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a resource in:

Marriage

Conflict Resolution Skills in Marriage



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Conflict Resolution Skills in Marriage

Directions: Read through the verses and information below, allowing adequate time for discussion about each topic. The material below should not be considered exhaustive; rather, it should serve as a beginning point for you to search the Scripture and to learn more about marriage.

I. SCRIPTURAL DIRECTION AND BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES.

A. Conflict will happen.

Occasional conflict in marriage is both normal and inevitable. However, how the two of you handle conflict (submitting yourself to the flesh or the Spirit) determines whether it harms your relationship or helps you to grow.

1 Corinthians 7:28, "But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you."

John 16:33, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

B. Active listening.

Active listening is a key skill to understanding each other and dealing with conflict.

James 1:19, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear. . . ."

Proverbs 18:13, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."

C. Guard your tongue.

Avoid speaking quickly and angrily. Criticism, sarcasm, and put-downs are hurtful to your marriage.

Proverbs 29:11, "A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards."

Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

D. Speak the truth in a loving manner.

Working through conflict successfully takes honest and truthful communication done in a loving manner. Remember to examine your motives. Would you be able to receive it, if someone came to you in this manner? Love is a very considerate awareness of the other person.

Ephesians 4:25, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another."

Ephesians 4:15, "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:"

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E. Resolve anger.

Deal with anger and hurt proactively. Don't deny it, "stuff" it, or let it turn to bitterness.

Ephesians 4:26-27, "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil."

Colossians 3:18-19, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them."

Hebrews 12:15, "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled;"

F. Forgiveness is essential.

The ongoing practice of seeking forgiveness and being forgiving is essential to a healthy, Christ-centered marriage.

Ephesians 4:32, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

1 Peter 3:8-9, "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing."

G. Disagreements will happen.

Accept that you will not agree on everything. Forbearance [patient restraint] is an act of love.

Colossians 3:12-15, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."

II. PRACTICAL APPLICATION.

A. Is conflict always bad?

Does having no conflict automatically mean you have a better relationship? No! Conflict isn't automatically good or bad. Rather, how it is handled makes the difference. Healthy conflict generates "light," while unhealthy conflict simply generates "heat." One spouse may need to lovingly confront the other or point out areas that need to be improved upon. For example, "Honey, I noticed that you haven't been taking much time to read the Bible lately." However, destructive conflict causes division and is harmful to the relationship.

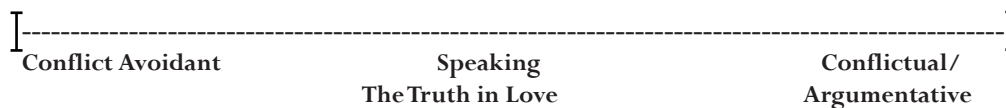
Sometimes couples worry that having a conflict means they have a bad marriage. While we all would prefer to have no conflict in our marriages, occasional conflict actually provides you with an opportunity to work

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together, learn from each other, and to love each other through the differences. Interestingly, having no conflict in a relationship may actually be an indicator that a couple is avoiding issues that need to be discussed. Ideally, seek to have the least amount of conflict possible in your relationship, realizing when it does occur, you can find ways to work through it for your betterment.

B. Avoid the extremes.

1. People who are “conflict avoidant” in marriage will do just about anything to avoid an argument. While this may be a good quality in many situations, those who avoid conflict may also avoid bringing up important spiritual, emotional, and relationship issues. Those who are “conflictual/argumentative” in marriage may tend to provoke arguments from time to time. While you will always know where these individuals stand on an issue, they may speak words harshly and put others down.
2. Jesus provided us with a perfect example for dealing with conflict. Sometimes He was silent or said few words (see *Matthew 27:11-14*; *John 8:3-11*), while other times He spoke quite firmly and directly (see *Matthew 23*). Jesus always spoke to the heart of the matter and always focused on the other person’s eternal good (see *Matthew 10:17-22*). He did not avoid conflict due to fear of man; however, He did not seek to be argumentative (see *Matthew 15:1-12*). Thus, no right answer exists for every situation. Match your response to the needs of the situation and to the needs of your spouse.
3. Where do you fall on the continuum below? Remember that sometimes remaining silent or saying few words is best, while other times you will need to lovingly confront your spouse. Note that if you tend to be “conflict avoidant,” you will need to practice speaking in a firm and direct manner, whereas, if you are more “conflictual / argumentative,” you will need to practice holding your tongue.



C. When conflict occurs, be careful how and when you talk to each other.

Research shows that 96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation during the first three minutes of talking. This means harsh words early in a conversation can doom the discussion to turn into destructive conflict. In order to avoid this problem, use the model provided in *James 1:19-20* where it says, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

1. *Be swift to hear*: When working through a conflict, remember that your spouse wants to be listened to and understood just as much as you do. Some researchers believe that up to 80% of relationship conflicts can be dealt with by using good communication and listening skills. Listening to each other and trying to understand where the other person is coming from is a practical way to show love, honor (*Romans 12:10*, “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;”), and submission to each other (*Ephesians 5:21*, “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”).
2. *Be slow to speak*: The words we speak hastily when frustrated or angry often hurt others deeply. In the end we often regret what we have said and wish we could take the words back. Remember when you hurt your

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spouse, you hurt yourself. *Ephesians 5:28-30* reminds us, “*So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.*”

Many people think that they need to “vent” their anger in order to deal with it. However, venting often leads us to spew out words or to take actions that are neither Godly nor healthy. Rather, than venting your anger, first rate your level of anger/tension from 0 to 10 (see the scale below). As our tension level goes up, our ability to think clearly and solve problems effectively GOES DOWN. However, most couples try to work through their most difficult problems when they are in the Red Zone. No wonder these conversations fail! Remember *Ephesians 4:26-27*, “*Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil.*” Satan has a much harder time getting an advantage with us when we deal with anger appropriately.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Green Zone			Yellow Zone			Red Zone				
Calm/Peaceful			Moderate Tension			High Tension				

Don't try to talk out any problems if your level of tension is in the Red Zone (7-10). Rather, take steps to calm down such as going for a walk, writing out your feelings, working in your garden, and taking deep breaths. If you are in the Yellow Zone (4-6), be aware you can quickly move into the Red Zone, so pay attention. Ideally we would always talk to each other from the Green Zone (0-3) with a prayer on our heart and our spouse's best interest in mind.

3. Slow to wrath: When conflicts occur, pray! Ask for God's help in dealing with your feelings, understanding your spouse, and sharing your feelings.

Anger is often referred to as a secondary emotion. That is, it comes as a result of another issue. When you are angered by something, try to identify which of the following categories likely triggered the anger.

- Emotional hurt (e.g., embarrassment, feeling of rejection, humiliation).
- Frustration.
- Fear.
- Physical pain.
- Injustice/sin (e.g., righteous anger).

D. Issues vs. Events: What are we *really* talking about?²

There are essentially two layers to most conversations:

1. Event: the topic at hand.
2. Issue: the “under-the-surface” feelings, meanings, and goals.

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Many conflicts are never solved because the spouses are actually arguing about different hidden issues. Healthy, helpful communication occurs when discussion is on the same issue. A loving action (though often challenging) is to work at understanding why your spouse is reacting to an issue the way he or she is. For example, a couple may have an argument about whether the toilet paper roll is supposed to go “over or under.” While on the surface they may both be talking about the toilet paper roll (the “event”), the “hidden issue” may be related to something very different. The unspoken issue may actually be, “This is the way we did it in my family,” or “You never listen to my ideas.” Always seek to communicate on the same issue. Many conflicts are never solved because the spouses are actually arguing about different hidden issues. Working to understand why your spouse is reacting to an issue the way he or she is, is a loving act that will help your communication.

E. Types of Conflict: Solvable or Perpetual?³

When choosing to marry a particular person, you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems you will be dealing with for the rest of your life. One researcher suggests that 69% of conflicts within marriage are unsolvable. While perpetual problems cannot be solved, it is important to manage this conflict or it will lead to gridlock and emotional disengagement within the relationship. The table below outlines the differences in these types of conflict:

Solvable	Perpetual
Situational	Centers on fundamental differences in personality or lifestyle
Less intense, simply about the topic	Generally more intense, deeper meaning behind the position
A solution can be found and maintained	The conflict keeps coming up
Solvable topics for one couple can be perpetual for another.	

Being aware of the perpetual conflicts within your relationship can be helpful. Simply labeling and identifying such conflicts as perpetual relieves tension in the relationship. In addition, here a few things you may consider as you work through perpetual conflicts in your relationship.

- Acknowledge the problem and talk about it.
- Remember that negative emotions are important and hold information about how to love each other better.
- Seek to understand each other’s subjective realities.
- Seek to approach the problem with good humor.
- Communicate acceptance of your partner.
- Don’t forget to continually build friendship within your marriage.

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E. Symptoms of destructive conflict.

Every couple, no matter how good their marriage, will have occasional disagreements, misunderstandings, and conflicts. Thus, when you have occasional conflict, don't be alarmed. Rather, take the time necessary to work through the issues and move on. However, researchers have found several types of conflict that you should be aware of and work to avoid.

1. Escalation - occurs when spouses, "respond back and forth negatively to each other, continually upping the ante so the conversation gets more and more hostile. In escalation, negative comments spiral into increasing anger and frustration."⁴
2. Invalidation - "is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other."⁵
3. Negative interpretations - "occur when one partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case."⁶
4. Withdrawal and avoidance - occur when one or both of the spouses, "shows an unwillingness to get into or stay with important discussions."⁷ Withdrawing refers to "shutting down" and trying to get out of a conversation, whereas avoidance is an attempt to keep the conversation from starting.

Another researcher has identified types of conflict that can be so poisonous to marriages that the researcher calls them the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."⁸

1. Criticism - global negative statements about your spouse's character or personality. For example, "Why do you keep putting your friends ahead of me? I always come last on your list. Are you avoiding spending time alone with me?"⁹
2. Contempt - words or gestures that show your spouse that you are disgusted and repulsed with him or her. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about your spouse. Sarcasm, cynicism, ridicule, name-calling, mocking, rolling your eyes, etc. are examples.
3. Defensiveness - instead of listening to your spouse's position and talking through it, defensiveness is a way of blaming your spouse and often involves pointing out flaws in his or her behavior, opinions, etc.
4. Stonewalling - avoiding your spouse by shutting him or her out and not communicating. Stonewalling includes giving your spouse the "silent treatment." While the intent of this is generally to avoid fighting, it also avoids the marriage.

Note that the chronic presence of the four types of conflict listed above predicts divorce by 82%!¹⁰

When you notice any of the above, try to find ways to resolve the conflict in a Christ-honoring way. Calming down and taking time to pray and talk through conflict can usually resolve it. However, if you find that you cannot seem to work through the conflict on your own, don't hesitate to seek support and guidance from an elder, minister, mentor, counselor, etc.

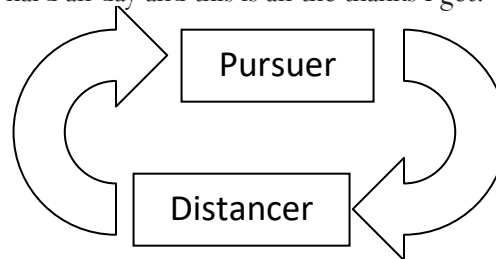
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Special Note: Emotional abuse (also called verbal abuse) and physical abuse are never acceptable and should not be tolerated in your marriage. These types of abuse are sins that strike at the very heart of the marriage and provide Satan with an opportunity to destroy the marriage. While physical abuse may cause visible bruises, emotional abuse crushes a person's spirit (*Proverbs 18:14* says, "The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?"). Examples of emotional abuse include a chronic pattern of using hurtful words, angry outbursts, silence, isolation, gestures, threats, etc. to control and manipulate another person.^{11,12} If emotional and/or physical abuse occur in your relationship, seek help immediately.

G. Avoiding the pursuer-distancer cycle.

Spouses often have different ideas as to what is the best way to resolve conflict. Many times one of the spouses wants to talk about problems right away (often the wife), while the other spouse wants time to think about it and talk later (often the husband). This arrangement often leads to the pursuer-distancer cycle.

For example, a wife may want to talk about why her husband has been working so many hours. However, when she says, "Why are you working so much? You never have time to help me around here," he says he wants to talk about it later and goes into his study. This, in turn, causes the wife to become more frustrated and anxious. She then follows him into his study showering him with a barrage of additional questions. In response to the continued questions from his wife (which he most likely perceives as criticism), the husband gets frustrated, becomes angry, shouts, "I work hard all day and this is all the thanks I get!" leaves the room and goes up to bed.



So who "causes" the pursuer-distancer cycle? The pursuer or the distancer? In reality, both do. When the pursuer (the wife in this case) puts pressure on the distancer (the husband in this case) to talk when he or she is not ready, the distancer withdraws. However, because the distancer didn't attempt to address the problem in any way, the pursuer became worried that the problem would never get solved and pursued more intensely. The goal is to be respectful of each other by doing the following:

- ***If you tend to be a pursuer:*** Be careful not to be too pushy – just because you feel like talking through an issue doesn't mean that the timing is right to discuss a conflict. Instead, let your spouse know that you have something you want to talk about and that you want to know when you both can talk about it.
- ***If you tend to be a distancer:*** Be careful not to withdraw without providing your spouse with a plan as to when you are going to discuss the issue. If your spouse wants to talk about something and you aren't ready to talk, let him or her know that you are aware that he or she wants to talk and now isn't a good time. HOWEVER, negotiate a time in the near future (after supper, tomorrow night, over lunch, etc.) that both of you can talk out and address the issue.

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H. Additional ground rules for good conflict resolution.

1. Stay on one topic: Trying to resolve multiple issues in one conversation can add confusion and more misunderstanding.
2. Don't dredge up the past: Bringing up past words, actions, etc. can be very hurtful to your spouse and damage trust.
3. Avoid "You" statements: Starting sentences with accusations (even if they are true) will put your spouse on the defensive ("You never listen.").
4. Use "I" statements: Speak from your perspective. "I feel frustrated when the garbage isn't taken out after I have asked you to take care of it."
5. Control the tone of your voice: "*A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*" (Proverbs 15:1).
6. Seek first to understand: Negative emotions hold important information about how to love your spouse better.
7. Don't lecture each other or treat your spouse like a child: Remember that we are "*heirs together of the grace of life*" (1 Peter 3:7) and that we should treat each other as such.

I. The steps of good problem solving.

When you have an issue that isn't solved through communication alone, go through the steps below. For minor issues, you can move through the steps fairly quickly. However, for emotionally-charged, difficult issues you should move through the steps slowly and deliberately.

1. Find an appropriate time and setting to discuss the issue (*Ecclesiastes 3:1*).
2. Decide what issue is going to be discussed.
3. Define the type of conflict – solvable or perpetual.
4. Define the problem clearly from both points of view.
5. State what you can agree on.
6. Brainstorm together for possible solutions.
7. Summarize, compromise, and agree upon a plan of action to try.
8. Pray to God for help to take the necessary steps and to make progress.
9. Identify a time to meet together again to evaluate your progress.
10. If you continue to have difficulty or cannot find a way to solve the issues on your own, seek counsel from an elder, minister, mentor, or counselor. *Proverbs 12:15* says, "*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.*"

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III. COUPLE QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES.

A. Questions and issues for you to discuss.

1. When you were growing up, how was conflict handled in your family? How did your father and mother handle conflict?
2. When you are upset, are you more likely to want to solve the problem right away, or do you need time to think about it?
3. Do you think you are more likely to be a “Pursuer” or a “Distancer?” In our marriage what patterns do you think we should be guarding against?
4. How do you think *Ephesians 4:26* (“let not the sun go down upon your wrath”) applies to us as a couple?
5. Where do you fall on the continuum from “conflict avoidant” to “conflictual/argumentative”? What do you think this says about how we are likely to respond to conflict as a couple?
6. Are there any topics that you avoid bringing up because you are afraid they will cause a conflict or hurt my feelings? What needs to happen to make sure that these issues get worked through?
7. What types of things get your anger/tension level into the Red Zone? What do you do to calm down? How will you know what zone (Green, Yellow, or Red) you are in?
8. If you start to notice any of the eight types of destructive conflict in our relationship on a regular basis, how do you plan to respond?
9. If we were having trouble solving a problem, at what point do you think we should seek out counsel from someone else (elder, counselor, etc.)? Who would you be most likely to go to for help?
10. Can you promise me that you would agree to go to marital counseling with me if we needed it?
11. As the spiritual leader of the home, what responsibility do you think husbands have in making sure that marital conflicts and problems get dealt with? What is the wife’s responsibility?
12. How will you know if something is bothering you and that we need to talk?
13. Are there any other ground rules for good conflict resolution that you think we should add to the list?

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References:

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

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 3. *Gottman, Seven Principles*, 138.
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 9. *Ibid.*, 34.
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 12. Paul Hegstrom, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them: Breaking the Cycle of Physical and Emotional Abuse* (Kansas City, Beacon Hill Press, 1999).