



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Relationship Distress

When does relationship conflict become relationship distress?

Conflict is a normal part of being a couple. However, all of us need to feel loved, understood, and respected by the people we are close to, and conflict in these relationships can undermine our emotional security. What makes the difference is how the conflict is handled. Couples who resolve conflicts constructively strengthen their relationships over time by improving intimacy and trust. Constructive strategies include stating opinions and needs clearly and calmly listening to and attempting to understand the partner’s point of view.

Conflict becomes destructive when needs are not expressed or when they are expressed in ways that criticize, blame, or belittle the partner. For instance, a woman who is hurt that her husband plays golf every weekend may accuse him of "selfishness" instead of expressing how lonely she feels when they are apart.

Although research does not provide a “one-size-fits-all” explanation for why certain couples are more vulnerable to distress than others, the critical nature of *how* couples resolve conflicts and provide emotional support to one another is widely agreed upon across the literature. However, there are several areas *besides* how couples handle conflict that have consistent support as factors that predict distress in relationships. For instance, various personal, social, economic, and environmental determinants of health (e.g., income status, job security, health status, education level, experiences of past discrimination), can act as external stressors that may exacerbate strains in the relationships. Individual differences, such as traits like neuroticism, may also impede relationship functioning.

When a couple is distressed, typically one partner takes the position of not saying how they feel while the other partner takes the position of blaming and criticizing. This pattern, which is very common in distressed relationships, tends to get worse over time. These couples often feel trapped in fights that are never resolved. Some couples may also handle conflict through means of avoidance. Avoiding conflict still damages relationships because partners become increasingly disengaged from one another.

Finally, couples who experience ongoing conflict can become aggressive with one another, and may push, slap, or hit each other during arguments. Importantly, other destructive forms of aggression include emotional and/or verbal harms, often manifesting as non-physical and control-oriented behaviour such as cyber aggression.

The impact of conflict on individuals and families is significant. Indeed, individuals who are repeatedly involved in relationship-related conflicts are at a higher risk for a variety of mental and physical health issues, notably depression, alcohol misuse, various illnesses, and increased mortality. They get sick more easily and die earlier than happily married couples.





Distressed couples do not cope well with life's inevitable stressors, and they may run into problems even when they go through normal changes, like the birth of a child. Children who witness repeated conflict between their parents also are at risk for emotional and behavioural problems. One of the most serious impacts of relationship conflict is divorce. The most common reason given for divorcing is infidelity, with a lack or loss of intimacy being a key driver of the infidelity. Of course, ongoing and unresolved conflict contributes to both relationship distress and loss of intimacy.

How can psychology help?

Three distinct forms of psychological treatment have been shown to help distressed couples.

Behavioural Marital Therapy (BMT) and Cognitive Behavioural Couple Therapy (CBCT) involve helping couples to communicate more effectively and to problem-solve in ways that resolve their conflicts. Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) tackles the unmet emotional needs underlying relationship distress. Instead of trying to solve problems, the couple therapist helps the partners to talk about their needs to feel loved and important to each other in ways that promote compassion and new ways of interacting.

Clinical trials of these therapies show that the majority of couples feel more satisfied with their marriages by the end of treatment. A few studies have also shown that the gains couples made in therapy are still evident two years later, or even that the couples' relationships continued to improve.

Unfortunately, few couples seek psychological treatment early enough. As a result, programs for relationship enrichment and the prevention of conflict have been developed. These programs focus on improving communication and teaching conflict resolution skills to couples before they are in trouble. Often, they are offered to groups over a weekend or series of weeks. Although these programs are effective in the short-term, research shows that couples often have difficulty maintaining these new skills once the program ends. 'Discernment Counselling', which is considered a brief intervention, may be one means of approaching these issues. Specifically, it helps couples to determine whether they wish to take steps toward divorce or to commit to working on the relationship for a set period of time.

Where do I go for more information?

- Couple relationships and cognitive-behavioural marital therapy can be found at <http://www.gottman.com>
- Emotion-Focused Therapy can be found at <http://iceeft.com/>
- Prevention and enrichment programs can be found at <http://www.smartmarriages.com>

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.





This fact sheet was originally prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Valerie E. Whiffen, Ph.D. R.Psych., Private Practice, Vancouver, BC in October 2009.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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