

## ***Relationship Conflict Research Findings***

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**Conflict features are strongly associated with marital quality.** Conflict is frequently viewed as an important dynamic in conceptualizing couples' interactions, a metaphorical "window" through which one can observe how close relationships function (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Unresolved relationship conflict can be defined as "the dissatisfying impasse partners reach in unsuccessful attempts to resolve differences" (Kelley and Thibault, 1978). Findings from empirical studies examining conflict in intimate relationships (see Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 1999; and Weiss & Heyman, 1990 for reviews) suggest a number of conclusions:

**1. It is both common and normal for couples to have disagreements or conflicts. The important factor is how constructively couples resolve their differences,** either by instituting mutually acceptable behavior changes or by deciding that aspects of their differences are unchangeable but acceptable (Epstein, Baucom, & Rankin, 1993; Gottman, 1999; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Markman, 1990).

**2. Couples who resolve their conflicts with mutual satisfaction tend to be more satisfied** with their relationships than couples who do not (Christensen & Shenk 1991; Gottman, 1993a; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994). Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, and Burnett (1996b) found that individuals' marital satisfaction was more strongly associated with the degree to which they were satisfied with the ways in which their personal relationship standards (the characteristics that they believed their relationships should have) were being met than with the degree to which the two partners' standards were similar. Thus, couples who find ways to adapt to areas of conflict experience greater overall relationship satisfaction.

**3. Individuals' cognitions about their relationships influence how satisfied or distressed they are in the relationships,** and how they communicate with their partners (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 1993). Concerning the cognition-behavior link, Fincham, Harold and Gano-Phillips (2000), Bradbury and Fincham (1992) and Miller and Bradbury (1995) found that individuals (particularly wives) who made negative attributions about their partners' intentions and responsibility for negative behavior engaged in less supportive and more negative behavior, as well as more negative reciprocation of their partners' negative acts, during problem-solving discussions with their partners. Similarly, Bradbury and Fincham (1993) found that spouses' adherence to unrealistic relationship beliefs (assumptions and standards) was associated with their negative interactive behavior during problem-solving discussions.

**4. Differences in conflict resolution styles are associated with levels of relationship satisfaction** (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Epstein, Baucom, & Rankin, 1993; Metz, Rosser & Strapko, 1994), and distinguish satisfied couples, physically abusive couples, and nonabusive yet discordant couples (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Schaap, 1984). Relationship satisfaction is

moderated by the process or manner in which a couple manages conflict (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Walczynski, 1997; Gottman, 1993b). **Couples who address their conflicts with constructive styles (e.g., assertion, cooperation), avoid destructive styles (e.g., aggression, withdrawal), and resolve their conflicts with mutual satisfaction and equity, are more likely to be satisfied with their relationship** and not divorce (Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Various studies comparing distressed with non-distressed relationships have found that **distressed partners: (a) engage in less assertiveness** (constructive verbal behaviors, such as calmly discussing issues together) (Epstein, DeGiovanni, & Jayne-Lazarus, 1978; Gambrill, 1977; Metz & Dwyer, 1993); **(b) exchange more aggression** (negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors, such as criticism or pushing/slapping) (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Metz & Dwyer, 1993; O'Leary & Curley, 1986); **(c) withdraw more** from each other (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Metz & Dwyer, 1993); and **(d) are more submissive or acquiescing** (Lloyd, 1990). Evidence suggests that expressions of criticism, contempt, and disgust are detrimental behaviors (Gottman, 1995).

**5. In distressed relationships, there tends to be a gender difference in the ways that partners deal with relationship conflict:** women more commonly engage their partners with verbally demanding behavior when conflict occurs, whereas men more commonly avoid their partners or withdraw when conflict occurs (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman, 1993a, 1993b; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Metz & Dwyer, 1993). However, Klinetob and Smith (1996) pointed out that the studies that found this gender difference tended to ask couples to discuss topics that were more relevant to females than to males (e.g., intimacy, child-rearing practices). Klinetob and Smith had couples hold two discussions, one for the topic that each person considered the most important to them. The results of the study indicated significantly more women demand/man withdraw behavior during the discussion of the woman's top issue, but significantly more man demand/woman withdraw behavior during discussions of the man's most important issue. An interesting question about relationship conflict is whether there are biological gender differences in response to conflict that may produce the patterns noted among distressed couples. There is some empirical evidence that men and women react differently physiologically to couple conflict. Gottman and Levenson (1992) reported that men, compared to women, react to disagreements with a heart rate of 10-12 beats per minute more, experience accelerated respiration, and exhibit higher levels of epinephrine release in their endocrine system, which may facilitate quicker and more severe reactions.

**6. Whatever actual gender tendencies may exist, among satisfied couples gender-typed conflict resolution behaviors are less likely to be found** (Metz & Dwyer, 1993). Members of satisfied couples tend to use similar conflict resolution styles in order to reconcile their differences and achieve mutually acceptable conflict resolution.

**7. Although promoted even in some approaches to couples therapy, there is no empirical evidence that expression of verbal or physical aggression is ever helpful** in an intimate relationship. Acceptance of differences is affirming and constructive (Jacobsen & Christensen, 1994).