

Therapists as Experts in Conflict Resolution

Couples entering therapy typically list conflict resolution as one of their main treatment goals. For successful treatment, they want their therapist to guide them to safe and satisfying resolution of these topics of tension.

Therapists therefore need conflict resolution expertise. They need to be able to lead the win-win waltz.

Couples themselves also need this expertise. Effective conflict resolution skills insure that a couple's differences will lead to constructive discussion, and that their partnership discourse will bring mutual satisfaction.

The Win-Win Waltz

Step One: Express initial positions.

She: I want to renovate our house.

He: No way.

Step Two: Clarify the underlying concerns

She: It's so dark and gloomy; I'd love to brighten it.

He: I'm panicked about spending a fortune that we don't have.

Step Three: Create win-win solutions responsive to all the concerns of both participants.

She: Let's invite a group of friends over for a house-painting weekend. We could paint the walls white, plus some yellow, or peach, or lime!

He: We can afford paint. The colors sound a bit fruity but fun. As long as all we need to buy is paint, let's do it!

These three steps may seem obvious. Yet, most emotional disturbances are manifest in mis-steps along this sequence.

For instance, disengaged couples fail to take the first step. Fearing conflict, they avoid launching discussions.

Argumentative couples take the first step but then draw battle lines. Instead of exploring the concerns underlying each of their preferences, they engage in power struggles over whose initial position shall prevail. In mediation language, they get stuck in positional bargaining. They need to learn to explore underlying concerns, and to think in terms of "yes, and" instead of either/or and who is right and who is wrong.

Personal character patterns each have characteristic conflict patterns. Narcissists make unilateral decisions, forgetting that partnership involves two people. People with depressive tendencies bow excessively to the desires of the other with insufficient consideration to their own concerns. Therapists therefore need to coach narcissists on including their partner in decision-making, and to teach people with depression to add their concerns to decision dialogue.

From Conflict to Resolution uses conflict resolution skills to expedite assessment and treatment. **The Angry Couple** (video) shows these skills in action. **The Power**

of Two, excellent for therapy homework assignments, teaches the skills couples need for marriage success.