

15 Suggestions for Constructive Conflict

When something happens to trigger a fight between marital partners, it is important to keep disagreement as constructive as possible by avoiding detrimental communication patterns.

1. Be specific when you introduce a gripe.
2. Don't just complain; no matter how specifically; ask for a reasonable change that will relieve the gripe.
3. Ask for and give feedback of the major points, to make sure you are heard, to assure your partner that you understand what he (or she) wants.
4. Confine yourself to one issue at a time. Otherwise, without professional guidance, you may skip back and forth, evading the hard ones.
5. Do not be glib or intolerant. Be open to your own feelings, and equally open to your partner's.
6. Always consider compromise. Remember, your partner's view of reality may be just as real as yours, even though it may differ. There are not many totally objective realities.
7. Do not allow counterdemands to enter the picture until the original demands are clearly understood, and there has been a clear-cut response to them.
8. Never assume that you know what your partner is thinking until you have checked out the assumption in plain language; or assume or predict how he (or she) will react, what he (or she) will accept or reject. Crystal-ball gazing is not constructive in relationships.
9. Don't mind rape. Don't correct a partner's statement of his (or her) feeling. Do not tell a partner what he (or she) should know or feel.
10. Never put labels on a partner. Don't call him (or her) names such as "neurotic", "child" or "coward." If you really believed he (or she) was incompetent or suffered from some basic flaw, you probably would not be with him (or her). Do not make sweeping labeling judgments about his (or her) feelings, especially about whether or not they are real or important.
11. Sarcasm is dirty fighting.
12. Forget the past and stay with the here and now. What either of you did last year or month or that morning is not as important as what you are doing and feeling right now. And the changes you ask cannot possibly be retroactive. Hurts, grievances, and irritations should be brought up at the very earliest moment, or the partner has the right to suspect they may have been saved carefully as weapons.
13. Do not overload your partner with grievances. To do so makes him (or her) feel hopeless and suggests that you have either been hoarding complaints or have not thought through what really troubles you.
14. Meditate. Take time to consult your real thoughts and feelings before speaking. Your surface reaction may mask something deeper and more important. Don't be afraid to close your eyes and think or pray.
15. Remember that there is never a single winner in an honest intimate fight. Both either win more intimacy, or lose it.

EXPLORATIONS: *Are there other suggestions you would add to this list? Which of the 15 suggestions do you think are most critical to constructive fighting?*

SOURCE: Excerpted from G.R. Bach and R. M. Deutsch (1974)