

10 Essential Skills for Navigating Conflict

Click [here](#) to listen to the *Reimagining Love* podcast series that accompanies this worksheet.

	Skill	Description	Exercise
1	Understanding Your Conflict Template	Reflect on how the big people handled disagreement, frustration, and disappointment when you were little.	<p>Complete the following (and discuss with your partner if you are in a relationship):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When I was little, I saw the big people in my home handle conflict by... - When I was little and I did something that upset the big people in my home, they responded to my behavior by... <p>Which of the following behaviors do you tend to move into during conflict:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Fight</i>: feels like anger and outrage and looks like getting loud - <i>Flight</i>: feels like fear and looks like walking away, refusing to engage - <i>Freeze</i>: feels like overwhelm and looks like going numb, silent - <i>Fawn</i>: feels like anxiety and looks like quick apologies, agreeing with the other person, accommodating.
2	Distinguishing Between the Lyrics & the Music	<p>Every conflict has both lyrics and music.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Lyrics</i>: The topic, the theme, the content - <i>Music</i>: The choreography, the form, the process. 	<p><i>Lyrics</i>: Which of the following topics tends to be most problematic, tricky, or tender for you and your partner? Sex, money, in-laws/extended family, parenting, domestic labor/chores</p> <p><i>Music</i>: Which of the following choreographies captures your dynamic with your partner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pursue/Pursue - Pursue/Distance - Distance/Distance

3	Separating Problem-Discussion from Problem-Solution	Research has found that a full 69% of problems are not solvable (Gottman), so it's vital to be able to use active listening.	<p>Make an agreement that you will initially focus on just attempting to understand each other's perspectives before, or instead of, trying to fix the problem or eliminate the difference.</p> <p>Commit to listening to understand rather than listening to respond (which tends to be our default setting).</p>
4	Adding Structure to Activate Empathy	Conversation involves moving between speaking and listening. Each role has its own unique challenges and responsibilities. Creating rituals for moving intentionally and slowly between these roles can reduce escalation and increase understanding.	<p>Practice the Speaker-Listener technique:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Choose an object- a pen, a rock, the remote. 2. Assign roles: one speaker and one listener. 3. The speaker holds the rock. They have the floor. The speaker talks a bit about their experience of the problem. Short sentences. "I" statements. Avoiding blame. Digestible bits. 4. After a few statements, the listener reflects back what they have heard. Not responding. Literally just reflecting back. "What I'm hearing you say is, X, Y, Z. Am I getting that right?" 5. The speaker either says, "Yes, that's it." Or, if the listener didn't get it right, the speaker can say something like, "You've got the first part right, but let me say the second part again because I don't think you quite understood." 6. The speaker tries again. The listener reflects back again, and checks to see if they've got it. 7. After a bit, call it 5-10 minutes, switch roles. When the listener becomes the speaker, they are now speaking about the problem from their perspective, and the listener is reflecting back.
5	Hating the Moment, Not the Person	Conflict is painful because it takes us out of connection with someone who matters tremendously to us.	<p>See what happens when you try:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being hard on the issue and soft on your partner. Explicitly convey your love, admiration, and respect- for their sake and your own! - Being upset about the disconnection <i>between you and your partner</i> rather than being upset <i>at your partner</i>.

6	Adopting a "We" Perspective	It is easy to get stuck in an adversarial position, and we need tools to shift away from a "me versus you" perspective and into a "you and me versus the problem" perspective.	<p>Rather than, "You did this to me," create a story that sounds more like this, "We get caught up in this pattern/cycle/dance. The more you do X, the more I do Y, and round and round we go!"</p> <p>See what happens if you try what Dr. Eli Finkel calls "The Marriage Hack."</p> <p>As you and your partner begin to escalate,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Press pause and step away. - Write about the conflict from the perspective of a neutral third party who has both of your best interests at heart.
7	Avoiding Intimacy-blocking Language	Certain language choices reflect how upset you are but also push your partner further away, guaranteeing that you will not be seen, heard, or understood.	<p>Resist the urge to use the following examples of intimacy-blocking language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Always and never - Name-calling and character assassination - Arguing that others agree with you - Guilt trips - Absolutes or "shoulds" - Kitchen sink <p>Celebrate like crazy when you opt instead for the intimacy-promoting language of Skill #8!</p>
8	Using Intimacy-promoting Language	Behind every criticism is an unmet need. We need to learn to verbalize our needs in a way that invites collaboration and connection... even if it makes us blush or stammer! Vulnerability is hard and beautiful.	<p>Practice making the following intimacy-promoting language choices that are more likely to bring your partner closer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I" statements - XYZ statement ("When you did X, in situation Y, I felt Z") - "The story I am telling myself is..." - Personalized requests - Criticism of someone's actions, not their character - Comments that stay on topic - Requests for change that are clear and specific

9	Offering Heartfelt Apologies	A vital Relational Self-Awareness question is, "What is the piece of this conflict that I can take accountability for and apologize for?" What is the kernel of truth in your partner's perspective? Identify this kernel of truth and own it completely.	<p>Practice making a heartfelt apology. Make sure you include the following elements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take responsibility: "I did X" 2. Name the impact: "My action hurt you" 3. Bear witness: Ask, "Can you tell me how you're feeling?" or ask "What was that like for you?" 4. Avoid "if": For example, don't say, "I'm sorry if I hurt you" 5. Avoid "but": For example, don't say, "But I didn't mean it." Generally speaking, anything you say after the but negates everything you said before the but. 6. Avoid passive voice: For example, don't say, "I'm sorry if you were offended." 7. Avoid cross-complaining: For example, don't say, "You did Y" 8. Offer an amends action or change: For example, say something like, "I wonder if this would help going forward." Make sure it's doable and that you can commit to it.
10	Forgiving and Looking Ahead	As Rabbi Kushner, author of <i>When Bad Things Happen to Good People</i> , says, "Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Can you forgive them and love them, because there aren't any perfect people around, and because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness?"	<p>Moving from conflict to connection requires both time and intention. Try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify something to do as a couple that is low risk, high comfort. Go get coffee. Run errands. Watch a show together. - Name the tenderness and tentativeness: "I'm glad we are going for a walk even if we feel like we're a little shaky still." - Reflect together on the process: What are you proud of about how you handled this frustrating experience with your partner? What are you proud of about how your partner handled this frustrating experience with you? What went better than it would have 6 months ago or 2 years ago or last week? What went better than it would have gone in your family of origin?