things that are potentially fun, exciting, interesting and positive.

Rest assured - the important things that you do not talk about and try to resolve now, will inevitably rise up over and over again, in some form or another, until you do pay attention to them. This is yet another example of the basic fact that life will present us with many, many opportunities to 'get it right', whether we are raising children, learning how to work things out with the people we love, or simply learning a new and different task.

It's best if we don't try to discuss something important in the heat of the moment, during or immediately after a serious argument when emotions are high. It is hard to think clearly and honestly when we are flooded with feelings of anger, disappointment, and despair. In these states of high emotional arousal, most of us are also much more likely to say and even do things that we do not really mean, and that we seriously regret later.

Very hurtful things that are said or done in such emotionally-charged moments can feel like significant wounds to one or both partners, and it can then take quite some period of time for each person to heal enough to re-engage with the other person. Trusting our partner to do his or her best to safeguard our feelings of comfort and security in the relationship is another significant cornerstone of any relationship, and when this trust is damaged, the process of rebuilding it can take time and some repeated experiences of reassurance. Please, give yourselves a little space and time after a serious argument to let things calm down a little. Then set aside some time to talk.

It really is important that you make some time in your busy schedule to sit down quietly together, preferably not when you are both bone-weary and can hardly see straight, and

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not when either person has been drinking alcohol or using any other type of drug. Again, in any of these circumstances, we are all less able to think and talk clearly and honestly about what has happened, how we feel about it, what our own part was in it, and what we believe might be an acceptable resolution for the time being.

Similarly, don't try to have an important discussion about an area of conflict in your relationship in the mad rush before everyone has to be out the door en route to somewhere. It is important that both people feel that there is enough time for his or her views to be expressed, heard, considered and responded to. Furthermore, if you are unable to reach any mutually satisfactory resolution in this 'rushed' bit of time, it is quite likely that both people will begin their days in a state of some emotional upset.

Once you have set some time apart to talk, keep distractions to a minimum. Don't answer the telephone or the knock on the door. The calling party will call back or come back if it is important enough! If you have young children (up to 9 years of age or so), wait until they are settled in bed. If your children are older, ask them to allow you a little privacy for some adult conversation. They should be quite capable of keeping themselves occupied for an hour or two.

If your life seems too busy to find a couple of hours to sit quietly together to do some serious talking, you may need to figure out what activity or activities can be shifted lower down on the priority list. Couples do need time alone together without others, for the fun things, and also for attending to problems that inevitably arise. Failure to make the time available for each other over a prolonged period of time can sadly result in circumstances where one or the other withdraws so much that the relationship simply falters and dies.

Once you've cleared the decks to allow for some serious, uninterrupted conversation, the next step is to begin the discussion with some direct reassurance from each partner to the other. It is important to confirm with each other that you are there together, as partners, to try to find something that can work better for both of you, that you are both committed to finding a solution to something that is not going well. Remind yourselves that there are certain areas of your shared lives together that are going very well, and that you have resources as a couple that allow you to experience comfort and success in these other areas. These same resources can often be called upon in some fashion to assist in whatever problem solving is currently required.

If your discussion begins with blaming the other for all that he or she has done wrong, you're sure to get bogged down in defensive responses and further accusations. These can be very hurtful and destructive, and do not contribute in any way to a successful resolution of the problems at hand. In these circumstances, the risk is very high that you'll end the conversation feeling worse off than when you began. Heightened feelings of anger, disappointment, discouragement and despair only make it that much more difficult to try again to talk with one another about important problem areas in the relationship. Please, do not begin your discussions by blaming your partner for everything that is going wrong!

If this pattern of blame does persist, eventually neither person will be willing to broach difficult topics, and no resolution will be found. At this point, you will probably need

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professional help to get out of this situation, and to get both people talking again with some sense of hope and optimism about the possibility of resolution. I'll return to this point a little later in the chapter.

It's helpful to remember, and even to make note of, that in all of the things you do well together as a couple, you each play a contributing role in making things go well. For example, if you run your household well, or you manage your finances well, each of you plays a role in making that work. Along the same lines, in those areas of your life in which you experience conflict or difficulties as a couple, each person also has a part to play.

Sometimes it is very difficult for each person in the couple to look openly and honestly at themselves. Yet it is very important that each person try to determine what role they may be playing in contributing to the ongoing difficulties. We all know how easy it is to find the fault in the other person, and how much more challenging it is to turn the tables around and try to see, understand, and accept our own share of responsibility when problems occur.

Getting the Conversation Started

If you have acknowledged the existence of a problem between the two of you, and you have successfully avoided blaming the other for all that is wrong, now it is time to 'get down to details'. Choose one specific area of conflict to discuss, and make a plan to stick with it. One or two hours of conversation is not enough to address every single concern you may have. If you fill up your discussion time with a long, long list of problems, you won't have enough time to actively participate in successful problem solving. Ending each discussion period with some feeling of successful resolution, of at least part of a problem, makes it much more likely that you will try the process again.

Once you've agreed on what you would like to talk about, there are a few general rules of good communication that you might try to follow.

1. While one person is talking, it is important that the other do his or her best to listen carefully without interrupting. This sounds easy, but can be surprisingly difficult to do! If you are busy trying to figure out how to get in your 'two cents worth', it will interfere with your ability to really listen and focus on what your partner is trying to tell you. It also feels very disrespectful to be interrupted while you are talking. If it turns out that one person is far more likely to 'hold the floor' for extended periods of time, it is even worthwhile to try using the equivalent to a stove timer to ensure that each person has a chance to speak and be heard. Two to three minutes at a time is quite a lot of active listening to do.
2. Active listening means paying close attention to all that your partner is trying to tell you, without offering critical commentary or suggestions about what he or she should say or do. Try to just listen, without imposing your own views or thoughts, and try to understand all of what your partner is trying to say at the moment. Your turn to talk will come. Be patient!

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Active listening also means offering small comments periodically, indicating that you are attending as closely as possible. Comments such as “uh, huh”, “I see”, “OK”, all convey an active message that you are attending. Active listening also includes body language such as nodding, and orienting your body toward the person who is talking, to acknowledge that you’ve heard what was said. Really active listening involves periodically paraphrasing what the other has said.

3. Try to listen both for the informational content of the message, as well as the emotional content. What is the specific information that your partner is trying to convey to you, and how does he or she feel as this information is being shared with you? Sometimes, to understand the emotional meaning of the message, you have to listen very carefully ‘between the lines’, particularly if your partner is one who is inclined to keep most of his or her feelings to themselves.
4. Watch carefully for any nonverbal messages that may accompany the spoken words. Are there gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, or other body movements that you notice and find yourself reacting to? Do these nonverbal messages seem to be different from the words that are spoken? Very often, it is these many nonverbal signals that carry much of the emotional content of a message, particularly from a partner who does not readily talk about his or her feelings very openly. Sometimes, we are not even very aware of what we are feeling ourselves. This makes it particularly challenging for our partners to figure out!
5. When it is your turn to speak, do your best to express your own thoughts, ideas, or feelings, with an acknowledgment that they are yours, and not necessarily those of your partner. Try to begin sentences with “I”. It’s much more difficult than you think. Try to keep the content of the sentence specifically about yourself, your own thoughts, ideas, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs. “I think that you don’t really want to change anything here” is not an effective statement about your own experience. Perhaps a better way to convey your thought might be to say “I sometimes feel like I am trying to make these changes by myself, and I would really like it better if we were working together on this”. The less you speak on behalf of the other person, the more likely it is that he or she will feel inclined to join in. The more active participation from each person, the more likely it is that, together, you will come to a mutually agreeable resolution somewhere down the line.
6. Please do not make assumptions or draw conclusions about something that your partner is thinking or feeling. Sometimes when we have lived with someone for a long time, we come to recognize fairly predictable patterns in behavior or speech in our partner. While there may be some circumstances in which it is useful to anticipate and rely on these predictable patterns, this is not one of them. When we are having important discussions about problems in our relationship, it is really important that we always allow our partner to speak for him or herself.

As soon as we make an assumption or an interpretation about our partner’s thoughts or



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feelings, we run a very real risk in getting something wrong. Not only do we feel that our own thoughts and feelings are not recognized and respected as having meaning and value of their own when someone else tells us what we are thinking or feeling, but furthermore, any error in interpretation or assumption can take the discussion in a completely erroneous direction.

These 'communication skills' can take quite some time, effort and experience to learn. Don't expect yourself or your partner to get them right all at once. Remember, life gives us countless opportunities to learn new things and to try new skills over and over again, hopefully making little steps of progress with each repetition. Particularly in areas of conflict in our relationships, it is not so very simple to convey clearly to our partner exactly what we intend to convey, nor to receive with complete accuracy the message that our partner intends for us to receive.

When two people try to share thoughts and feelings, the information going out and being received is filtered through our own individual histories, experiences, expectations, and interpretations. Sometimes what we think we hear and subsequently react to is more a function of this individual filtering process than it is a function of what the other person has really said or intended.

Thus, it is essential that we take an active role both in conveying our message as clearly as possible, and in doing our best to listen carefully to the entire message that our partner is doing his or her best to share with us.

If our communication is consistently unclear or incomplete, there is an increased likelihood that, in our own individual ways, depending on what our life experiences, expectations, and interpretations are, we may well end up "filling in the blanks" with assumptions about the other person's meaning or intent that may be totally inaccurate. If we give our partner persistent 'mixed messages', that is, where we say one thing with our words, but convey a very different, contradictory message with our tone of voice, facial expressions, or gestures, it will become virtually impossible to have a meaningful, continuing discussion. Our partner will be confused, and may in fact feel quite distressed by the contradictory nature of what we are trying to convey. Sometimes, we don't even realize that we are giving such mixed messages, particularly if we don't really fully understand our own emotional reactions to something.

Why Do We Sometimes Get So Stuck?

Sometimes, despite our best efforts at talking clearly, listening, and struggling to understand our partner and the conflict that exists in our relationship, we just can't find a way to a mutually acceptable resolution. Tension and distress continue, and hopelessness and despair may follow. If this goes on for a prolonged period of time, the relationship will suffer.

Sometimes, conflicts around day-to-day issues are more symbolic or representative of problems at a deeper level. If basic trust and respect between partners have been

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seriously damaged, then there can be an underlying tension that regularly surfaces in the form of major outbursts in response to seemingly inconsequential incidents. These can rise up out of nowhere, it seems, and then leave both partners feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of reactions that both people experience.

Emotional and Physical Intimacy

When couples are experiencing significant, seemingly unresolvable conflict, the intimate relationship (emotional and physical) between the two is very often affected as well. Where once there was a comfortable, satisfying, mutually enjoyable sexual relationship, couples in conflict often find themselves lonely, confused, disappointed and/or angry about the absence of pleasant affectional and sexual contact.

Sometimes, the 'poor sexual relationship' gets interpreted as the source of the couple's problems, and a demand is placed on the reluctant sexual partner to become more sexually interested and involved. If the underlying nature of the conflict in the couple is not understood and addressed, the unsatisfying sexual relationship rarely improves. In fact, the ensuing conflict around the sexual relationship itself can make problems worse for the couple.

Sometimes, it does occur that one partner has a specific sexual problem that has affected his or her ability to participate comfortably and enjoyably in the sexual relationship. If this goes undiagnosed, and misunderstood, it can contribute to an ongoing misperception that he or she is no longer interested, willing, or wishing to have a sexually intimate relationship with their partner.

Some people do in fact have difficulty being intimate partners with others. Emotional intimacy requires:

- a high level of trust in another person;
- a willingness and ability to learn about and to share many aspects of oneself with another;
- a willingness and ability to be vulnerable to another and to let the other person see parts of yourself that you keep mostly to yourself;
- a willingness and ability to soothe and comfort another, and also to let another person provide soothing and comfort to yourself;
- a basic respect and acceptance of the differences between two people without feeling compelled to compromise important elements of who you fundamentally are;
- a reasonable level of physical and psychological health.

When there are significant differences in a couple between the individual wishes, needs and capacities for emotional intimacy, there can be an ongoing struggle to find an acceptable level of intimacy that works for both partners. Sometimes one wants to be emotionally closer than the other can tolerate or enjoy. Sometimes there is a distance that suits one person, but feels too lonely and isolating for the other.

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When Do We Look for Professional Help? How Do We Do It?

When a couple finds themselves struggling for months at a time, and can not seem to find an acceptable resolution that allows both people to feel reasonably content and fulfilled in the relationship, it is a wise decision to seek professional help. Just as we should never leave a serious medical condition untended, neither should we ignore our needs for psychological tending when we are unable to make things better ourselves.

It is sad to see two people, who have clearly loved and cherished one another once upon a time, hovering on the brink of divorce, when some assistance earlier on in the process of coming apart might have helped a great deal in finding far better solutions.

Once you have decided that you just can't sort out some area of conflict on your own, despite trying and trying for 4 to 6 months, ask around to get the name of a well-trained, respected practitioner in the field of marital therapy. If you have a trusted friend who has previously sought out such help, ask him or her. If you have a family doctor whose advice you have valued and acted on in the past, consult with him or her.

If you have no idea where to start, you can call the local licensing and/or registering bodies for psychologists, marital therapists, and family counsellors. These phone numbers will be available in the yellow pages of your local phone directory. From each of these separate associations, you will get a short list of names of individuals who are trained to provide couples counselling.

Call around and speak to several of these people. It is OK to ask questions about their training, qualifications, and experience and to request a consultation interview. For many of us, it isn't easy to reach out for help with our relationships. It usually feels better to take an active role in making a choice of a therapist who appears to be a good fit for you and your partner. Once you've made these calls, completed a couple of consultation interviews, and settled on a couples' therapist, you can both relax a little. With a trained professional to help you out, you no longer have to struggle alone with something that seems to have grown beyond your control.

The whole process of couples' therapy can be extremely rewarding, even if at times it is difficult, stressful and frightening.

- You will have opportunities to learn more about yourself and your partner in a safe environment.
- You will learn new ways to talk to one another about things that are very important to the well being of your relationship.
- You will have the opportunity to learn to identify patterns of behaviour that arise between the two of you that seem to come up out of nowhere, but, in fact, do have their origins in other parts of your life.
- The more you become aware of the existence of these patterns, and where they come from, the more you will actually have some choice in altering them and their effects on your relationship with your partner.