



## **"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, and 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.

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.

Couples who experience ongoing conflict can become aggressive with one another, and may push, slap, or hit each other during arguments. Other couples handle conflict by avoiding it. Avoiding conflict still damages relationships because partners become increasingly disengaged from one another. Although researchers do not know why some couples become distressed and others don't, most agree that the ways couples resolve conflicts and provide emotional support to one another are critical.

The impact of conflict on individuals and families is enormous. Couples that repeatedly have conflicts are at risk for a variety of emotional problems, notably alcohol abuse and depression. Physically, they get sicker 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 feeling unloved.

### **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. While these programs are effective in the short-term, research shows that couples often have difficulty maintaining these new skills once the program ends.

### 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://eft.ca>
- 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/>.

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Last Update: October 2009/September 2012

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

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