



## Building Strong Families

Life resources for health, wellness, finances, and positive relationships.

### 5 Tips for Constructive Conflict

Conflict is natural. Everyone experiences it in their relationships and daily lives. No one agrees on everything or gets along with each other all the time. Follow these five tips to help overcome conflict, work through negative feelings, and manage challenging situations in a healthy way.

#### 1) DON'T SEND DESTRUCTIVE MESSAGES

In the heat of the moment, destructive conflict can creep into disagreements. Always remember destructive messages will only make things worse, never better:

- **Criticism** involves attacking someone to portray yourself as being right and the other person as being wrong, often using statements such as "You always" or "You never." Statements with these phrases are rarely accurate and should be avoided.
- **Defensiveness** happens when you see yourself as the victim who is being attacked. You may think, "The problem isn't me, it's you!" Defensiveness may include making excuses, denying responsibility, and sarcasm. Although these reactions might be normal, defensiveness will keep you from being able to deal with the issue at hand because you are not open to suggestions or trying to understand the other person's perspective.
- **Contempt** involves attacking and intentionally putting another person down through name calling (such as saying fat, stupid, ugly, or lazy) or body language (such as sneering, eye rolling, curling upper lip, or rude gestures). Contempt is the most toxic and destructive way to try and deal with conflict.
- **Stonewalling** is the "whatever" moment in the relationship when one person stops caring and checks out by refusing to communicate.

Verbal, emotional or physical abuse is never part of healthy conflict management. To learn more, visit the National Domestic Violence Hotline, available 24/7, at [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org), call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), or text "START" to 88788.

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## 2) SOFTEN YOUR START-UP

If you have something important you want to talk about, don't start the conversation by immediately attacking the other person. Use a soft start-up to help the other person feel less defensive and more willing to talk. If you feel too angry to discuss something calmly, don't discuss it at all until you've calmed down. Here are some ways to soften your start-up:



- **Complain, don't blame.** No matter how wrong you feel the other person is, don't approach them with criticisms. Try saying, "It is frustrating when we forget to take the trash out on time. How can we remember to get it out in the future?" instead of "I can't believe you forgot to take the trash out again! You are so forgetful!"
- **Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You."** Start your sentences with "I" so you don't put the other person into a defensive position. Say, "I don't feel like you are listening right now," instead of "You're not listening to me."

## 3) SOOTHE YOURSELF

You don't have to get angry about your differences. You can calm yourself by using time-outs, speaking in a soft voice, speaking non-defensively, smiling, using appropriate humor, relaxing, or thinking about the positives in your situation.



## 4) COMPROMISE

You don't always have to have things your way. Take other people's preferences and opinions seriously, resist the urge to be defensive, and respectfully listen to others. Compromise is a two-way street; it is reasonable to expect others to consider your opinion and perspective as well.

## 5) ACCEPT AND FORGIVE

Individuals in healthy relationships accept differences and forgive each other when appropriate. Understand that no matter how many similarities are shared, you will have some difference of opinion. Choosing to be forgiving can strengthen the relationship. However, if someone has a pattern of saying hurtful things during an argument and expecting to be forgiven after, this may indicate a more serious issue.

Source: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families, *Strong Families: Tips for Healthy Conflict Management*



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