



CONFLICT

What Do Successful Couples Do?

■ by Steve Augustus, MA, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor

Conflict is a reality in any relationship. We actually do conflict in specific ways, but may not recognize our partner's style. When our conflict styles mismatch, we don't just argue about an issue, we also argue about *the way* our mate is arguing about the issue.

Conflict Avoider: Doesn't like fighting or arguing. Anger may feel too unsafe. They prefer to just hear what the complaint is and drop the subject if it's brought up at all. "Let's just get along and be happy."

Conflict Validator: Wants to talk it all out. Needs to feel understood and to understand. Seeks security of a strong connection. "Please talk to me about this."

Conflict Volatile: Can be very confrontational and "in your face" when upset showing the full force of the emotion as well. Then after venting they can quickly calm down, move on and forget anything went wrong in the first place. "I got a BIG problem with you and I'm gonna get this off my chest!!"

Couples who share the same conflict style have marriages that tend to be stable and happy. Mismatches between couples' conflict styles are shown to predict marital discord and lead to a "Pursuer-Distancer" cycle between the couple, leading to a high rate of divorce in this group. The Volatile/Avoider couple has the worst of the "Pursuer-Distancer" dynamic. Mismatches are not necessarily doomed but changes must take place for them to flourish.



Marriage Tip: Soft Startup | Positive Emotions | Accept Influence | Low-intensity negativity

What do successful couples do?

- They use soft startup when raising a complaint so as not to trigger defensiveness (women seem to play a stronger role here since 80% of the time women bring up relationship issues first according to research).
- They use much positive affect (emotions) during the conflict to keep things from escalating negatively.
- They accept influence from their partner rather than batting it back with a counter complaint (men play a stronger role here according to research).
- Not only do successful couples repair successfully after fights, they preemptively repair to avoid fights from becoming high-intensity negativity. Low-intensity negativity is easier to turn around and according to the research men help when they lead in this effort.

According to research, successful happy couples only resolve 31% of their conflict issues. What they do with the other 69% is enter into dialog with each other. What mattered most in dialoging is that couples show lots of positive emotion and only low-intensity negativity. They develop a culture of acceptance of each other for their differences, even humor about the issues, and willingness to cope. ■



Steve Augustus, MA, LCPC enjoys working with couples in our Orland Park & South Holland, IL locations.

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