

PURPOSE

Understand more about the factors that lead to conflict and some strategies to help sort it out

MATERIALS

Paper and pens

TIME

2 hours – it would be best to do each activity separately

Since differences are an inevitable part of relationships, it is crucial to be able to manage the full range of disagreement from mild differences to raging conflict so that there are useful results for each person and your relationship.

Most people develop strategies to deal with differences and conflicts that suit them and that work for them most of the time. It is only when issues are not being resolved or it seems that conflict is taking the place of good feelings and pleasant times that most people even think about difference and conflict.

Research has identified several important factors that impact on a couple's ability to manage conflict.

Dealing with differences and repairing damage when it occurs means that feelings of distance and coldness don't last. So, people stay open and the warmth continues.

- 1 Stressors from outside of the marriage. Even the most loving relationship can be challenged when there is a high level of pressure from outside stressors.
- 2 The openness of each person in the couple to the thoughts, opinions and feelings of the other and their willingness to adjust or modify their stance on issues as a result of their partner's input affects the long term viability of the relationship. Men's capacity for this kind of yielding is especially critical.
- 3 A couple's capacity to raise issues in a gentle way impacts on their ability to approach difficulties.

- 4 Having an accepted way of raising issues and an agreement to deal with the issues that are raised helps couples to bring issues to the table and increases feelings of trust and stability.
- 5 A couple's capacity to manage when either is overwhelmed with strong feelings when issues are being discussed.
- 6 A couple's ability to keep close and to maintain their efforts to comfort each other even when struggling with difficult situations, anger and pain.

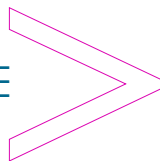
STRESSORS FROM OUTSIDE THE RELATIONSHIP

During life there are inevitable outside pressures that affect the functioning of relationships. A little pressure can lead to increased focus and performance but too much can lead to a sharp decline in every area of life.

When people are pressured and need most of their personal resources to cope, they find it difficult to be fully involved in nurturing their relationship. When this is a short term issue any damage can easily be recovered. When the pressure is chronic or so intense that it has a very negative impact, recovery is more difficult.

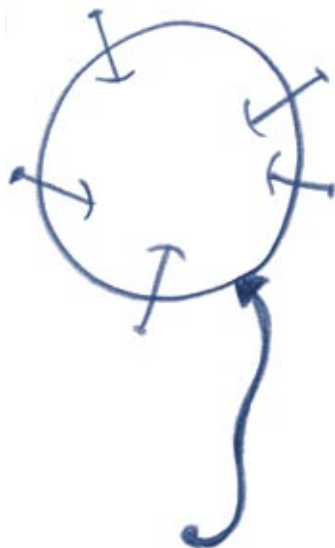
It takes very creative thinking and management of personal support from other sources, money and time to find a way to manage or get away from

ACTIVITY ONE



PUTTING ON THE PRESSURE

Individually, use the table below to think about the pressures in your life. Allocate the pressures you feel to one of the boxes.



Think of all of the areas in your life including: beliefs, work and career, commitments, family, friends, health, learning, location, recreation and relationships.

Then, allocate a positive score to indicate the ones you find stimulating and a negative score to those you find most stressful and difficult to deal with.

Spend some time considering if a fresh approach might be needed to lessen the stress and pressure you feel to manageable level.

ONGOING		
SHORT TERM		
RELATIONSHIP (Self or others)		CIRCUMSTANCES (Illness, family responsibilities)

Technical information about stress and its affects is available in:
Merali, Zul. "Understanding Stress: Characteristics and Caveats" Alcohol Research & Health. 22/12/1999

A workbook that focuses on managing stress:
The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis, P.H.D., Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, M.S.W., and Mathew McKay, Ph.D. 2000. NewHabinger Publications, Inc. Oakland, CA.

An online test that links your stress levels with health outcomes see:
www.help4cops.netheaven.com/test.html

YIELDING TO WIN

Gottman and Silver's research² shows that it is particularly important for men to yield to their partners. The important thing to note is that a lack of yielding on the man's part was very predictive of divorce. Men need to become the kind of hero and knight in shining armour that is strong enough to yield to build their relationship.

Other research³ shows that even at very young ages, boys will only accept influence from other boys when they play, while girls accept influence from both boys and girls equally. There needs to be a whole lot more research about why this is so, but it points to a possible reason for the importance of men yielding to build their relationship and why they need to learn the skill.

This is not to say that women don't need to yield to their partners, just that they are more comfortable with this skill.

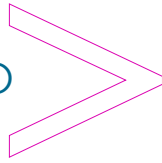
One reason that many people find yielding difficult is that it appears to put them "under the thumb" of the other and so at the first sign of any request they move into being uncooperative or even aggressive. There is much to be gained apart from a happier more stable marriage. These benefits include, deeper connections, a richer view of life that takes in your partner's understanding of the world and the knowledge that you are the one making the choices, not some out of date attitude.

The first step in yielding is to recognise the force behind the other's statement and identify what you can do. You need to be listening to the message underneath and disregard anything that is floating around on top – even if it is a demand, criticism or attack. Remember, they have resorted to these tactics because nicer, kinder messages haven't been getting through.

The second step is to remember that you won't be losing anything if you do yield and that you will be building a stable and lasting relationship.

A perfect yield is when you work out what they are really telling you and

ACTIVITY TWO



YEILDING TO WIN

Individually, think of responses, including words and actions, that indicate you have yielded.

“I need a weekend off. Can you organise the kids?”

“I hate the way you leave your clothes on the floor. For the twentieth time, please put them in the basket.”

“I reckon that you are spending about twice as much as me on bits and pieces. You should cut down your spending.”

“Why don’t you look after the car? Check the oil and water in the car every time you get petrol.”

“I am over it. Everything always goes your way. So this time we are going to spend some time and money on me.”

SPEND SOME TIME to compare your answers with your partner.



RAISING ISSUES IN A GENTLE WAY

It is important to raise issues in a gentle way.

To do this:

- ensure that your first statement of the issue only includes what actually happens
- make sure that your first response to an issue your partner raises includes acknowledgement of their issue and check that the issue has been correctly identified and heard
- spend time making sure that the issue raised is the main issue and not something that is the surface of something deeper
- allow issues to be raised without defending yourself or taking a position.

This is important because many issues spring from misunderstandings, individual differences or preferences that come from early family life. Most couples have a routine way they indicate to their partner that they have something they need to say. If most of their attempts to sort out differences work, it serves as a useful marker that says, 'pay attention'. If there is a history of difficulty, any attempt to raise issues becomes a signal for withdrawal or attack. New ways to raise issues need to be found.

How are issues raised in your relationship? Is there a typical set of words or behaviour that you use? (eg I'm silent and then he asks if something is wrong.)



Do you have a special time or place that helps you to raise issues' (eg We always seem to talk about issues in the bath.)

Have you noticed anything that derails your efforts to raise issues? What is it and what could you do to support each other's efforts to raise issues?

UNMENTIONABLES AND TABOOS

Most relationships have areas that are comfortable to talk about and some areas that are unmentionable. For some it is sex, others money or family. Often communication happens at the level of body language and is easily misunderstood.

Couples can go on for years with issues in these areas and no way of sorting them out. In this situation there is no way to check assumptions, to refine messages, or check for understanding. Sometimes, even the thought that the area can't be raised comfortably is an assumption.

One way to raise issues:

- 1 Make sure that there aren't other pressures and that there is time available for discussion. Check that the time you are choosing isn't one that is usually filled with difficulties. Prepare yourself by sorting out exactly what you do want. Make it an action not an attitude or a feeling. Do NOT mention what you don't want.
- 2 "I have an issue/concern" OR "I'm upset/angry/disappointed/anxious." OR "I'd like to talk about....."
- 3 "Can we talk about it now?" (If not arrange a time)

- 4 “I’ve noticed that (say only observable behaviour and avoid any interpretation or assumptions) and I’m(say what you are feeling) OR if it is something you would prefer to happen, say calmly what you want without any attempt to justify or convince the other that it is OK that you have raised the issue. This is because it is easy to accidentally attack the other person while we are attempting to justify what we want. When people are defending they are not listening.
- 5 Listen
- 6 Calmly say it again in a different way if they seem not to have got the message.
- 7 Be prepared to work hard at listening.

HANDLING OVERWHELMING FEELINGS

Gottman and Silver’s research revealed that women and men have very different responses to conflict and difficulties . Men generally react more strongly to conflict and are more easily emotionally overwhelmed. They also have more trouble soothing and comforting themselves. The shortcut to men feeling better is retaliation.

Women are most upset by feelings of distance and lack of closeness. These two can work together to create escalating misunderstanding. When a woman raises something that the man perceives as a conflict his main impulse is reduce his distress by leaving. This skyrockets the woman’s distress. She is apt to follow him about trying desperately to reconnect. He desperately tries to get away. Frustration and distress result.

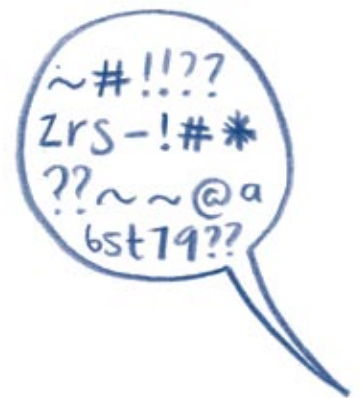
The situation needs to be carefully managed. If men are feeling overwhelmed taking a break is a good idea. If women are feeling abandoned, an assurance that the discussion will be continued at a particular time and place can be settling.

Dealing with these feelings increases the chances that the issue can be settled without the extra burden of overwhelming feelings.

KEEPING CLOSE THROUGH CONFLICTS

Most people find trying to sort out issues difficult. There are complicated feelings about the issue, beliefs about what is owed, what giving in a little bit ‘means’ and even what people think of as their rights.

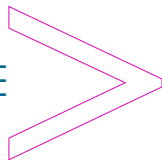
It is difficult to get past all of these and remember the core of the situation that is about the relationship you are have invested a great deal of time and energy in and which has the potential to be the best and most wonderful thing in your life.



It is important to remember that your partner is the person you married and that even if things haven't been going well for some time, the negative things are the result of temporary difficulties, not because they have been abducted by aliens and given a nasty personality transplant.

- Remember that you are attempting to make your relationship better
- Keep what you want to achieve as the most important thing
- You win only by building better feelings, more trust and happiness
- Offer each other comfort if it's not going well
- Keep the conversation as pleasant as possible
- If things are going off track, do everything you can to settle things down
- Recognise that men and women can have different responses to conflict.

ACTIVITY THREE



REMEMBERING THE BEST

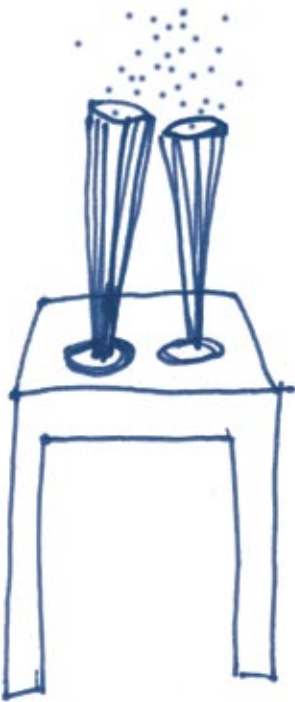
Think back to when you first started going out with your partner.

- Remember something that intrigued you about them
- Something you did that they liked
- Something that they did that you liked

SHARE WITH YOUR PARTNER...

Think about these same categories of things now.

SHARE WITH YOUR PARTNER...





SO YOU HAVE DONE IT!

If you have worked through the 7 Skills and made a genuine effort to put them into practice you deserve congratulations.

There are a few things we would like you to do:

Keep all your worksheets in a safe place and bring them out when you think they could be useful.

Tell others about the skills you learnt so they too can benefit by doing the Course.

Let us know how effective this Course is by completing and sending the following feedback to us at admin@mfl.com.au

What are 3 positive changes you have noticed about yourself or your partner as a result of doing the course?

1

2

3

What difficulties did you have to overcome to do the Course?

What other topics would you like to cover if you did another Course to strengthen your marriage?

Finally we thank you for your interest and suggest you keep in touch with us either through our Newsletter or logging in regularly to www.marriage.com.au.

Have a great marriage for life!

Michael and Susan Hanley