

# CONFLICT IN RELATIONSHIPS

*A Mental Health Educational Series brought to you by:  
Innovative Psychological Consultants*

## Description

Most likely if you have been in a relationship, you have had conflict in that relationship. A certain amount of conflict is normal and can even be healthy in relationships. Sometimes conflict can bring about conversation that leads us to learn more about each other, our needs, and what we like and don't like. Unfortunately for many, conflict seems to be the main stay. Some couples fight with great regularity and rather than constructively working through issues, they find things routinely degenerating into destructive battles that lead to greater hurt and discouragement. When conflict is not resolved and issues are swept under the rug, resentments can build and drive a wedge between couples sense of closeness to each other. Once this process is underway many problems can manifest in relationships.

## Symptoms & Features

The stress that results from relationship conflict can show in countless ways. Some common symptoms can include: poor concentration, disturbed sleeping patterns, loss of appetite, lowered energy, headaches, muscle tension, GI distress, irritability, feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, or shame. When problems persist for long periods of time people can develop lasting mental health issues.

Often couples will engage in destructive arguments for some period of time further alienating each other. Ironically, the relationship may be in more serious trouble when couples give up fighting and simply avoid conflict (and each other). When couples are still destructively fighting, although unhealthy, it reflects a drive and desire to make things work. Often when couples have stopped fighting, they have reached a place of apathy in the relationship and feel hopeless to make things work. When couples have reached this point, it is not uncommon that they may seek to get their needs met outside the relationship. This could be spending more time with friends, children, or possibly an emotional or physical affair.

## Treatment

Most often couples will seek support from friends, family, books, their church, or professional counseling services. Couples counseling will help identify if there are individual mental health issues that need to be addressed that are affecting the relationship as well as working on the relationship itself. Couples counseling is largely based around the development of communication skills. It is not the goal of the therapist to help the couple solve their problems as that would only foster dependence on the therapist. The goal is to teach the couple how to identify problems with the communication process. When couples have learned a communication process that is effective, they will be able to apply it to any topic and have a greater chance of successfully resolving the issue.

## What Can I Do To Help Myself

If you are concerned about conflict in your relationship, start by talking to your partner about the conflict itself, not what you typically argue about. If they agree the relationship needs work, start exploring options to improve your relationship. Obviously, something you are both willing to do will increase motivation and follow through. You can join a support group or talk with family and friends that you trust about how they make their relationships work. Learning stress management skills can help your relationship. The less stressed we are in general; the less likely we are to take it out on our partner. You can read self-help books on communication and relationships. In particular the work of Dr. John Gottman provides scientifically proven findings in working with issues around communication in couples. Most of the clinicians at I.P.C. have expertise in couples counseling.