

SOS Détresse

Good conflict resolution

Disputes, conflicts and disagreements are part of the couple. Naturally each couple would like to solve conflicts in a peaceful and constructive manner. Often, though, things go otherwise.

We may hurt one another, raise our voice, criticize, accuse and try to blame the partner. We insist on their weaknesses and try to mend them. We always come back to the same old stories, standing by our own point of view, so as to confirm we are right. Alternatively, we may not say what is affecting us, till we explode in fury. At times we react too violently to details which should not disturb us, as we feel offended and devalued by the critiques of others. We start justifying and defending ourselves.

Of course most people had rather avoid the quarrel, because it does not satisfy them, especially in our couple where we look for harmony and peace, not conflict and wounds. How many times have we noticed that our behaviour is difficult to change? We often find ourselves in the same emotional chaos, which is absolutely normal. Our bad habits are hard to leave behind until we learn a more appropriate behaviour which can help us consider some solutions.

When we take into account our needs as well as the other's, beside those deriving from our communal life - which can be difficult - we will have access to a solution satisfying for both sides. Differences may even turn out to be enriching for our couple.

How to duly analyse and solve conflicts?

First of all, it is important to create a space for conflict management. Different opinions cannot be squared out in a doorway. Time pressure easily generates misunderstandings. When it is necessary to find a common path, I must be given the chance to focus all my attention on me and on the other person. This is impossible if I am preparing a snack for the children or am thinking of my duties at work tomorrow. We need time and a calm space to open up to one another in conversation and listen.

A conflict can only be solved by the two parties at play. If two people cannot find an agreement, that often depends on the implication of a third party in the conflict. It may be children, friends, parents or colleagues. Often we join an accomplice or „advocate“ who represents our side, instead of helping us to understand the other. In this way we avoid being seen as vulnerable and defending our needs.

To prevent a conflict from ending in an irreparable quarrel, it can be useful to apply some rules from the psychology of communication. They are simple and allow to manage communication better in conflict situations:

Stay in the present moment

If there is a conflict between us, it is futile to discuss what was or will be. The past cannot be changed and the future is yet to come. To deal with another time only brings us far from what is happening now.

Constructive communication is possible if we keep these questions in our mind:

What could I feel in the other's shoes? How do they feel in my presence? What is it we want? How shall we behave towards one another?

The answers to such questions lead us towards common solutions.

The attitude of "wanting to understand"

At the end of the day, damaging and destructive behaviour is often engendered by our own wounds or fear to be wounded again. Sometimes even sentiments such as shame or sense of guilt may block us. To keep the dialogue open we should not immediately interpret every word (and action) as an attack or a critique.

It is advisable to be attentive and look together at what the partner actually meant to say. Even in difficult situations where their attitude is not understood, exploring their good intentions hidden behind words and actions will be beneficial.

A fundamental rule

One of the most important communication rules in a couple, in particular when it comes to conflicts and differences, concerns criticisms and expectations.

According to this rule, instead of choosing criticism-based expressions we should try to rephrase the idea in terms of needs.

Allegations are a poison for any relationship. They are obstacles to finding a common solution to a problem. Such claims are mainly tied to a negative event in the past that must be changed at all costs. They also have a negative effect on the future, as we only rarely express clearly what we wish for tomorrow.

It is much more positive and efficient to state our needs and expectations, instead of saying what is bothering us and what we hope to change. Our desires may be phrased in different ways: *„I would be happy if ...“*, *„I would like to ...“*, *„I would be glad to...“* or *„It would be important to me that ...“*.

Criticize the behaviour rather than the person

Sometimes criticism can be appropriate and justified. In order for criticism to be accepted and led to positive changes, it is essential to criticize clearly the behaviour that bothers us. Often in a quarrel we say things that aim at the person as a whole,

like “How can you be so stupid!” or “You are utterly useless!”. The partner then quickly feels devalued, hurt and under attack. They will not subsequently be able to accept criticism and improve. When phrasing criticism, we should replace vague accusations with concrete descriptions. Instead of saying „*You are negligent*“ we could say „*When you make supper in the evening, you often leave plates on the table and do not throw out the garbage. This bothers me, as I feel uneasy in an untidy kitchen, so I must wake up early to clean up after you. I would be happy if in the future you ...*“.

Generalizing kills communication

“*You always must ...*” and „*You never do ...*“ is exactly what we do not want to hear from our partners. „Always“ and „never“ are seldom fair when it comes to behaviour. Just like allegations, such expressions prevent solutions from being found. Hit in this manner by our partner, we stop communication in its tracks, not wanting to listen to the other anymore. It is however much easier to accept arguments and demands of our partner if they describe specific accidents that infuriated them, leaving generalisations aside.

The value of appreciation

With all the criticisms we address to our partner, we often forget to appreciate what they give us, what they have already done or changed up to now. There is no point in devaluing one another with reciprocal criticism. A valid and constructive discussion can arise essentially if we show recognition and esteem.

These communication rules are naturally valid not only within a couple, but can be applied to any conflict situation.