

10 Rules for Constructive Conflict¹

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“We’re all dysfunctional. So get over it!” says a bumper sticker that has become commonplace in some areas of the United States. Two steps to ongoing relationship growth and development are 1) to become aware of our own dysfunctions and 2) to root out and overcome as many of our dysfunctions as we can by gaining the knowledge and skills to build healthy relationships. Getting rid of many of our own dysfunctions so we don’t pass them on to our children is one of the greatest gifts and legacies we can leave them.

Helpful Information

Determining how we handle conflicts—whether constructively or destructively—is a good way to see how functional or dysfunctional we are acting in our relationships. Take a minute and complete the quiz below to see if you handle conflict in a constructive or destructive way. It will help you realize what you are already doing well and what skills you might still want to work on a little more.

10 Rules for Constructive Conflict Quiz

Answer *yes* or *no* in the **10 RULES QUIZ** below to see whether you are conflicting constructively.

1. *Do I attack, accuse, or blame others and put them on the defensive through the use of destructive conflict tactics like slamming doors, nagging, criticizing, mocking, mimicking, name-calling, sneering, rolling the eyes, or giving people the silent treatment?*
2. *Do I employ constructive conflict tactics like calming down, seeking to speak non-defensively, using a soft voice, calling “Time-Out” when I feel like I might use a destructive conflict tactic, seeking to achieve a compromise, or simply resolving the conflict by agreeing to disagree?*
3. *Do I soften the conflict by constructively focusing on feelings first (i.e., “This is how I feel when...”) and then moving on to the specific issue or complaint?*
4. *Do I focus on one specific issue at a time and seek to resolve it before moving on to another issue, so the conflict doesn’t degenerate into a mudslinging contest?*
5. *Can I identify patterns of destructive behavior and focus on the underlying root causes for these patterns?*



Figure 1. How do you handle conflicts? Credits: Image by Mark Jaroski-Biava. CC BY-SA 2.0. <http://flic.kr/p/5Synq>

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such as power and control, commitment, unmet needs, acceptance, appreciation, and integrity?

6. *Do I think win-win and understand that if one person loses the argument, then both people in the relationship lose?*
7. *Can I calm myself when I am feeling angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed and resist using destructive conflict tactics so that I can avoid saying things that are hurtful?*
8. *Can I calm my partner by speaking non-defensively, validating his or her perceptions and feelings, or using humor?*
9. *Do I “say what I mean” and “mean what I say” during a conflict while being respectful of the other person’s feelings and perceptions?*
10. *Do I seek to resolve the specific issue as soon as possible in order to avoid experiencing ongoing resentment, frustration, or hurt feelings?*

Things You Can Use

How did you do? Each question on the quiz corresponds with one of the *10 Rules for Constructive Conflict*. Becoming skilled at following the *10 Rules for Constructive Conflict* can make a big difference in any relationship.

10 Rules for Constructive Conflict

RULE 1: Refuse to Use Destructive Conflict Tactics

Becoming aware of the tactics we are using when we argue is the first step in the change process. According to John Gottman (1994a; 1994b), criticizing, showing contempt, being defensive, stonewalling, and speaking defensively are all destructive conflict tactics.

RULE 2: Choose to Gain the Skills to Conflict Constructively

Constructive conflict doesn’t just happen, it takes effort and skill development. Calming down, speaking non-defensively, validating our partner, and overlearning (i.e., constantly practicing and memorizing)—developing these skills are the most important lessons we can learn initially to help us resolve conflicts constructively (Gottman 1994a, 1994b).

RULE 3: Focus on Feelings, First, Then Move to the Specific Issue

This is an important part of learning to speak non-defensively. If we can soften the introduction of the complaint, there is a much higher probability that the issue can be discussed effectively, without defensiveness or stonewalling behavior from either party.

RULE 4: Focus on One Issue at a Time

In the heat of conflict, it is easy to bring up multiple issues without resolving any of them. This rule encourages taking a step back in the conflict to point out that another issue has just been advanced while the current issue has not yet been resolved. The new issue *must* be put on hold to prevent a destructive social and emotional mud-fight.

RULE 5: Identify the Patterns of Behavior that Reveal the Root Cause

A study of our patterns of conflict can reveal the truth or the root cause of our issues. If we continue to focus on the symptomatic patterns only, then the same conflicts will repeatedly occur. Gottman (1994a; 1994b) calls this destructive pattern the “negative cycle of reciprocity.” For example, if a partner becomes stressed and criticizes his/her companion, it may lead to his/her defensiveness, which, in turn, may lead to mutual contempt and withdrawal. Gottman has found that entering into this cycle occurs because of how a complaint or a specific issue is presented. Entering this negative cycle of communication may be due to a lack of constructive skills or any one of a myriad of power and control issues.

RULE 6: Think Win-Win

This principle has been popularized by many scholars, and it is the crucial *mindset* we must take with us into conflict resolution. If we can think win-win during an argument, it is easier to avoid speaking defensively, attacking through criticism and contempt, becoming defensive, or backing our partner into a corner by giving ultimatums.

RULE 7: Learn to Calm Yourself

How we seek to calm and talk to ourselves during conflict is vital to our success or failure. Forcing ourselves to relax, to calm down, to call “Time-Out,” to think positively about our partner, etc., can help reduce the negative stress-maintaining thought, emotion, and behavior patterns that are destructive during conflict.

RULE 8: Learn to Calm Your Partner

Learning to employ a soft voice, a smile, the use of humor, or to speak non-defensively and to validate our partner’s needs, perceptions, and feelings are all a part of this important skill. This will help defuse negative conflict and guide communication into a healthy forum for constructive negotiation.

RULE 9: Be Congruent in Your Communication

If we can learn to “say what we mean” and “mean what we say” when we communicate and conflict (i.e., be congruent) while remaining respectful of the other person’s feelings

and perceptions, then we can avoid stuffing our feelings, ongoing resentment, passive-aggressive behavior, and gunnysacking (i.e., keeping our concerns and complaints silent while throwing them into a large imaginary gunnysack that over time becomes heavier and heavier and is then more difficult to empty).

RULE 10: Seek Closure and Resolution of the Specific Issue ASAP

One common myth about conflict is that we should never go to bed angry at each other. (We simply can't give up that much sleep!) Often, the best method for constructive conflict is for both partners to get some needed rest that will allow them to calm down and to approach the conflict in a more skilled manner. The sooner the conflict can be resolved, however, the more likely it is that destructive tactics like criticism, contempt, "gunnysacking," passive-aggressive behavior, stonewalling, and ongoing resentment will not be used and cause damage during the conflict. When "Time-Out" is called, it is important to negotiate a time in the near future when the discussion of the specific issue will be resumed, resolved, or defused. Some problems may never be resolved and it is, therefore, perfectly acceptable to agree to disagree.

Following the Rules

Tracking how we are doing at regularly following the *10 Rules for Constructive Conflict* is an important way to measure how functional we are in our relationships. **Table 1** provides a way to do just that. After each conflict you experience, take a minute and put a "+" or a "-" next to each rule as you track how well you followed them during the conflict. It may be that you notice that how you follow

these rules changes based upon the different situations you find yourself in and the various people you may conflict with. Put this sheet up on the refrigerator door as a reminder of how you are doing. When you become better at consistently conflicting constructively (say these last three words three times fast!), you can then help others learn how to conflict constructively. Good luck!

Helpful Websites

Conflict Management and Resolution: Can We Agree? – <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy047>
National Health Marriage Resource Center – <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/>
Stronger Marriages – <http://strongermarriage.org>

References

This document was synthesized and adapted from research and expert knowledge from many different scholars and resources. Several of these sources include the following:

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- Gottman, J. 1994a. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail...and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York, NY: Fireside-Simon & Schuster.
- Gottman, J.M. 1994b. *What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship between Marital Process and Marital Outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
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Table 1. Week: ____ Frequency of Target Behaviors for Constructive Conflict

Target Behavior	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Totals
1. Refuse to use destructive conflict tactics.								
2. Use constructive conflict tactics								
3. Feelings first, then move to the issue.								
4. One issue at a time.								
5. Identify the root cause.								
6. Think win-win.								
7. Calm yourself.								
8. Calm your partner.								
9. Be congruent.								
10. Resolve the issue ASAP.								