

# Conflict Resolution Protocol for Couples

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Partners in intimate relationships routinely become gridlocked in their conflict with one another. By adhering to the following steps and norms, partners can significantly reduce their gridlock and conflict in their arguments. There are three essential steps to this protocol:

## Step 1: Show Appreciation

Begin your conversation with a review of what's been going right. For example, identify several things your partner did this past week that you appreciated.

## Step 2: Maintain One Speaker/One Listener

For effective conflict resolution to take place, both partners must adhere to the norm that there can only be one Speaker and one Listener at a time. The partner who has a compliant or problem to discuss becomes the Speaker. As the Speaker, this partner maintains the floor for as long as it takes to express his or her perspective and feelings about a particular issue. When one partner is speaking, the other partner must confine him or herself to listening, and the roles don't reverse until the Speaker is satisfied that he or she is understood by the Listener.

## Step 3: Negotiate Differences

This phase begins when each partner is satisfied that he or she has been heard and understood in regard to the issue or issues being discussed. Once this takes place, take the following steps:

- Start by identifying your core needs to ensure that you—and your partner—are clear on what your core concerns are.
- Next, specify any aspect of your position that you can modify or be flexible about in securing your core needs.
- Go back and forth to weave each other's area's of compromise into a resolution that you can both accept.

## Key Norms

Here are some key norms for Speakers and Listeners:

- The Speaker's responsibility is to make a conscientious effort to discuss the problem without triggering emotional flooding in the Listener. The Speaker's role is to practice awareness, tolerance, and transform his or her criticisms into wishes and positive needs. In doing so, here are the relevant guidelines:
  1. Stick to "I" statements and your own experience of the situation.
  2. Stay on topic and avoid criticism and personality analysis.

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\*This approach to conflict resolution is adapted from John Gottman's *What Makes Love Last?*, 2013, Simon & Schuster.

3. Be sensitive to your partner's triggers and vulnerabilities.
  4. Acknowledge your partner's perspective as just as valid.
  5. State what you want in the affirmative rather than in the negative, i.e., translate your concerns into statements of what you would like.
- The Listener's responsibility is to try to appreciate the emotional experience of the Listener. The Listener's role is to provide understanding, non-defensive reactions, and empathy. In doing so, here are the relevant guidelines: Avoid defensiveness and disputing the facts of the situation.
    1. Don't try to solve your partner's problems.
    2. Work at staying calm and soothing your upsetting reactions.
    3. Focus on attuning to your partner's hurt feelings.
    4. Let your partner know that you understand what he or she is feeling.
  - Here are some key norms for both parties in this phase of the discussion:
    1. Offer Assurance—remind your partner that just because you might have different priorities, you want to see if you can work out something out.
    2. Give Equal Regard—let your partner know that your willingness to take into consideration his or her feelings just as much as your own.
    3. Accept Influence—find those parts of the other partner's position that you understand and indicate your willingness to find agreement.