

# Assessing the Five Features of Relationship Conflict

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*In evaluating relationship conflict, several qualities may characterize the disagreement and offer unique information about a particular couple's conflict. The following areas of assessment summarize the basic areas to probe during a clinical interview. The interview material can be supplemented by self-report questionnaires.*

## 1. Conflict ENVIRONMENT

This feature considers the “**Who**,” “**Where**,” and “**When**” of the couple’s conflict. What are the descriptive patterns of conflict?

### *Probes of remote features:*

- What individual personality traits, mental health difficulties (e.g., depression, anxiety), or unresolved issues in your personal history may play a role in the conflicts that occur between the two of you?
- When you and your partner have gotten into conflict or disagreement in the past, what positive ways have you dealt with it? What negative ways?
- What unsettling events in the past have influenced the way(s) you and your partner approach conflict resolution now?

### *Probes of immediate features:*

- Do you currently have any medical problems that seem to have an effect on your relationship? If so, please describe.
- Where do you usually have conflict?
- Describe any patterns in the times when you typically disagree/argue/fight? Any particular days? Any particular time(s) of the day?
- What happens before the conflict -- what circumstances seem to “set the stage”?
- Who else is present or nearby when you have conflict?
- How long does the disagreement typically last?
- What happens after the disagreement?

## 2. Conflict SUBJECT or AREA

This feature considers “**What**” the couple is fighting about? What subject or topic becomes the focus of the fighting.

### *Probes:*

- How much do you disagree about each of the following topics?

_____ religious practices	_____ parenting	_____ making decisions
_____ politics/ideas	_____ lifestyle/recreation	_____ household chores
_____ sex	_____ sense of humor	_____ career/work
_____ finances	_____ past histories	_____ alcohol/drugs
_____ friends	_____ how to act or behave	
_____ in-laws/relatives	_____ goals in life/philosophy/ideas	
_____ time together	_____ other:	

### 3. Conflict SEVERITY

Severity combines the **frequency** and **intensity** of the couple's conflict. *Probes:*

- How frequently do you have disagreements or conflicts in your relationship?
- How emotionally intense are your relationship disagreements?
- How long do they last?
- How upset are you / your partner about the relationship conflict or disagreement?

### 4. The STYLES of Interaction

This feature considers "**How**" the partners respond to each other when disagreement occurs? What are the behavioral patterns, such as assertion, aggression, playfulness, withdrawal, submission, and denial.

*Probes:*

- How do you deal with your partner when you have a disagreement? If I was watching, what would I see you doing?
- How do you engage your partner during conflict: cooperate, confront, act playfully?
- How do you avoid your partner during conflict: yield, evade, withdraw?
- How do you perceive that your partner typically behaves toward you when you disagree? If I was watching, what would I see your partner doing?

### 5. The MEANING of Relationship Conflict

This feature considers "**Why**" this couple is fighting. The meaning of conflict involves the goals that each partner has, which appear to be blocked, or potentially blocked, by the intentions or behaviors of the other person. What does the disagreement mean to each member of the couple, in terms of his or her goals, and the attributions that the person makes about the partner?

*Probes:*

- What thoughts typically go through your mind about your partner and the conflict when the two of you are having a disagreement?
- What is it that you focus on that is upsetting to you when you have a conflict?
- When you and your partner get into conflict or disagreement, what do you think causes the conflict?
- What is upsetting to you about the fact that you and your partner have a conflict or disagreement in this particular area? Describe any ways in which the conflicts between the two of you are based on having different beliefs about how your relationship should be.
- What do you expect will result when the two of you discuss important topics in your relationship?
- Ideally, what would you like to see happen when you and your partner disagree about an area of your relationship?
- What would ultimately calm you or make you feel satisfied when a conflict occurs between the two of you?