

# 9

## Managing Conflict

When we talk about managing conflict, we don't mean eliminating it. We don't even necessarily mean reducing it. In fact, sometimes it's better to increase it. It all depends on which type of conflict is involved. We're going to discuss different types of conflict in this chapter. To start out, let's define two major categories: destructive versus constructive conflict. "Constructive conflict." Doesn't that sound like an oxymoron? How can conflict be constructive? Doesn't conflict wreck relationships? Most of us are so conditioned by painful experience that we overlook the potential utility of conflict. Anger tends to get the same treatment. How can anger be a good thing? When it protects and helps the species to survive. Conflict can similarly protect and help our relationship to survive. We just need to know how to do it skillfully. The difference between constructive conflict and destructive conflict is like the difference between electricity and an atomic bomb.

We have to initiate conflict in certain situations if we want a vital relationship. If we settle for an emotionally distant relationship with our partner, then we can afford to be perpetually nice. Conflict and anger won't be necessary. Totally avoiding conflict will get us a peaceful and vapid relationship. If we want emotional closeness instead, then we'll have to pay for it with occasional discomfort. We'll have to use our anger in a disciplined way while we risk our partner's disapproval and correct the situation so that it doesn't perpetuate. This is the heavy lifting aspect of a vital relationship. It's tough work, but it keeps a relationship more balanced. Robust relationships aren't for wimps!

## **We have to initiate conflict in certain situations if we want a vital relationship.**

There are three types of situations for which conflict can be beneficial. They are:

1. **Conflict of Interest** – This occurs when one partner wants it one way and the other partner wants something different. For example, you want to go out for dinner and eat Chinese while your partner wants Italian. The choices may be mutually exclusive.
2. **Broken Agreement** – This occurs when one partner breaks a negotiated agreement with the other. For example, your partner agreed to pick up milk on the way home but forgot.
3. **Boundary Intrusion** – This occurs when one partner intrudes on some form of privacy, ownership, or personal prerogative of the other. For example, one partner gives a command to their partner instead of a respectful request.

Initiating conflict in these situations can help prevent a relationship from going downhill. If we don't negotiate conflicting interests, then we build up resentment and hedonic inhibition that can strangle our affection. If we don't confront broken agreements or boundary intrusions, then we accumulate relationship shame from our sense of subjugation. When we do risk conflict in these situations, we certainly need to use skill and tact in order to get positive benefits. Otherwise, we just get the all too familiar mess. The following discussion outlines some useful strategies that can help.

### **Negotiating Conflict of Interest**

We need to exercise the hedonic part of our personality if we want to keep it alive in a relationship. When we have a partner doing the same thing, we're going to naturally bump up against them. There's a natural friction when two partners are robustly living together. If we do have the courage

to openly express what we really want, then the conflict can go in one of two directions. We've already mapped one direction when we previously discussed the concept of responsible capitulation. Sometimes it's important to yield to our partner when we're aware of a higher purpose. At other times, we need to hang tough and firmly negotiate. When we follow the second route, there are four principles to keep in mind. These principles are explained in a classic book on negotiation by Fisher and Ury titled *Getting to Yes*. I've modified them so that they can be applied to intimate relationships.

### **Principles for Tactful Negotiation**

1. **Focus on interests instead of positions.** The initial focus of negotiation should be about what each partner wants and not about each partner's rigid idea for a solution. By initially focusing on needs instead of solutions, there's more flexibility to create solutions that meet the needs of both partners.
2. **Separate your partner from the problem.** There are subtle ways to protect each partner's ego from shame during negotiations. When "the problem" is defined as not being the fault of either partner, then both partners can be less defensive and more creative.
3. **Negotiate objective standards of fairness.** Objective criteria in the real world can be used to define what's fair or equitable. One simple example would be: who was the last person to choose the restaurant for dining out? Objective criteria can protect both partners from fearing that they'll be victimized. Without objective criteria, the threat of shame is greater. One partner could perceive that the other partner is bullying him or her into submission and victimization.
4. **Create alternatives for mutual benefit.** Sometimes both partners can get their needs met if they think creatively. They can reconfigure the conflict in such a way that both get something in the end. Alternatively, one partner might "trade" a favor in a completely different area so that the final solution doesn't completely leave the other partner deprived. Shame of feeling victimized would again be averted.

## Focus on Interests Instead of Positions

The use of tact during negotiation can remove the specter of a possible humiliating defeat. When we don't have to fear shame, we can negotiate more flexibly and creatively. The principle about dealing with interests requires that we control our focus of negotiation. If we focus on our positions during a conflict, then we'll advocate our one proposed solution against our partner's solution. The problem is that our egos are attached to our proposals. With egos involved, we'll be afraid that our proposal will be found inferior. We're afraid of symbolic inferiority rendering us inflexible. If we deal with both partners' interests without bonding to one proposed solution, then we don't have to prove that we're smarter or more capable than our partner. We can think more creatively.

**When we don't have to fear shame,  
we can negotiate more flexibly and creatively.**

Here's an example of a conflict that I once had with my wife Helen. It illustrates the difference between positions and interests. We had our sailboat in a boat slip located at the mouth of a scenic harbor. The view was absolutely majestic. However, we could see the sailboat was less protected if a large storm ever blew down the river from the southwest. We figured that our thick dock lines could handle the large swells if that happened. One year, a tropical storm nearly wrecked the boat and proved us wrong. Two huge dock lines had broken and the remaining ones were nearly chafed through by the time the storm subsided. Helen and I started to negotiate about what to do.

When we first started negotiating a solution, Helen and I were negligent about using principles of tact. We both quickly staked out positions. She thought we should sell our original boat slip and relocate to a "hurricane hole." I felt an agony about her position. I had envisioned myself in my later years, writing books in the pilot house of our boat, looking out over the river and the waves crashing over the rock jetty. A hurricane-proof boat slip would wreck my dream. My position was that we should keep our boat slip and watch for storms. I figured we could have the boat hauled out of the water if one approached. Helen argued that we couldn't always tell if a tropical storm might quickly generate off the coast. Back and forth we went. Tempers flared. These are good examples of battling positions. Each of us had our own idea for a solution. Each became like a sword with which we parried.

In this case, both of our interests were valid. Why have a boat if it doesn't give you a spiritual benefit. My interest was that I wanted to maximize my aesthetic enjoyment during my senior years. My wife also had a valid interest. What good is a boat if it's sunk? Helen was more interested in safety and protection. I was more interested in the aesthetics. Our interests were weighted in different directions. We eventually got around to addressing both of our concerns with two boat slips. We had another spare investment boat slip which we would sell and use the proceeds to purchase a safe slip in the hurricane hole. During tropical storm season (summer and fall) we would keep our boat in this safe slip where we would also have access to a pool. During the winter and spring months when tropical storms don't occur, we would keep the boat in our exposed scenic slip. The latter would be close to town and give us access to more friends during winter. We would rent out each unused slip during the months when we were in the alternate location. The final solution addressed both of our interests and we were satisfied. However, we would have resolved things more easily if we hadn't locked into opposing positions at the very beginning.

## **Separate Your Partner from the Problem**

This principle of tact is once again about protecting each partner against potential shame. If we let our partner know that we see "the problem" as being outside of them, then they won't be as afraid that they'll be attacked for being the obstacle. Which of these scenarios do you think would make your partner more defensive? In the first scenario you sit facing each other. You each present your respective ideas. In the second scenario, you sit side by side. You both face some visual aid such as a blackboard or piece of paper. You avoid using words such as "your" and "my" when referring to different perspectives. Instead, you refer to "the" different interests that you're trying to resolve. You both look at those interests drawn out on a blackboard or the piece of paper in front of you. It's a no-brainer as to which scenario would evoke greater defensiveness.

I remember a conversation I had with a man who drove a horse-drawn carriage. He said that if you ever want to know what a horse is thinking about, look in front of him. Most people don't know that emotions can operate on the same level as a dumb horse. Body language is extremely effective at evoking different emotions. For example, I have learned to stoop or kneel down to reduce my stature when talking with an angry paranoid client. This submissive posture doesn't aggravate the paranoid's already overblown fear. If you and your partner are in a conflict with scowls on your faces, you don't want to

stand and face each other. The horse brain part of your partner's mind will tell them that you're the problem. The situation gets worse if either of you label the other's ideas as being "dumb" or "stupid." It's much better to sit parallel and face an outline of the problem on a sheet of paper.

**A great way to separate your partner from the problem  
is to validate his or her interests at the start.**

A great way to separate your partner from the problem is to validate his or her interests at the start. It's not enough to understand the partner's interests. You need to communicate to them that you think their interests are important. A great way to do this is to elaborate their concerns with feeling. When you do this, it's a bit like acting. You passionately advocate their interests as if they're your own. For example, let's use the previously discussed boat-slip conflict that I had with my wife. Suppose I had said the following:

"Dear, we have to get this boat totally safe. She's a once in a lifetime investment and we'll never be able to replace her if she gets wrecked. The insurance would never pay what she's really worth. And these tropical storms are so unpredictable. They can blow up off the coast in almost no time. Remember Hurricane Charlie? That blew up in 24 hours. Whatever we come up with as a system to protect her, it has to be reliable and most important it has to be FAST!"

In this hypothetical conversation, my wife probably would have assumed that I didn't view her as the problem. I would have articulated the problem in a way that would have kept it separate from her. My passionate emphasis would have been disarming. She wouldn't have needed to express as much of her emotion since I had already emphasized the importance of her concerns.

## Negotiate Objective Standards of Fairness

You can think of this principle as being a close cousin of separating the person from the problem. It's another way of protecting egos by making conflicts less personal. If we don't use objective standards for determining fairness or truth, then we'll be afraid of being subjugated to our partner's will. That's the great fear: that our partner's desires will be treated as being more important than our own. If our partner's force of will were to prevail over ours, then we'd feel shame. Our subjugation would tell our unconscious that we're less important. What a shameful position! Our mind rebels at this specter and we become more defensive.

**The great fear is that our partner's desires will be treated as being more important than our own.**

Objective criteria involve real world data that are independent of anyone's will. For example, imagine two partners who are arguing about whether they have the money to buy a larger house. They might use bank records from the previous six months to calculate realistic figures for a budget. They might also agree to use a friend who is a realtor and who might give them objective advice about the parameters of any prospective purchase.

Objective criteria might be as simple as remembering which partner had the last choice. If you remind your partner that she was the last one to choose a restaurant, then you're using an objective criterion. Turn taking is a factual standard that doesn't rely on force of will. More complex decisions might involve getting a neutral expert involved. My wife and I had to use one to resolve a particularly tough dispute. She operated a speech pathology clinic next door to my psychological practice. I had designed the financial and billing program for both corporations. My wife had a favorite employee who had worked for her a long time, and she wanted to give her a raise. I was appalled when I saw what she started paying the employee. I didn't see how she could afford it. I wouldn't ordinarily protest what my wife does in her own business. It's her business, not mine. However, if she was mistakenly setting up a welfare system that would result in a perpetual loss, then I felt I had to demand more accountability. I showed her calculations from her database that indicated her employee was being paid more money per

collected dollar than she was. It was no use. My wife said that I was biased and could make MY financial programs say anything I wanted. I refused to drop it.

I asked my wife to choose any financial expert she could trust to act as a mediator. She chose our own CPA who has a lot of corporate experience. I sent my calculations to him and we scheduled a meeting for all three of us. When we finally met, I asked him if my costing model was appropriate. He replied that if there was a better model, he didn't know what it would be. After a few minutes of looking over the calculations, he looked up at Helen and exclaimed: "They're eating off of your plate!" He then described how it was unfair that the risk-taking proprietor (my wife) was being paid less per dollar collected than her employees. Afterwards, when we were walking out the front door, Helen turned and said: "I could hear it from him. I couldn't hear it from you." Even in a good relationship, objective criteria can sometimes be trusted more than a possibly biased partner.

## **Create Alternatives for Mutual Benefit**

When resolving conflict, it's often possible to find a solution that gives something good to both partners. Suppose Sue wants Ed to come with her to her family's reunion in Minnesota. Ed happens to hate these types of affairs. He doesn't like her family, and he doesn't like large parties or groups. Her family had recently visited them and stayed for several days. He figures he's reached his yearly quota and the end of his tolerance. Sue is in agony at Ed's resistance because this is a once in a lifetime occasion arranged around her parents' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. What to do? One solution is to sweeten the deal for Ed by reconfiguring the trip. Sue knows that Ed's passion is fishing. She proposes that they lengthen their trip another three days so that after the anniversary, Ed can drive to nearby Lake Oshkobe to fish its waters that are thick with big muskellunge. He can take a room in the nearby town and fish, while Sue spends an extra day with her parents. Then Sue can drive up on the last day to join Ed before returning home.

The preceding example shows how a "win-win" can sometimes be arranged from a conflict of interest. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that this is always the case. Sometimes, circumstances won't allow it. Imagine that Beth is in genetic research and Mike is in business. Beth has just won acceptance to do ground-breaking research on the genetic engineering of corn. The problem is that the job is in Kansas and they live in Boston. Mike, who loves the night life around Boston, is not enthused about "spending their next four years in the middle of corn fields." This kind of dilemma is actually fairly

common with the increasing mobility of the work force and double-income families. One partner may get an occupational breakthrough in a new city that holds little occupational promise to their partner. What to do?

In Beth and Mike's case, they decide to do a horse-trade. Mike doesn't make the common mistake of assuming that Beth will restore equity in the future through self-sacrifice. He's smart enough to know that the deal needs to be struck **now**. He's also smart enough to know that he needs to help Beth make her breakthrough. He's willing to take the big hit now of living where he loathes, but he wants to make a trade. He'll get a part-time job in Kansas to help support the family, but he wants to use the rest of his time to get an MBA. He wants Beth to agree that after the grant is finished, **he'll** pick the next place to live. It will be somewhere that can advance his business background...perhaps New York. She might have to teach for four years while he beefs up his business resume.

Most people don't think creatively enough to do trades. Instead, they think only within the confines of the particular situation. It's uncommon to think about doing transactions in two dimensions at once. However, it's extremely beneficial to prevent one partner from feeling the victim while their partner gets a favorable outcome. Here are some examples of creative horse-trading between partners.

**Partner A:** Wants to buy a car that she likes. She will be the main driver. Her partner hates the car.

**Partner B:** Will agree to let his partner get the car if she will go camping with him for their vacation instead of going to the beach like they usually do.

**Partner A:** Wants his partner to start participating in a structured smoking cessation program. Wants her to stay in a treatment group for a year to ensure her abstinence.

**Partner B:** Will agree to go to treatment and the group if her partner agrees to take salsa dancing lessons with her and join a dance group.

**Partner A:** Wants to get a poodle.

**Partner B:** Will agree to allow the poodle if he never has to walk it and if she will agree to help support his training for a pilot's license.

**Partner A:** Wants to buy a motorcycle from joint funds.

**Partner B:** Will agree to the motorcycle if her partner first builds her the screened-in porch that she's always wanted.

**Partner A:** Wants to get a horse.

**Partner B:** Will agree to the horse if his partner will agree to the country club golf membership he's been wanting.

**Partner A:** This one's for you. Think of something you want that requires your partner's cooperation but that they've been opposing.

**Partner B:** Now think of some things that you partner badly wants. Is there any trade that you would be willing to offer?

You may notice that sex doesn't show up anywhere among the preceding examples. That's because trading sex is a bad idea unless you want to be a secret prostitute. Many people are. We'll be discussing this sad phenomenon in another chapter. For now, let's just say that it's injurious to make sex a commodity. If you do, you generate shame within yourself. You don't want to trade sex any more than you'd commit to telling your spouse you love them every time they empty the trash. You'd be training your emotional expression to become a means to an end as well as a lie. Don't do it.

**It's injurious to trade with sex.**

## **Negotiating Different Kinds of Wants**

Earlier in our discussion, the point was made that there's a difference between wanting lusty sex versus wanting to get off a hot stove that's burning your butt. We use the word "want" in both instances as if the motivation were the same. It's not. Avoidance and escape aren't the same as seeking enjoyment, yet we use the word "want" for each. The English language has some serious deficiencies.

If we want to service our autonomy by negotiating with our partner, then it's important to know that hedonic interests are more important to negotiate than dislikes. There are many people who think they have no problem expressing what they want to their partner. If you ask them for examples, they may

say something like, “I tell him all the time that I want him to stop coming home late.” Or perhaps, “I want her to not interrupt me when she can see I’m working on the computer.” These are examples of non-hedonic desires that relate more to removing something that’s distasteful. Unfortunately, there are many people who stay primarily on the negative side of the street. Their unconscious won’t let them cross over to even thinking about enjoyable goals. If all they do is negotiate for removal of things that they dislike, then their core self won’t be strengthened. They’ll be on their way to eventually numbing out.

Negotiating conflict of interest works best when we negotiate for our positive desires. If you’re in a committed relationship, then it would be a good idea to ask yourself the following questions: “Do I actively negotiate with my partner when we’re determining our agenda for pursuing enjoyment? Does our common agenda for enjoyment include many of my ideas? Did half of it originally come from me?” These questions can help you determine whether hedonic inhibition or fear of conflict has a strangle hold on your oxygen supply.

## **Confronting Broken Agreements**

None of us have a perfect memory. We all sometimes break agreements because we forget to follow through or may even have forgotten the original deal. We forget to stop by the store to pick up the milk that we agreed to get on our way home. We forget that we agreed to keep our voice low when we’re in a heated conflict. We may also appear to break an agreement because the deal wasn’t clearly communicated in the first place. Many people will throw a proposal at their partner and then erroneously assume that their partner’s acquiescence means that they’ve made a commitment. It’s rare that a partner knowingly breaks an agreement merely because of a sociopathic personality.

Broken agreements need to be confronted for several reasons. One reason is that you don’t want to accumulate shame and resentment by perceiving yourself to be the victim. You can reduce this kind of shame when you confront. However, there’s a more important reason to confront broken agreements. If left unrepaired, they’ll fracture the basic safety of your relationship. Everything will go downhill. You need to confront broken agreements so that a) you can clarify if there was an original miscommunication, b) your partner can come up with a plan for improving compliance in the future, or c) you can find out if you’re truly in bed with a sociopath. Most of the time, you will be working with your partner toward improved compliance.

Most people don't know how to confront broken agreements effectively. The classic mistake made by most people is to accuse their partner in a way designed to provoke humiliation and shame: "You forgot the milk, didn't you? Can't you remember anything or do you only think about yourself all the time?" This kind of shaming accusation is usually met with stiff resistance or avoidant withdrawal. Rarely does it accomplish anything positive.

The best strategy for confronting a broken agreement is to get the other person to do the work. Instead of outright accusation, it's better to induce the partner to sweat his own inconsistency. If you lay out the whole case of how he messed up, then he can't "own" any part of the process. There's nothing left that to feel good about. If you're smart and use some tact, you can get him to declare his inconsistency before you do. That way, they'll be much more motivated to make plans to keep the agreement in the future.

There are four steps to effectively confront broken agreements:

- 1) **Ask your partner about what he remembers about the original agreement.** This can be as simple as "Do you remember us discussing the car registration? What did you agree to do?" Sometimes it's necessary to provide details to help your partner jog their memory. "Remember? We were standing in the kitchen and I said this and then you said that and then I made such and such a point, etc." If you can't get him to remember any agreement, then you're dead in the water. You won't be able to do any constructive confrontation, and you might as well drop the matter. If you get many irretrievable agreements, then you will need to start recording agreements between the two of you. Either that or ask your spouse to get a neuropsychological exam.
- 2) **Ask your partner about what he actually did.** "Did you do it in time to avoid the late fee like we discussed?"
- 3) **Ask your partner to reconcile #1 and #2.** "What gives? How come you agreed to do it but it's not done?" Your goal here is to get your partner to sweat the inconsistency. You want him to explain what happened. This is where he can start taking responsibility for the mistake. Most people will do this if you haven't hurled an angry accusation. Unfortunately, some people are so shame-bound that they can't admit mistakes. If your partner is a total narcissist then he might not admit his mistake, no matter how good your tact is.

- 4) **Ask your partner when you can expect a correction plan**. This is a step that's frequently bungled. When the mistake is a one-of-a-kind occurrence, then it's probably OK to let the matter go after your partner admits regret. However, if the same agreement is repeatedly broken over time, a more deliberate confrontation is in order. Imagine the following situation involving a husband who forgot to take out the recycling bin before its scheduled pick-up time. He has already apologized to his wife. She replies:

“John, I’m not interested in an apology. That’s not going to work because it obviously hasn’t worked all the times before when you’ve forgotten. This must be the fifth time you’ve forgotten. Each time you apologize. I don’t want any more apologies. They don’t work. I want to know what you’re going to do differently so that you don’t have to rely so much on your terrible memory. I want you to think up a better plan and tell it to me tonight or tomorrow at dinner. Better yet, why don’t you tell me when you think you can give me your plan?”

This is an effective confrontation because it’s practical. The wife is demanding that her husband take responsibility for solving the problem long term. She’s not settling for an apology without a plan. She’s not being manipulated with the usual “I’m sorry” ritual.

## **The Problem with “I’m Sorry”**

Saying “I’m sorry” is a perfunctory social ritual that’s good for soothing the feelings of an injured partner. It’s based on the premise that the apologizing partner is really expressing regret and empathy. These emotions help the injured partner to feel less hurt and to realize that her feelings and needs do matter. This is useful when there’s a one time transgression like stepping on your partner’s toe or making a simple mistake. A one time occurrence doesn’t need further correction. In this case, a simple “I’m sorry” will do.

The problem with “I’m sorry” is that it’s a distraction when it’s often used in the context of repetitive or systematic transgressions. For example, your partner comes home an hour late for dinner for the fourth time in a month. Another example is that you’ve just caught your partner lying again about

something he said he would do, but didn't. In these situations, many people will profusely apologize with "I'm sorry." They'll also say it will never happen again and will beg for forgiveness. But what's really going on? Where's their attention focused? It doesn't take much thought to realize that the focus is on manipulating his partner's emotions by ego posturing. It's as if he's saying, "I'm self-flagellating and abasing myself so low that you should show mercy and forgive me." The focus really isn't on fixing future problems. It's on placating his partner so that he can escape disapproval. He's not taking responsibility because he's distracted by his effort to manipulate. What's the alternative? Imagine that the late arriving husband says something like the following:

"Dear, I know I really messed up. I owe you more than a simple apology because it's happening too often. I mean it's what?...the fourth time this month? It's getting ridiculous! I've been thinking that I have to come up with some sort of system to help my leaky brain so that this doesn't happen again. I really don't like doing this to you. It's just that I get so caught up with the stress and crises at work that I forget about everything else. Then, when I realize that I'm already late, I'm too afraid to call because I'm already feeling guilty and I know that you're going to be furious with me. But I've got to come up with a better way of dealing with it. I'm going to ask that you let me take a few hours to think about what I can do differently. I'll come up with some plan to help me wake up at work and call you when I'm obviously going to be late. I can't prevent having to come home late sometimes, but at least I should be able to call you ahead of time when that happens. Can we talk about it at bedtime tonight?"

Later that night, the husband tells the wife that he'll set his watch to sound an alarm at 4:30pm every day. That will be his signal to remind him to call his wife if he sees that he's managing some crisis that won't let him get home on time. It may or may not work, but it's a reasonable plan to try.

This example illustrates two important differences from the "I'm sorry" ritual. First, there's no covert seeking of forgiveness! There's an expression of regret, but that regret is expressed as a statement without the ego posturing manipulation for forgiveness. The husband is saying "I really don't like what I'm doing to you." He's also saying that he owes his wife some sort of reasonable plan for correction. These statements express regret but the main focus is not on manipulating the wife's disapproval. It's on his responsibility to fix the overall problem. That's the second major difference from the "I'm sorry" ritual. The transgressor takes the responsibility to forgive himself. Then he's in an adult state of mind with more autonomy.

For repetitively broken agreements, there's a more useful ritual that can be summarized: **Share your regrets and a plan.** What's implied with this is that if you're the one making amends, then you take the responsibility to forgive yourself. You don't extend that authority to your partner. He or she may choose to do it but you're not in a child-like dependent state. You're taking the responsibility for being an adult. This is why sharing your regrets and a plan are often more valuable than saying you're sorry.

**Sharing your regrets and a plan are often  
more valuable than saying you're sorry.**

There's another aspect pertaining to the partner who's on the receiving end of a repetitively broken agreement. I often train couples to demand more accountability from their partner than the usual "I'm sorry" apology. Why settle on such a cheap response? It's a responsibility dodge! What's much better is to refuse the apology and demand more. Imagine a wife confronting her husband in the following way after he's finished his "I'm sorry" routine.

"John, I really don't want your apology. Your feelings of guilt aren't what I'm after. It's obvious that having you feel sorry and guilty hasn't fixed the problem up to now. I don't expect that it will change your behavior in the future either. I want you to take more responsibility than that to fix the problem. You can forgive yourself but give me a better plan than your supposed guilt. When can I have a plan about what you're going to do differently so I don't have to keep hearing your apologies through the rest of our marriage?"

The guideline I'm suggesting here is to hold out for your spouse's plan of correction if the same agreement has been repetitively broken. Don't be satisfied with "I'm sorry."

## “Setting the Bone”

There’s a common bias in the counseling community that intense crises should always be averted through collaboration and calm negotiation. The operative word here is “always.” People are shocked when I tell them that I once counseled someone on how to kill another person. The idea is so alien that it seems that it has to be invalid. But at the time that this book is being written we have over 100,000 citizens overseas who have to be prepared to do just that. Then comes the moment of realization: Oh! Yes, of course. The military! But that doesn’t really apply to over here. Or does it? Then I tell the person who is listening a few more of the details. The person I counseled was a contracted younger therapist in my practice who was being stalked. The police had already issued her a bulletproof vest and had told her that they couldn’t adequately protect her. The stalker was a former prison inmate who had a severe pathological transference to the therapist. Word was coming back from the criminal community about details of what was happening in the therapist’s house. The therapist was being watched inside her own house! One evening, the former inmate even tried to run her off the road after the therapist had left the office. Vaguely worded threats were being relayed through intermediaries. I think you would agree that this was a dire situation. The final solution came when the therapist finally left the state.

What’s the point of the story? The point is that collaboration and calm negotiation don’t always work. For some rare situations, forceful action is more adaptive. Most of us have a hard time accepting that. We want to believe in the goodness of human nature. We usually want to prevent tension and conflict from building up in our relationship. We also don’t want to provoke anger or hurt feelings. Shouldn’t we try to keep everything calm? The answer is usually yes, but not always. Let’s consider a metaphor.

Imagine that you and your family are on the high seas in a sailboat. You’re at least a week away from land, and your radio has blown a circuit. You have no communication. Suddenly, you hear an awful cry from above deck. You run up to find that your 8-year-old daughter has fallen and is lying in the cockpit holding her leg. The lower leg is obviously broken because it’s bent in an acute angle from the rest of the leg. You can see that it’s a compound fracture because blood is beginning to soak through the pant leg. Your daughter is crying in agony. When you reach to try to see under the pant leg she screams. “Don’t touch it! Please don’t touch it! Oh! It hurts so much! Please. Please leave it alone!” You’re a week from land without communication. What are you going to do?



### **Please don't touch it!**

This imaginary crisis evokes a collision between two responsibilities. One is to prevent your child from suffering more acutely and the other is to protect her life and limb. It's empathy versus responsibility. If you're compulsively empathic, you might abide by her wishes and not touch the leg. However, that would probably result in a gangrenous leg and might take her life through sepsis. Most people choose the alternative. They'll protect her life and limb even though it'll cause her great pain. Some of us need to make such an intelligent choice when it comes to fixing our relationship.

There are some relationships that have fatal flaws. It's as if they have cracks in their foundations. If they're ignored, things will usually get worse. In Chapter 2, I explained how responsibility and respect form the safety foundation of a relationship. If one partner refuses to assume responsibility or is toxically disrespectful, then it's best to take action to fix the problem. This is true even though the offending partner will feel hurt or angry. If one partner refuses to deal with a fundamental fracture in the relationship, then it's best to set the bone! In order to do this kind of repair, a person has to momentarily de-prioritize emotions and focus instead on the greater responsibility. Protection of personal and relationship integrity should be a higher priority than momentary emotions. In order to fix the fracture, a person needs to tolerate the agony of seeing the partner hurt. Alternatively, one may need to tolerate the fear of the offending partner's anger. Either way, major relationship fractures require action over

emotion. Compulsive empathy is unwise in the face of oncoming danger. Timid passivity can kill a relationship that might otherwise be salvaged.

**If one partner refuses to deal with  
a fundamental fracture in the relationship,  
then it's best to set the bone!**

Unfortunately, it's true that more people take unilateral action in their relationship for pathological reasons than for beneficial ones. Many people threaten divorce in the heat of the moment, only to retract it and apologize when they calm down. Some get violent. Others act out. These people are reacting to their own fear of shame. Remember "The Great No-No" from the Chapter 1? These are escalations that turn out poorly.

A strategic crisis is one that's planned with forethought about the possible consequences. Instead of trying to avoid the crisis, the person allows it to build so that the issue will finally be addressed. The involved partner may need to decide whether to risk the relationship in order to improve their quality of life. It's a gamble. Here are some situations that many people find deserving of a strategic crisis.

- Physical abuse
- Ongoing infidelity
- Refusal to share access to family finances
- Refusal to respect a partner's right to decline sex
- Refusal to get help for a chronic absence of sexual desire
- Repeated violation of joint finances without the partner's consent

- Refusal to seek gainful employment when there's no agreement for the person to stay home and perform household or parental responsibilities
- Physical or sexual abuse of a child
- Refusal to get treatment for a mental or emotional illness
- Refusal to get help for chronic lying
- Refusal to get help for a continuing compulsion or addiction

The following are some examples of strategic crises in which the offended partner chose to risk their relationship by taking action, rather than remaining passive.

Jason denied that his behavior was way out of line when he would hit and slap Brenda during their fights. After their fights, he blamed Brenda for provoking him so badly. He viewed each of them equally responsible for what happened during their arguments. Finally, when he choked her, she was depressed for weeks afterwards. She decided that she didn't want to continue her futile attempts to persuade him to get help. The next time he hit her, Brenda called the police and had Jason arrested. She got a restraining order, and Jason had to attend a mandatory domestic violence program. She refused to attempt any reconciliation until Jason started individual therapy after the program.

Molly didn't think it was fair that she couldn't access the marital income through the main accounts. Dennis insisted that giving her an allowance should be sufficient. He told her that since he was the breadwinner, the money was his to manage. He complained that Molly was an unwise spender and that his allowance to her for groceries and household needs would be sufficient if she didn't waste it as she had. Molly didn't agree to this because Dennis would use "his" money to fund his fishing trips, but she couldn't go to the beach with her girlfriends. Dennis had taken her credit cards because she had used them defiantly on a previous occasion. When Molly's requests to go to marriage counseling

were refused, she finally decided on a plan. Molly took her child and went to her parents' house. She also visited a lawyer to learn about what might be involved in a divorce. From her position on the brink, Molly then extended a last chance invitation to Dennis to start marriage counseling. He finally accepted.

Dale found Kim nearly impossible to tolerate. She raged unpredictably, went into periods of miserable depression and, at other times, would fly as high as a kite. She episodically went on spending sprees that landed the couple deep in debt. Dale confronted Kim telling her that he thought she probably had a bipolar disorder and wanted her to be assessed. Kim resisted because she didn't want to be a "zombie" like her mother. Her mother had been bipolar and had required constant medication just to stay out of the hospital. When Kim started having brief sexual affairs, Dale reached his limit. He told Kim that if she would not go to a psychiatrist with him that he would be moving out within a month. Kim initially blew him off, but Dale reminded her periodically that he would be leaving if she kept ignoring him. Finally, Dale moved out when Kim was in one of her highs. She wasn't that concerned because of her frenetic lifestyle. It was three months later that Kim approached Dale and reported that she was finally on medication and wanted to go with him to marriage counseling.

### **To set the bone, you may have to risk ending the relationship.**

What's apparent from these examples is that fostering a strategic crisis is a serious maneuver that should never be undertaken in a moment of emotion. It's best to spend several weeks considering your options before risking such a move. To set the bone, you may have to risk ending the relationship. And this challenge separates the real adults from the children. Or perhaps I should say "wounded children," because adults who have been wounded as children often can't make it over this hurdle. Core shame has a lot to do with it. Try to imagine the extreme challenge such a risk would pose for individuals who have never experienced a quality relationship. Perhaps their first image of marriage involved seeing their parents tear each other apart. Or perhaps their relationship with one of their parents involved being physically abused or sexually exploited. How can they hope for better if for years they were consistently

taught that their needs were unimportant? As a general truth, I've discovered that people don't leave bad marriages because their marriages are unbearable. They leave them because they hope for a better life. That's not a mere play on words. Core shame robs a partner of their ability to hope. What's left is their ability to despise, but that doesn't push them forward to take methodical action. The human capacity to tolerate misery is astounding! People can wallow in excruciating misery their whole life if they don't think they can do better. Hope is the key.

**People don't leave bad marriages  
because their marriages are unbearable.  
They leave them because they hope for a better life.**

## **Confronting Boundary Intrusions**

The third type of constructive conflict is when a person confronts a partner who has intrusively invaded one's personal boundaries. It's constructive because it protects. A skillful confrontation can prevent the accumulation of shame that would otherwise occur. Chapter 7 discusses this issue in depth. The techniques described in that chapter are useful tips on how to manage this form of conflict. "The When and Where Rule" and micro-corrections are both very useful strategies for this. To avoid redundancy, we won't discuss what has already been presented in the previous chapter. We're only referencing it because confronting boundary intrusions is the third type of constructive conflict. You will need it in your kit if you want to keep your relationship robust.

## Destructive Conflict

Destructive conflict is what many people erroneously associate as being ordinary conflict. It's a fight in which both partners use emotional attacks to bludgeon each other with shame. It's also fueled by each partner's fear of that shame. It's as if each person's unconscious says "I can't let myself feel like a worthless and unimportant victim. I *must prove* that I'm worthy of better treatment!" Then the person tries to prove that he's not only right and strong, but that his partner is ridiculous and less powerful.

The precarious position of feeling your self-worth in jeopardy can have a profound effect on the nervous system. It tends to deactivate parts of your brain that are involved in metacognition. Metacognition is a process in which a person consciously monitors their thoughts and feelings. It allows a person to override impulsive behavior. This is why some readers observe themselves frequently apologizing after fits of rage. It's because they can't observe themselves during the rage itself. They can maturely view themselves afterwards but not while it's happening. They lose metacognition during their rage. Different parts of their personality are involved. Information from the person's mature world view can be offline when the person is in their rage state.

Let's define what we mean by rage. Most people assume that anger and rage are the same. I would encourage you to think of anger as being protective energy that's used to engage a challenge. From this viewpoint, you can see that anger is the energy behind constructive conflict. Anytime you refuse to accede to your partner's wishes, you're using anger. It's true that it's of such low intensity that it's hard to recognize. A parallel is that few people would recognize ultraviolet rays as one form of light.

Think of rage as being anger that's contaminated and inflated by the unconscious fear of shame. A simple formula expresses this idea.

$$\mathbf{ANGER + FEAR OF SHAME = RAGE}$$

Fear of shame will turbocharge anger into rage. People who grew up with raging parents often don't learn these fine distinctions. They've rarely experienced the beauty of healthy assertiveness that can restore balance in a relationship. Instead, they've learned the childhood lesson to *never* get angry. They're desperate to be unlike their parents. It's a paradox that their shame-driven attempt to cut off anger will usually increase their own tendency to rage. By not working with their anger, growing it up and integrating it into their mature personality, they ensure that it will become a rogue self part. The state becomes cut off from the information in other mature self parts that carry wisdom and consideration for consequences. Then when individuals rage, their behavior generates even more shame. When they calm

down and see how they behaved like their parents, they try even harder to cut off their anger. The shame and rage reciprocally reinforce each other. This is just one of several syndromes that can convert anger into rage.

The following are three types of destructive anger that often disrupt relationships. Rage is central to each.

1. **Defensive Rage** – This is rage in reaction to someone else’s anger. When the recipient of a partner’s tirade is afraid of appearing weak and unimportant, she may choose to respond in a way that makes her feel strong again. Rage momentarily does the trick.
2. **Emotional Depletion** – This occurs when a person fears that he is not loved by his partner. It can also occur because the person has very poor self-esteem because of his previous conditioning by a disturbed childhood. The shame of feeling unloved can inject anger into major control fights over seemingly trivial issues. The real origin of the conflict is the unconscious pain within the individual.
3. **Neurotic Association** – This occurs when a person reacts to unconscious feelings of shame that are being triggered by her partner. The person believes that the partner is to blame but she’s actually getting unconscious associations from old memories. An example would be a wife who feels abused and fears she will be hit when her partner merely shares a difference of opinion.

If you want to reduce your own rage reactions during conflict, you can come at the problem from one of two directions. You can either change the situation or you can change your emotional reactions. Managing your situation is actually a lot easier than trying to change your emotional responses. That’s because your rage reactions have already become habitual and automatic. When you’re enraged, the intensity of emotion is cutting off your higher consciousness. You lose your cognitive flexibility. It’s much easier for you to do something about the situation long before you get too aroused. Here are some things you can do.

1. Train yourself to notice how your body responds when you’re angry. Is your heart rate speeding up? Do you think it’s over 100 beats per minute? Do you feel blood rushing to your head? Is your breathing starting to change? You want to notice early if this is happening *before* your rage becomes a runaway freight train.

2. Learn to use “The When and Where Rule” from Chapter 8. It helps you to postpone destructive conflicts in order to prepare and pace yourself. This can dramatically reduce your rage. It gives you time to organize your thoughts while you’re in a calm state. An organized mind feels more prepared, safer, and is therefore less prone to rage.
3. Increase the amount of healthy nurturing in your relationship. Reread Chapter 4 for ideas on how you can do this. You can reduce the shame of emotional depletion that might be covertly fueling the rage. Many couples who’ve done this have found their destructive fights dramatically reduced within one or two months.
4. Refuse to discuss more than one complaint at a time. Whenever you hear your partner bring up several complaints, give him one chance to narrow it down to a specific issue. You can invite him to tell you what type of agreement he wants. If the partner stays on the level of multiple complaints, then refuse the discussion entirely. Tell him you will talk in the future when he’s ready to be specific. The reason it’s good to do this is because multiple complaints are impossible to digest and process constructively. They only signal the beginning of a destructive fight.
5. Learn to give your partner permission to be angry with you when she’s starting to rage. This is a very powerful maneuver to reduce your own defensive rage. It helps you by giving you permission to let go. You feel less shame because you’re no longer trying (and failing) to influence the partner’s emotions.
6. Use the previously discussed guidelines for different types of constructive conflict. These strategies can reduce some of the triggers that provoke defensive rage. The better you become at constructive conflict, the less likely you will be triggered into rage.

Changing your actual rage response is going to be tough! You’re talking about changing a conditioned emotional reaction, not your voluntary behavior. Think about altering your salivation response to the sight of a squeezed lemon. Then, additionally consider that your reaction to shame is a whole lot stronger. This is where therapy can be an option. However, don’t naively assume that all

therapists are equipped to help. Anger management training will usually teach you to manage triggers, situations, and overt behavior. It usually doesn't get down to the level of reconditioning the rage itself.

Eye movement and desensitization processing (EMDR) is one type of therapy that is very effective at resolving core shame. When a person rages because of neurotic association to early childhood trauma, the benefits from EMDR can sometimes seem miraculous. Resolving several core traumas this way can sometimes eliminate decades of previously intractable raging. Information about EMDR is readily available on the internet. A worldwide association, EMDRIA, has a humanitarian branch that provides service to disaster victims around the globe. The EMDR protocol treatment has been well researched and is now accepted as a mainstream treatment for emotional trauma.

## **The best conflict skills are internal connection skills.**

Conflict inoculation training is another protocol that I've developed for treating excessive rage. It's much too detailed to be presented in the current discussion. It would require a dedicated book to sufficiently outline and explain the protocol. It's similar to military training when soldiers are trained under live fire. The military does this so that trained behavior will be remembered when the soldier is in the highly arousing situation of combat. During conflict inoculation training, patients learn to put themselves in a shame state but then practice getting themselves out of it without rage. Instead of using their rage defense, they practice using their attachment system as a healthier defense. The success of this approach has led me to the conclusion that the best conflict skills are internal connection skills.

If you can connect to your higher consciousness, then your expanded awareness will be better able to handle both your rage and the situation. Of course, this assumes that you've developed a higher level of consciousness in the first place. If you're one of the unlucky souls who've never received good socialization from mentors or attentive parents, then your participation in some intimate community or therapy group would be a very good idea. Any of the twelve-step groups fall into this category. Some bible reading groups can be intimate if you break into small groups and relate biblical principles to your own life. Men's and women's support groups may also help. As a rule, healthy socialization helps you to better manage impulsive behavior. It increases your willpower to resist acting out your destructive rage.