

Therapists as Experts in Conflict Resolution

Susan Heitler, Ph.D.

www.therapyhelp.com

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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 the topics that have generated their tensions.

Therapists need conflict resolution expertise to be able to lead their clients effectively and efficiently through the steps of the win-win waltz.

Couples themselves also need this expertise so they can make shared decisions cooperatively, resolve their differences, and clean up after upsets on their own.

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 concern.

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!

The three steps to win-win solutions may seem obvious. Yet, most emotional disturbances stem from missteps along this sequence.

For instance, disengaged couples, that is, couples who have "grown apart," typically fail to take the first of the three steps. 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, fighting a tug-of-war 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, "but..." 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, insufficiently considering 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.

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