



Couple Distress

Conflict is a normal part of being a couple. However, all of us need to feel loved, understood, and respected by the people we are close to, and conflict in these relationships can undermine our emotional security. What makes a difference is how conflict is handled. Couples who resolve conflicts constructively strengthen their relationships over time by improving intimacy and trust. Constructive strategies include stating opinions and needs clearly and calmly, and listening to and attempting to understand the partner's point of view.

Conflict becomes destructive when needs are not expressed to partners or when they are expressed in ways that criticize, blame, or belittle the partner. For instance, a woman who is hurt that her husband plays golf every weekend instead of spending time with her may accuse him of "selfishness" instead of expressing how lonely and hurt she feels. When a couple is distressed, typically one partner takes the position of not saying how they feel while the other partner takes the position of blaming and criticizing. This pattern, which is very common in distressed relationships, tends to get worse over time. These couples often feel trapped in fights that are never resolved.

Couples who experience ongoing conflict can become aggressive with one another, and may push, slap, or hit each other during arguments. Other couples handle conflict by avoiding it. Avoiding conflict also damages relationships because partners become increasingly distant from one another. Although researchers do not know why some couples become distressed and others don't, most agree that the ways couples resolve conflicts and provide emotional support to one another are critical.

The impact of conflict on individuals and families is enormous. Couples who repeatedly have conflicts are at risk for a variety of emotional problems, notably alcohol abuse and depression. Distressed couples do not cope well with life's inevitable stress, such as unemployment or illness, and they run into difficulty when they go through normal changes like the birth of a child. Children who witness repeated conflict between their parents also are at risk for emotional and behavioural problems. One of the most serious impacts of relationship conflict is divorce. The most common reason given for divorcing is feeling unloved.

How can psychology help?

Three kinds of psychological treatments have been shown to help distressed couples.

Behavioural Couple Therapy (BCT) involves coaching couples to fight in ways that resolve conflicts. Couples are encouraged to show more positive behaviour toward one another, and to solve problems through constructive communication. Research shows most couples are more satisfied with their relationships by the end of treatment, and 35% are no longer distressed. However, many couples deteriorate again over the following months. Researchers are now working to improve this therapy so that more couples keep the gains that they made during treatment.

Cognitive-Behavioural Couple Therapy (CBCT) helps couples change the negative ways they think about their partners. While this treatment does not seem to be quite as effective as BCT at the end of treatment, couples continue to improve after treatment.

Emotionally-Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) tackles the frustrated emotional needs underlying relationship distress. Instead of trying to solve problems, the health professional helps the partners to talk about their needs to feel loved and important in ways that promote compassion and new ways of behaving toward one another. At the end of treatment, the majority of these couples have improved, and 70% are no longer distressed. One study also showed that couples who had worked with emotionally-focused therapy remained satisfied with their marriages two years later.

Unfortunately, few couples seek psychological treatment before divorce, at which time it is often too late. As a result, programs for relationship enrichment and prevention of conflict have been developed. These programs focus on improving communication and teaching conflict resolution skills to couples before they are in trouble. Often they are offered to groups over a weekend or series of weeks. While these programs are effective in the short-term, research shows that couples often have difficulty maintaining these new skills once the program ends.