

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

Differences Are Inevitable: How to Resolve Conflicts

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Differences between couples are inevitable. As couples these differences do not simply go away. Instead, they are likely to become magnified over time and sometimes turn into a source of frustration for the partners. This is No. 6 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

Conflict and Love

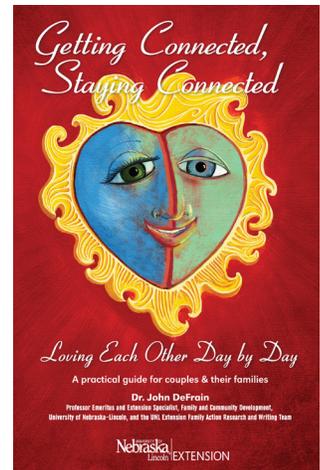
Can you love a person and still get mad at them? Of course. Everyone gets mad at their loved ones. But the key is not to say or do things that are damaging and hurtful. We can do the wrong thing from two different directions: We can get so angry with our partner that we become emotionally abusive or physically abusive. Or, we can try to avoid being angry at our partner so much that it leads to emotional disengagement and a *devitalized relationship*. So, if we can destroy the partnership by being too angry and abusive, and also by being too avoidant of conflict, what is the solution? How do we strike the right balance?

1. Recognize that differences are normal and inevitable. All loving relationships have differences.
2. Recognize that differences can lead to conflict.
3. Recognize that conflict can lead to anger, abuse, or avoidance.
4. Recognize that successful relationships always have a little give and take: Each person has to give in on occasion. Compromise is an essential tool.
5. Learn to deal with anger in a peaceful, loving, and caring way. Avoid getting too worked up emotionally.

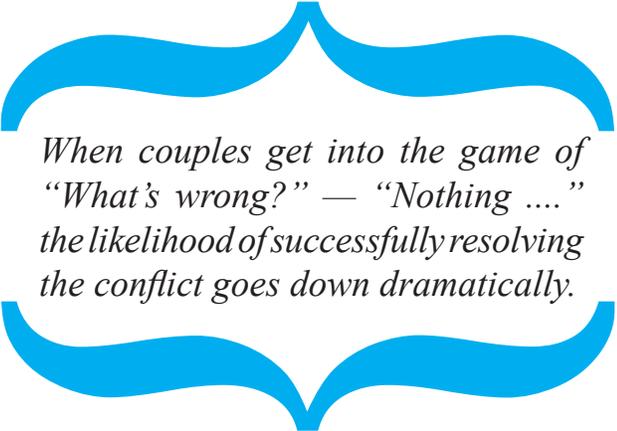
Focus on the facts and how to solve the problem together. Is this easy? Of course not. Is the effort to learn how to deal with life's inevitable conflicts in a peaceful way worth it? Absolutely.

Good Advice for Resolving Conflict

- **Focus on the positive aspects of your partner.** Every day let your partner know how much you appreciate her/him. Don't focus on a few negative things when the vast majority of things your partner does are commendable.
- **Call a time-out.** If a situation is getting out of hand, call a time-out with your partner. Agree that you will get back together in a half hour or a day or two when you can be reasonable.
- **Listen very carefully to your partner. Check out what he or she is saying:** "Let me see if I understand your point here: Are you saying that ...?" Many arguments go on needlessly because the partners have no idea what each other is really trying to say.
- **Get to the point. Say what you mean — what you really mean.** Besides listening carefully to your partner, make sure that when you speak you are speaking clearly and to the point.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.



When couples get into the game of “What’s wrong?” — “Nothing” the likelihood of successfully resolving the conflict goes down dramatically.

- **Don’t expect your partner to be able to read your mind.** You may think that *he/she should just know*, but this is not realistic.
- **Don’t humiliate your partner in front of others.** Shame and embarrassment don’t work. The hostilities will simply continue when you’re alone together, and the level of anger may be even higher.
- **Avoid giving ultimatums.** Don’t get into the game of saying things like, “If you do that again, I will *never ever...*” or “You had better do this *or else!*” This is one of the most confrontational ways people argue with each other. Don’t give ultimatums. You may find yourself doing something you really don’t want to do.
- **Grow up. Calm down. Act like an adult.** A sad thing often happens when couples and family members get into a conflict situation. They behave like small children, yelling and throwing tantrums. This behavior may work for children but not for adults.
- **Don’t fight dirty. Avoid attacking your partner.** Avoid the temptation to fight dirty, to win by damaging your partner. What good can possibly come from making our loved ones feel bad?
- **The silent treatment is fighting dirty.** The silent treatment does not end a conflict. To end a conflict, the partners have to listen to each other and talk with each other respectfully and kindly.
- **Hate begets hate. Love begets love.** When we are kind to our partner, our partner will be likely to respond with kindness. Similarly, when we are nasty to our partner, we are likely to get nastiness in return.
- **Keep sex out of all this.** If passionate sex follows a big argument, then passionate sex can end up serving as a reinforcer, leading to more big arguments in the future. If you really want to make love, don’t pick a fight. Instead, do loving, kind, and thoughtful things. Don’t make the mistake of confusing *anger-sex* and *love-sex*. Love-sex is better.

- **Use “I” statements rather than “you” statements. “I” statements are more gentle and work better.** “You” statements are blame statements: “You always make me so mad.” Blaming doesn’t work to resolve conflicts. It only makes people angry. “I” statements aim toward minimizing blame and work toward understanding and joint problem solving. “I feel hurt when you choose a golf game instead of dinner with me. Could we find time in our schedules for both?”
- **Discuss one thing at a time until it is resolved.** Pick the most important issue to talk about and save your discussion of other issues until you have first resolved the most important issue.
- **Win-Win is much better than Win-Lose.** Loving relationships are not athletic contests. Loving relationships work well when couples work as a team to find a solution that is good for both partners. The reality is, if one partner wins and one partner loses, both are losing.
- **Solve the conflict, make things better, create a peaceful and harmonious relationship.** Long-term loving relationships are much more important than endless bickering.
- **Agree to disagree.** People who love each other simply will never agree on everything. Talk about things that are important to you. Stop the debate when it is going nowhere.
- **If you need help, go get help.** The vast majority of couples find counseling sessions are helpful.
- **Laugh, have some fun, goof off together.** We get too serious about life, too tightly wound. Make sure you have some fun with each other every day.
- **Be kind to each other.** It’s really quite simple when you think about it. Treat your partner with the respect, love, and kindness she/he deserves.

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

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