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Reference:

1. Gottman, JM (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically based marital therapy.* (New York, NY: WW Norton).

— Understanding Relationships —

We form relationships through repeated contacts with other people. Some of those contacts are enjoyable while others are not. Early thinking about conflict presumed that close relationships suffered when anger followed anger (*i.e., when both people 'fought fire with fire'*). However, more recent thinking suggests this is untrue. Studies following married couples over time revealed that anger in response to anger occurs just as often in healthy, long-lasting relationships as in troubled and unsuccessful ones. A better predictor of whether close relationships succeed or fail is how the parties manage their conflict. Do they try to stay connected during the conflict, building closeness and understanding? Do they back away, allowing emotional deadness to creep in? Or, do they turn against each other and create deeper wounds? Becoming aware of how you interact during conflict is a key to maintaining successful relationships.

The following common behaviours are toxic to relationships.

1. **Criticism** can be destructive when it attacks another person's character, suggesting that something bad is part of their personality (*e.g., You always leave my car empty. What's wrong with you?*) The antidote is to talk about how a particular behaviour makes you feel and express your need instead. (*e.g., When you leave my car without gas it feels like you think my time isn't as important as yours. I need to know that you value my time.*)
2. **Contempt** refers to statements or behaviours that communicate one person's superiority over the other (*e.g., eye-rolling, mocking their voice or mannerisms, and correcting their grammar*). Manage contempt by finding things you can genuinely appreciate and respect in the other person (*e.g., Even though I struggle with it sometimes, I admire how you stand your ground.*).
3. **Defensiveness** occurs when one person denies responsibility for a problem or acts like an innocent victim, implying that conflict is the other person's fault (*e.g., Why didn't you remind me that I had an appointment?!*).

Be part of the solution by acknowledging the role you played for even small parts of the problem (*e.g., I took it for granted that you would remind me.*).

4. **Stonewalling** occurs when either party 'leaves' the interaction by tuning out, looking away or doing anything to withdraw. Although stonewalling is often an attempt to reduce one's own physical or emotional discomfort, it actually increases the other person's discomfort, which can intensify the conflict. Avoid stonewalling by recognizing when you are becoming overwhelmed and find strategies to soothe yourself so you can remain calm and connected with the other person.

How you interact during conflict is key to maintaining successful relationships.

Improving Relationships at Shift Cognitive Therapy

Couples, families and others in close relationships are often unaware of how they may be slowly eroding and damaging their connections with each other. At Shift Cognitive Therapy we help people examine their relationships from a different perspective, identifying behaviours and attitudes that weaken relationships and teaching skills that foster closeness and connection.

Services are covered by extended health benefit plans and are tax deductible.

Contact Shift Cognitive Therapy for more information about the treatment of relationship and communication issues.

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