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15 Common Couples Conflicts & Differences: Lessons from Decades of Couples Counseling©

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All couples have some differences.

Some of these differences are over relatively minor matters, such as, the level of order and cleanliness in the household or how household chores are divvied out and completed.



Some of those differences may be chronic. Most couples have two or three differences that tend to exist throughout their relationship. They find a way to accept and work around those differences. For instance, one may be particularly neat in the other less so. They find a way to work that out.

For example, the partners may be of different religious backgrounds and need to find a way to work through those differences. One of them may have used alcohol a few times a week at a low level - two or three drinks – and that is more than

the other, who is the adult child of an alcoholic mother – is comfortable with. So, they work to adapt to their differences and perhaps to help bring about a change in their patterns.

One may need more time for sports activities or friends than the other, and they find a way to support one another in those differences.

Some differences may be serious, that is, potentially harmful to the relationship. Such differences may fester to the point of leading to separation or even divorce. More about that later.

Some of the most common reasons couples have conflicts include these 15 themes.

Change, Adaptation, and Problems. One theme pervades many of the other problems we have as couples. Namely, *life happens*. We all face many transitions in life. These transition points often bring out some of the themes covered in this short essay. For example, engagement, marriage, job changes, moves, having a child infertility, a death in the family, a major health challenge, and purchase of a home are all life transitions that could affect anyone.

Because the transition points are times of high challenge, what these *transitions* do to a couple is bring out and highlights their differences. In order to do their very best working together in these difficulties, the couple would need to have some of the best qualities discussed above. To the extent their relationship is troubled, then at these points in life, their differences appear more starkly. When they have difficulty managing one of these major transitions, the result may be prolonged difficulty.

15 Common Themes in Couples Conflict

1. Boundaries Around the Couple and the Extended Family – Tensions over creating boundaries around the couple and tensions involving in-laws or extended family members and friends – taking the side of your partner.

2. Clashing Values, Including Religion – Mismatch in guiding principles such as truthfulness, fidelity, cooperation, openness and sharing, loyalty, respect, forgiveness, trust, finances, boundaries, faith, emotional support, gender roles, personal growth, commitment, kindness, equality, relationship with extended family, and more. Religious backgrounds, moral values, and cultural practices.

3. Closeness and Emotional Intimacy -- Mismatched need for love and affection, how one needs close to be expressed, how one may be more distant.

4. Conflict Style – Mismatch in how they resolve differences between them and differences in how they quarrel, one perhaps conflict escalating and one conflict-avoidant, one from a family in which strong arguing is a sign of connection and one who finds that hurtful.

5. Fidelity and Infidelity – Faithfulness, trust, and dependability within the relationship versus going outside the relationship.

6. Hurtful Comments – Critical, depreciating, or contemptuous statements, or stonewalling, leaving wounds that do not heal.

7. Love Languages -- Divergent ways in ways in which each partner experiences the need for love in each partner expresses loving towards the other.

More About Love Languages

The Psychologist Gary Chapman observed people have unique ways of feeling they are receiving love. He found these to fall into five themes he called Love Languages. Love languages are 1) the way you experience feeling loved and 2) the way you then communicate your love to your romantic partner. The difficulty is your love languages may not match. You may have different ways of experiencing love!

That does not mean you are incompatible. *It means you have to find the love language of your partner and learn how to speak it.* Your love language is part Inborn and partly learned in early childhood. We are not usually all that aware of why we experience love only through certain behaviors of others and why we do not experience it when we receive other behaviors that our partner thinks are loving behaviors.

One of these will be your primary language, that which you most want and most give another. Another of them will be a secondary language that you also give and want, but just not as much as the primary.

The Love Languages

1. Acts of Service -- doing something you think will be useful or appreciated, expecting that for yourself as well, such as cleaning up, doing errands, washing her car.
2. Physical Touch – hugs, kisses, holding hands, small touching during ordinary activities (e.g., a pat) taking time in sexual intimacy.
3. Quality Time - spending devoted time together, time to interact and do preferred activities together.
4. Gifts – For some gifts mean you are thinking of the person, you pay attention to what he or she may like and prefer, you are thoughtful, you make the effort.
5. Words of Affirmation – what most of us think of as loving is saying loving words, but also words of praise, showing what you value and admire in your partner.
New research suggests one more.
6. Feeling Known – The sense of someone who holds your history, really listens to you, shows knowledge of your preferences, so you feel part of something valuable, validation.

The Principles Behind Love Languages

- A. Couplehood is more satisfying when both partners match as to their primary love language.
- B. Couplehood is less satisfying when partners do not know how or do not try to communicate in a way that matches the partner's needs/language. Satisfaction comes from speaking the other's language as much as you can learn to do. That leads to what we all want, namely, to feel *known, respected, significant, and validated*.
- C. When partners work to see the world from the partner's point of view and show empathy for the partner's experience, they can better grasp their partner's way of feeling loved.
- D. Uncover your love language by thinking about what you do when you want to show love. It's most likely based upon what you value.
- E. Talking it over. Discuss your results with your spouse. With an open mind, discover your partner's primary love language and how you can learn to "speak" it.

8. Money – Disagreement on working, how to manage their money, how to collaborate on purchases, spending habits, financial goals, the balance between current expenditures and saving for the future.

9. Parenting Differences – Disagreement on how to raise the children to. Discipline them and lead them. And just differences over. Choices for their education

10. Personal Habits – Annoyance with a partner's habits and behaviors.

11. Sexuality – Differences in sexual practices, frequency of physical intimacy, mismatched desire

12. Sharing Responsibilities – Disagreements. Over the division of household chores and tasks.

13. Substance Use, Alcohol Use, or Gambling Patterns – Discrepant patterns of use of alcohol or even gambling habits, that may cause some. arguments between them even when the use is not severe or problematic.

14. Time Management – Conflicts over how time is spent, including how to balance time together and time for work, family, friend, and personal needs

15. Trust, Security, and Jealousy – Making your partner feel safe in the relationship at all times, miss. Mistrustfulness and jealousy over the partner's friendships or past relationships or relationship with family of origin.

We made this list to be alphabetical. However, some of these challenges are fundamental to the success and foundation of the relationship, especially. The need for trust and security in the relationship is essential.

Some of these are crucial to the unfolding developmental maturity of the relationship, such as creating boundaries around that relationship and protecting it from outside forces, even from family of origin.

Some are habits within the relationship that may or may not be shared equally
Some are important areas of skill.

Important Skills for Avoiding Conflicts

Here are the main skills that come from looking at these common conflicts.

1. The main thing is to recognize one's own faults in order to allow yourself to be influenced by your partner.
2. Be willing to be non-defensive and make changes that may be necessary.
3. Be able to negotiate without escalating arguments.
4. Know how to de-escalate arguments.
5. Think of your relationship in terms of two extremely crucial factors.



- a) Make all of your behaviors increase the level of attachment.
- b) Make your behaviors after a disagreement, or even in the middle of a disagreement, REPARATIVE. That is, behaviors in the direction of repairing the strength of your connection to one another.

If you think about any disagreement as leading to a breach in your attachment and in a reduction in the connection with one another it would be much easier to drop your objections and think about how to find the middle ground or the way that the two of you can compromise and accept one another.

**Does your behavior promote a stronger attachment between you?
Is your behavior reparative to any breach between you?**

6. Is your behavior kind?
7. Is your behavior sensitive to your partner's needs?
8. Love-mapping that is knowing what your partner is doing during the day and asking about it.
9. Does your behavior tend towards tenderness?
10. Does your behavior tend toward listening carefully and being able to accurately paraphrase what your partner is saying?
11. Is your behavior free of defensiveness? And leading to an openness to actually listen without having to come up with the reasons why you are doing what you are doing or rationalizing your own behavior when there's an argument?
12. Have you observed any ways in which you may be showing any sense of contempt, disapproval, disappointment in your spouse and your partner?
13. When part problems escalate between you is your first effort to de-escalate those problems, or do you add to the conflict and make it even more intense?
14. Do you avoid the silent treatment in which you or your partner do not talk to each other. Rather do you take breaks from conflict and come back shortly after to talk about it in a calmer and more considerate mood?
15. If a difficulty between the two of you cannot be resolved do you accept that there are differences and not demand that your way has to be followed?

Unfortunately, some of these disagreements can escalate to the point of creating a separation or divorce. Here are some of the reasons why divorce may be ultimately the outcome

Major Reasons Couples Divorce:

1. **Infidelity:** Extramarital affairs and cheating, leading to a breakdown of trust.
2. **Incompatibility:** Growing apart, changes in interests or personalities, and feeling disconnected.
3. **Communication Breakdown:** Persistent misunderstandings, lack of effective communication, and constant conflicts that are hurtful and hostile.
4. **Financial Problems:** Chronic financial stress, disagreements over money management, and financial infidelity.
5. **Substance Abuse:** Struggles with alcohol or drug addiction affecting the relationship.
6. **Physical or Emotional Abuse:** Any form of domestic violence, including physical, emotional, or psychological abuse.
7. **Lack of Commitment:** One or both partners not fully committed to the marriage.
8. **High Conflict Relationships:** Constant arguing, disrespect, and inability to resolve conflicts.
9. **Sexual Incompatibility:** Differences in sexual needs, desires, or a lack of intimacy.
10. **Parenting Differences:** Fundamental disagreements on child-rearing practices and values.

The reasons for separation and divorce are much more complicated than a simple list can ever capture.

Every couple's situation is unique, and the dynamics of relationships can be complex. Couples Counselors train to understand relationships in depth so we can help you learn the methods and skills discussed in this essay. We hope for an excellent result.