cosrt
College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists

PO Box 13686, London, SW20 9ZH
Registered Charity No: 1101961

Tel/Fax: 0208 543 2707
Email: info@cosrt.org.uk
Web: www.cosrt.org.uk

Relationship Difficulties

Here is some general advice about what to do if there is conflict in your relationship. These are the sort of steps a relationship therapist might take you through.

Take Time Out

When a conflict flares up it can be incredibly hard to stop talking and separate off. The temptation is to keep at it, trying to prove your point, win the battle, or make the other person see your perspective. However, time apart almost always helps us to have a more useful conversation when we do come back to the issue.

It is worth talking about this with the people we're in relationships with when things are good: what are the tell-tale signs we might observe that one or both of us needs a break from a discussion? How can we say, in those moments, that we need some time out? We probably won't always get it right but it might help to think about it in advance. It is also worth considering together about *where* we will go to get that time out, especially if you live together and don't have a room of your own you can go to.

Similarly it might well be worth taking some time alone prior to raising a new issue with someone, to think over some of the questions here. Before you approach the person you could consider what you're bringing to the discussion and the different ways in which they might react, as well as thinking about how you'll express things when you do talk to them.

Think About Yourself

The tempting thing to do in the time out is to go over and over the argument that you just had or to imagine conversations you would like to have with the person where you win and they are reduced to a blubbering mass of apologies. Alternatively you might start listing all the crimes you feel that they have committed against you in your head. All these things will keep the rage you feel simmering away nicely but might not be the most useful thing in terms of resolving the matter!

Instead of focusing on the other person try to concentrate on yourself. What did you bring with you into this situation which might have formed a backdrop to the conflict that unfolded? What things do you need to be aware of on your side of the discussion?

What are the things that you have learnt over your life which really make you angry or upset? Some therapists call them 'crumple buttons' because when they get pressed we immediately burst into tears or fly into a rage. It might be that you had a past relationship where you found out that your partner was unfaithful. Now you are too alert to any sign that your current partner might be doing the same. It might be that, as a child, you were always being told that you were too bossy, or too lazy. If something your partner says gets too uncomfortably close to sounding like they are criticising you for that then you panic and want to deny it at all costs. Often we're not even aware of what our buttons are until they get pressed. It is a very good idea to try to be aware of 'our stuff' in relationships and make sure that we're not blaming the other person when really it is our own hang-ups that we are so wound up about.

Think What your Emotions are Telling You
If we feel angry, indignant, frustrated or hurt during an argument we should see these feelings as helpful because they are telling us what important to us. For example, if you find yourself fuming over the washing up then it is useful to probe what those feelings are about. Perhaps it is because you strongly value equality in the relationship and it feels like it is really your partner's turn to wash up. Perhaps it is because you value your freedom to relax in the evenings and your partner's rule that the washing up has to be done straight after you've eaten is not the way you would choose to do things.

When you have figured out what you are feeling and what lies behind it you begin to see the story that you are telling about the conflict and why you might be doing so. Your partner was late home and didn't text you to say when she would be arriving. Your story is that she couldn't be bothered to let you know even thought she knew you were cooking a nice meal for you both. You took this as a sign that she clearly doesn't care as much about you as you do about her, and this made you scared that she doesn't value your relationship as much as you do and that you might lose her.

Once you've thought about the story that you are telling, you can begin to consider the alternative stories there might be: those that your partner is probably telling themselves, as well as other stories that might fit the circumstances as well as, or better than, your story.
When we first get on our own it might be difficult to do such a calm investigation of ourselves. Some people find it useful to punch a pillow, run round the block, take a brisk walk or otherwise release the strong feelings they have before they start to think. Writing a letter that we don't intend to send can be useful to get out our story and all the things we might like to say in the heat of the moment. Some find the meditation or journal-writing techniques useful to get into a calm place.

Develop Compassion and Imagine Alternative Ways of Seeing the Situation
Once we have understood the story that we are telling about events it is useful to think through the alternative stories that the other person might be telling. We need to be wary of deciding that they must definitely be understanding things in a certain way until we've actually heard their version of events, but it can help us to empathise with them later if we can at least begin to understand that the way we see things is not the only way, and that they might have an equally valid way.

Going back to the example of your partner being late home, alternative stories that you might want to consider include: her mobile phone being out of battery so she can't contact you; her not knowing that you were cooking a meal (did you actually tell her?) or having forgotten it (remembering the things that you have probably forgotten about her in the past); or her getting into a good conversation and enjoying an evening doing something separate to you (just as you may enjoy an evening out with your other friends). Empathy is about putting yourself in the other person's shoes and imagining the ways in which they might be seeing things and how they might make complete sense to them. It is about having the compassion to see that we are not the only one who might be feeling bad, and thinking about the values the other person has and how they may also feel under threat.

When we are in the midst of the conflict it can be a lot harder to see the other person's point of view. When we are trying to come up with possible alternative stories it is worth thinking about what we know about this person we are so close to. What are their buttons? What do they value?

How might we react if we had their values and rules? Quickly we might see that what seemed like them being cold was actually them feeling insecure and wanting us to reach out to them, or what seemed like them being angry at us was actually all about

the situation reminding of something hurtful in their past. We can then go into a conversation prepared to recognise how it might have been for them and to offer reassurance in the areas they are vulnerable on.

Meet the Other Person

Many therapists suggest that it is useful to schedule a time to have a discussion following a conflict or when there is something important and potentially difficult that one person wants to bring up. Start by picking a time when each person is free and won't be disturbed, and also giving time beforehand for each person to prepare and organise their thoughts.. It is much easier for people to put their stuff to one side if they know that it there is a planned time for when it will be dealt with.

Reconnect and Build Empathy

You might think it should be easy to be kind and empathise with a partner: after all, don't we love them and know them really well? But the old cliché of the fine line between love and hate comes in here, and it does seem that we are very capable of switching to seeing our partner as our enemy in arguments. It can be a good idea to put aside some time to connect with each other before a potentially tough conversation and to focus on being kind to each other during this time. If we've just had a nice meal out together where we've made an effort to hear all about the other person's day, or if we've just spend some time giving each other long pampering foot massages, it might be harder to be cruel to the other person or to try to score points off them.

Relationship therapists often recommend that, when you do talk about the issue, each person is given a set amount of time to tell their story and explain things from their perspective without interruption. This tends to work pretty well. Try setting a timer so that each person gets five or ten minutes. Make sure that you stick to the one issue and end on time to let the other person have their turn. Here is advice for what to do when it is your turn to talk and when it is your turn to listen.

Your Turn to Talk

When you are telling your side of things the key thing to remember is to 'own your emotions. It is very tempting to put our emotions onto other people and to blame them for 'making us feel' angry, hurt or upset. Stick with 'I messages', which don't include any accusations or blame. So instead of saying 'you made me feel rotten when you told me off like a child,' you might say 'I felt bad when you said that I didn't pull my weight around the house'.

It is much easier for the other person to listen to us and to empathise if we talk this way. If we blame them then they are likely to want to defend themselves, but if we just say that we feel angry or sad or scared it is easier for them to show that they understand that feeling and sympathise us without having to take all the blame for it. Make sure that the words you use accurately reflect your feelings. Don't say you felt 'a bit annoyed' if you actually felt furious.

A good thing to avoid in such situations is generalisations: saying that someone 'always' does something, or 'never' says something, or claiming that 'everyone else' behaves in a certain way. Taking things to extremes and making those kinds of comparisons are seldom useful.

It is also worth avoiding deliberately pushing the other person's buttons. We might not like to admit that we do it, but it can be tempting in an argument to poke at something that we know is a sore spot for the other person.

When you talk about your side of things it is a good time to take responsibility for the parts of it that you do feel you are responsible for (but not so much that you are taking all the blame, because there is likely to be responsibility on both sides).

If you are criticising somebody then try to start and end by saying something positive. Don't just tell them what you think they are doing wrong, but be clear what you would rather they did and own your feelings: 'When you do X, I feel Y, and what I'd rather you did was Z'.

Your Turn to Listen

When we argue with other people, the two phrases that often come into our minds (usually in a very angry tone of voice) are ‘you just *don’t* understand!’ and ‘how *could* you?’. The point of explaining clearly and openly is to give the other person as much chance as possible of being able to understand where we are coming from (so they just *do* understand). The point of listening well to the other person is to come up with an answer to the question: ‘how could you?’. When we ask the question in our minds, or in the heat of an argument, we are usually completely disinterested in hearing an answer: it is purely a rhetorical question. But imagine the question removed of all its heat and aggression. This is the person we love and care about and generally think is a wonderful human being. *How* could they say what they said or do what they did? If we can ask ourselves that question in a genuinely interested way we will see that there are probably many reasonable and understandable answers. They haven’t become a monster overnight therefore it is most likely that they were in a difficult situation. Let’s find out how that was for them.

Many conflicts escalate because people just really want to be *heard* and aren’t being. The point of listening to somebody is to truly try to *hear* them: to understand them and to show them that we get what they are saying. Remember that you don’t need to say that you see things the same way, or to come round to agreeing with them. What hearing somebody is about is about showing that you’re open to accepting that they might see things differently to the way you do, and showing that you are moved by their suffering. These things can be extremely powerful and are likely to put the other person in a frame of mind to hear you too.

Listening to the other person involves avoiding interrupting them or making it about your stuff. It is also good to show that you are listening with your body (turn towards them, meet their eyes and nod appropriately), and to say ‘uhuh’ and ‘mmhm’ in relevant places! When you ask questions to find out more about their story make sure that they *are* questions rather than accusations or challenges. Try to enter the conversation from a place of curiosity. Your job is to really get into their head and understand where they are coming from. Try to build up the most complete picture that you can about what it was like for them. Ask ‘so how did you feel when I wasn’t there at the party when you arrived?’ or ‘what went through your head when I said you work too hard?’

When they seem to have finished it is also good to ask whether there is anything else they want to say. Remember to give them plenty of time to think and answer rather than leaping in.

Finally, it can be very useful for you to summarise what you’ve heard to show that you’ve really got it, and to check whether it is accurate or whether they want to add any more. Reflect back what they’ve said to you, appreciate how they feel, and make it clear that however they do is an acceptable and understandable response.

Finding the Win-Win Solution

Once you have both had your say and listened thoroughly to the other person you may well find that there is nothing left to do. Often the entire conflict can be about wanting to be heard and understood. However, obviously there are some circumstances in which decisions do need to be reached and people have differing goals. It might well be necessary to have several discussions about an issue. Once

you've finished one discussion make sure you stop talking about it until the next time and try to spend some time doing something you enjoy together.

We are trying to find ‘win-win’ solutions in which both people feel heard and the way forward takes everyone’s needs into consideration. It can be difficult to find 'win-win' in seemingly incompatible aims. What do we do if one person wants to move out of the city and the other wants to stay living there? Or if people have different goals regarding having children? Or if one person wants an opebn relationship and the other doesn't. One suggestion is that after listening to each other, we write a list – together – of all the possible solutions, even those that might seem ridiculous. Then each person, in turn, crosses out suggestions that they feel they just couldn’t live with. After that you decide together to try one solution for a given length of time, after which you will re-evaluate and either stick with it a while longer or try something else.

Guidelines for discussions:

- Take time out beforehand to think about where you are coming from and to try to develop compassion for the other person.
- Come in prepared to really listen to the other person, not to interrupt and not to say anything deliberately hurtful.
- Come with an agenda of what you want to say.
- Try to stick to one issue rather than bringing in lots of issues.
- Put a time aside when you won't be disturbed: at least half an hour.
- Turn off phones and other distractions.
- Give each person ten minutes (you might want to use a timer to stick to time).
- Try to own your feelings and take responsibility when you are talking.
- Try to really listen and empathise when they are talking.
- Don't keep on discussing if it isn't going anywhere. Schedule another time to talk and make sure you spend some positive time together in the mean time.
- Once you have both said what you want to say and are ready to think about solutions, try writing down all possible solutions and then going through the list together removing any that don't meet both people's needs.