

**WATERMAN & ASSOCIATES**  
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**COUPLES IN TROUBLE:  
NEGOTIATING CONFLICT & RESOLUTION**

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If you find yourself experiencing ongoing conflict or difficulties with your significant other, you are not alone. Negative life events, financial difficulties, and other unexpected stressors can have a negative impact on most relationships, even healthy ones. While experiencing interpersonal conflict can fluctuate over time in any relationship, it is important to find ways that you can work together to resolve difficulties, challenges, or negotiate disagreements.

Individuals typically enter into a partnership with a pre-existing array of strategies for coping with stress and managing interpersonal conflict. Couples experiencing interpersonal difficulties sometimes find themselves locked in a pattern of interacting with their partner that proves to be less than effective in resolving disagreements. For example, one partner may deal with conflict in a relationship by seeking to openly talk to the other, in hopes of finding a mutual resolution. In contrast, the other partner may cope by withdrawing and hoping that the issue will resolve itself with time.

Both partners in the above scenario may want a positive resolution to the conflict, but you can imagine how such different styles of dealing with conflict can lead to problems. As the tension escalates, the pursuing partner may intensify attempts to reach the other through communicating, sometimes becoming more hostile, critical, and argumentative. The withdrawing partner, possibly feeling criticized and blamed, withdraws further into a shell. This precludes effective resolution of their conflict.

Although couples vary in their approaches to dealing with interpersonal conflict, if problems linger, or even escalate, this is a good indicator that you are not successfully resolving difficulties with your partner. Here are some tips in working on resolving interpersonal difficulties:

1. Take time to examine your pattern of interaction when experiencing conflicts. Do you respond to conflict by pursuing your partner, by blaming and complaining or do you tend to avoid your partner when he or she is upset?
2. Identify the feelings your partner triggers in you during such times of conflict. Do you feel fear of their disapproval? Criticized? Misunderstood? Dismissed?
3. Identify what unmet needs you may have during such conflictual times. For example, are you seeking comfort, reassurance, or simply wanting to have your perspective heard?
4. Find a quiet time to talk to your partner and share your personal reflections with one another.
5. As you share your perspective, avoid blaming and criticizing as this will only create defensiveness in your partner, lessening the chance that you will be heard.
6. Avoid interrupting your partner when he or she is speaking. Set time limits on how long each can talk to avoid being "lectured".

7. While you may not agree with your partner's perspective, see if you can understand what your partner is trying to say. Reflect back to your partner your understanding of his or her perspective until there is agreement that you understand one another.
8. See if you can empathize with your partner's experience. Beware of mixed messages you may be communicating. For example, reflecting your partner's perspective with a sarcastic and critical tone likely will not be effective in communicating understanding.
9. Negotiate how you might handle conflicts differently in the future. Emphasize a win-win approach, in which each partner has the opportunity to feel heard and understood.
10. Commit to communicating respectfully and honestly with one another.

Occasionally, the conflictual style of relating can take on a life of its own. The longer resentments and anger have time to build, the harder it can be to change the relationship's underlying pattern of interacting. If this is the case for you, you may want to consider seeking the assistance of an impartial third party, such as a marital counselor or therapist. A therapist can be helpful in managing escalating conflicts and equip you with more effective interactional styles so that you can negotiate conflicts on your own. A third party can also help heal lingering resentments so that you can re-establish trust in the relationship. Choosing to improve your style of relating, in the end, can help both partners re-establish the feeling of having an ally and a supportive friend by their side during difficult times.

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