



How to Keep a Relationship Strong

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One of the first thoughts that secretly comes to mind when we realize we're in a great relationship is, "I'm so *happy* I'm not single anymore!" But it seems like that euphoria can be challenged when conflicts, even differences of opinions inevitably arise. So how do you keep a relationship strong and refrain from turning on your mental panic attack button when an argument ensues? The first step is to get over the notion that arguments and conflicts never happen in good relationships. Every healthy relationship will have its share of conflicts, disagreements and arguments – and that's normal!

To strengthen your relationship, it is important to learn how to resolve issues in a manner that establishes open communication and encourages closeness. Saying things that aren't so easily taken back is the result of poor emotional connection. Conflicts then serve as a platform for bottled up words to come tumbling out. Learning to express negative feelings and thoughts *in the moment* in a clear and respectful manner is vital to prevent future resentment.

The first step to healthy conflict resolution is identifying impediments. Overall, the biggest roadblock is attitude. If unresolved anger and resentment are held onto, attitudes are greatly affected. If you do not practice forgiveness, you'll never be able to maintain the open, caring attitude needed for genuine resolution.

Timing is everything in conflict resolution. Do not give in to the impulse to blurt out the first thing that comes to mind when you are angry. Calm down and then address the problem. Real communication can only take place when genuine feelings and honest thoughts are expressed.

The goal in understanding communication styles is to reach a comfort level when expressing positive and negative emotions. Each person is receptive to information, ideas, criticism, and praise in a certain form. The idea is to find the mode best suited for you. The challenge is learning to hear what is being said, regardless of past filters from former relationship and life experiences. By recognizing these barriers in communication, you can stop recreating the past in the present.

The following are suggestions for conflict resolution, which will lead to strengthening your relationship long-term:

- **Agree to reach a resolution.** Many people take a fight-or-flight approach to conflict, sometimes only to make our point stick. Resolution is defined as both parties compromising to reach a solution. It is not about one person getting his or her way and the other person caving in to manipulation or feeling defeated.

- *Explore your feelings.* Why are you so upset? Investigate your reaction and see if you are responding to the present situation or reliving a past hurtful event.
- *Identify what you want.* Speak up. See what can work out for a mutually satisfying resolution. You cannot receive what you want if you don't have the courage to ask for it. Remember, you love each other and all relationships are driven by feelings. You both want to feel good as a couple, so keep that in mind as you express your desires.
- *Generate options and possible solutions.* Be willing to back up requests with a mutually satisfying solution. Sometimes we dismiss a new way of doing things simply because we're opposed to change.
- *Choose mutual action.* Resolving conflict does not mean taking on more responsibility simply because it is easier than arguing. A relationship is a joint effort. If one person ends up being responsible for harmony, resentment builds and the relationship breaks down.
- *Evaluate the outcome.* If the first solution doesn't work, don't be afraid to revisit the issue and make changes. Many times what seems doable in theory is flawed in reality.