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HOW TO TAKE CONFLICT OUT OF DIVORCE

Some important steps in ending the cycle of conflict and making your divorce cooperative and supportive.

By Bill Ferguson

It's possible to divorce in a way that supports the well-being of everyone. You can end the conflict, heal the hurt and part as friends. You just need to learn how.

Unfortunately, most divorces are handled in a very different way. Sides get drawn and issues become something to fight over rather than something to resolve. Walls of protection get fortified and distance grows. Then we bring in adversarial attorneys and escalate the conflict dramatically. We hurt each other over and over, feeling fully justified for everything we do. Serious damage is created in the process of divorce, and none of it is necessary.

To have a divorce be supportive rather than destructive, you need to defuse the conflict. To learn how to do this, let's look at what creates and destroys love in relationships.

We think that love is enough to have a relationship work, but it's not. The divorce courts are full of people who love each other. To have a relationship work, people need to *feel* loved. You create the experience of love by giving the gift of acceptance and appreciation. Just look at how you feel when someone genuinely accepts and appreciates you. Doesn't this feel great? Of course it does. You feel better about yourself and better about life. You also feel better about the other person.

The same thing happens when you give acceptance and appreciation to someone else. That person feels better about him or herself and better about you. By giving acceptance and appreciation, you create the experience of love, and it comes right back.

You destroy the experience of love by being non-accepting. Notice how you feel when someone is critical or controlling towards you. Instantly, you feel hurt and upset. You close down inside. You put up your walls of protection and automatically resent the person who is non-accepting towards you. The same thing happens when you are non-accepting towards someone else. That person gets upset, puts up his or her walls of protection, and automatically becomes critical and resentful towards you. By being non-accepting, you destroy the experience of love. You then receive non-acceptance in return.

Then it gets worse. As the other person becomes critical and resentful of you, you get even more upset. Your walls of protection get stronger and you become more critical of the other person. Then the other person gets more upset and becomes more resentful of you. Then you become more resentful towards the other person. Without knowing, you create a cycle of conflict, a cycle of resisting, attacking and withdrawing from each other.

It's this cycle of conflict that creates the suffering in divorce. To heal your relationship and to have your divorce be supportive, this cycle has to end. Fortunately, it only takes one person to end it. The cycle of conflict is like a tennis match. Two people are required to keep the game going. As soon as one person stops playing, the game is over. Once you discover your role in the conflict, you can turn your situation around. You can put water on the fire instead of more fuel.

To end the cycle of conflict and to have your divorce be supportive, take the following steps:

1. **Accept the person.** You fuel the conflict by being judgmental and critical. To end the conflict, accept the other person just the way he or she is. This may seem difficult, but it becomes much easier when you notice that the other person is the way he or she is whether you like it or not. Accepting is nothing more than telling the truth. When you are at peace with the truth, you stop being upset. You can then put water on the fire instead of more fuel.
2. **Be willing to feel your hurt.** All of our upsets and destructive behavior are fueled by the automatic avoidance of hurt. The more you heal your hurt, the more your upsets and destructive behavior disappear. The key to healing your hurt is to feel it willingly like a child. This allows the hurt to come and go. When you fight the hurt, you give it power. The hurt then turns into pain and stays. Feel the hurt of your circumstances and the deeper hurt of feeling worthless, not good enough and not worth loving. Dive into the hurt and cry as hard as you can. Let the hurt come and let it go.
3. **See your role in the conflict.** As long as you blame the other person, you give that person all your power. You make yourself a victim. To get your power back, find your role in the problem. If there is a cycle of conflict, there are two people participating. Once you see your role in the cycle, you can do something about it. Notice how critical you have been and how much you have hurt the other person. Notice how the other person has put up his or her walls of protection and given it back to you. Work with this until you can see your full, 100% responsibility for the cycle of conflict.
4. **Don't hang on. Let the person go.** There is nothing you can do to make someone stay with you. In fact, everything you do to make a person stay, pushes the person further away. To be most effective in handling your situation, let the person go. Then put your focus on healing your relationship and restoring the love, one human being to another. This is the key to saving your marriage. To let go, be willing to feel your hurt. It's the avoidance of this hurt that forces you to hang on. Once you are willing to feel this hurt, the need to hang on loses power.
5. **Let go of resentment. Forgive.** Forgiveness is not for the benefit of the other person. It's for you. When you resent, you close down inside. You become bitter and lose your aliveness. Resentment is a subconscious tool we use to avoid feeling our hurt. Once you are willing to feel your hurt, the need for resentment disappears. To forgive, go to the hurt that's under your resentment and feel it willingly like a child. Then notice that the other person is doing the best he or she can with his or her very limited ability. Forgive the person for not being wiser and more aware.
6. **Be willing for anything to happen.** When you fight what happens, you become full of fear and upset. You get tunnel vision and lose your ability to see clearly. All you can do is fight, resist, hang on or withdraw. Whatever you do tends to make your situation worse. When you flow with what happens,

- you have peace of mind. You see your situation clearly and you can see what needs to be done. You are creative and can discover solutions you could never have seen before. To be able to flow, be willing to feel your hurt and trust that you will be okay no matter what happens.
7. **Don't argue. Listen.** Any time there are two people arguing, there are two people who are trying to push their point of view on the other, and no one is listening. To end an argument, stop and listen. Let the other person express whatever he or she has to say. This ends the argument and makes the other person more open to hear what you have to say. After both of you have said everything, you can put your focus on finding solutions.
 8. **Find solutions that work for both of you.** In any divorce, you can expect differences of opinion. The key to resolving these differences is to keep your focus on finding solutions that work for everyone. Normally, we resolve issues by drawing sides against the other person. Then we then fight to have our side prevail. Unfortunately, this puts the other person on the defensive and forces him or her to fight against us. When you are committed to finding solutions that work for both of you, you dissolve the other person's resistance against you. It's hard to fight someone who's on your side.
 9. **Try the collaborative law approach.** If you can't find solutions on your own, use the collaborative law approach. This is a great way to resolve disputes. In this process, all the parties and their attorneys work together to find solutions that work for everyone. The process is non-adversarial and very effective. Disputes get resolved with a minimum amount of conflict and suffering.
 10. **Take every opportunity to heal your relationship.** Every time you interact with the other person, you will either put water on the fire or more fuel. Make sure you always add water. Do everything you can to empower the person. Make sure the other person feels accepted and appreciated. Be a friend and be interested in that person's well being.

Bill Ferguson is the founder of Divorce as Friends, a court-approved program for divorcing parents. He has been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show and is the author of the best-selling book, *How To Heal A Painful Relationship*. He leads workshops and does individual consulting in the Houston area.