



“*Sooner rather than Later*”

10 Steps to healthy resolution of couples’ issues

Every couple needs to develop a good working relationship that enables them to resolve differences and solve problems. Some couples do this well while others do not. When problems are addressed rather than ignored, resentment and tension do not build up. When couples have the tools to address problems, they are more likely to use them. This results in less conflict and more good times together.

Avoiding conflict is a common mistake. One of the ways couples do this is to dismiss issues that crop up as too small to deal with. However, small issues dismissed tend to build up over time. Often a big fight breaks out due to the backlog of small issues. In the long run it is much healthier to deal with small issues as they come up.

The following exercise provides a guide for couples to quickly, easily and effectively address issues *Sooner Rather Than Later*.

When these instructions are followed as given, the exercise will help you and your partner:

- Choose an issue and define it.
- Set aside a manageable amount of time in which to address it.
- Keep you both on track as you work with it.
- Listen to each other’s point of view including wants and needs.
- Brainstorm possible solutions.
- Agree on which solution to follow through on.

It is recommended that couples use a time-limited format to listen to each other’s issues, stay on track during a discussion, avoid bringing up past hurts and failures, avoid deflecting from the issue in focus and use the creative resources of the relationship to solve the issue.

Deal with issues when they are small and resentment in the relationship is minimal. They are much easier to resolve *Sooner rather than Later*.

PROCEDURE

You will need about 30 minutes.

STEP ONE:

PICK AN ISSUE - SET A TIME

One person chooses an issue to be resolved. Choose only one issue and leave other issues that may come up to another time.

That person invites his or her partner to engage in the Sooner rather than Later exercise.

Together set a time when both of you are free to devote 30 minutes to your relationship.

Make that time a priority in your relationship. Do not cancel it unless it is imperative to do so. If you have to cancel it make a new date that you will be able to keep. (If couples were to treat their spouse/partner as their best client, best student, best customer, best patient, best contractor, best supplier, best employee, etc., relationships would be much better.) In healthy relationship couples make their spouse/partner a priority in their lives.

Do not expect or demand your partner to address an issue right away. Your partner may or may not be ready. If necessary, give your partner some time to think about it.

STEP TWO:

PLAN FOR AFTER

Plan something fun/pleasant to do after the 30 minutes is over. (No sex)

STEP THREE:

OPEN UP. LOOSEN UP

Open your mind to the process.

Keep in mind the following:

Be respectful of each other.

No one has to fix anything,

No one is right and no one is wrong.

Allow the relationship to solve the problem.

STEP FOUR:

EXPRESS YOURSELVES

5 minutes each.

Each person takes 5 minutes to express his/her concerns about the issue **without being interrupted by the other**. Allow for periods of silence during the 5 minutes of talking. (Often, after a period of silence, the concern deepens to another level.) Do not take longer than five minutes. Some people tend to repeat themselves over and over and lose the effect of what they are trying to get across.

STEP FIVE:

REFLECT EACH OTHER.

2.5 minutes each.

Each person expresses what he/she thinks the **other person's** concerns are. That is, their thoughts, feelings and behaviors relevant to the issue. Allow for clarification.

Say: "You think....(about the issue)....."

and/or "You feel.....(about the issue)....."

and/or "You (describe behaviors).because....."

STEP SIX:

BRAINSTORM – Write ideas down

5 minutes.

Brainstorm together, allowing each person in the couple to suggest as many solutions as he/she can think of. **Do not evaluate or judge any suggestion** during this process, as fear of criticism will shut down the creative process. Be aware of your non-verbal communications, as partners and spouses are very sensitive to non-verbal messages. Allow each other to suggest silly, impossible and/or exaggerated solutions. Have fun with this. It stimulates the creative process. A silly solution may generate a plausible solution.

Add in what you know about how other couples handle this issue without thinking that any one way is the right way. You are exploring all possible ideas. The right way for the two of you is whichever way works for both of you. How you decide to resolve this issue may be very different from any other couple, and that's OK.

STEP SEVEN:

AGREE ON A SOLUTION TO TRY

10 minutes

From all the solutions, choose one that you think will work. Look for a solution that each person will be 80 percent satisfied with. This is not an either/or situation. Look for a win-win solution. If one person is unhappy with the solution, it won't work. If one person tries to press his/her solution on the other, it won't work.

A new solution may emerge out of this process.

Say what you are willing to do, not what you're not willing to do.

If a solution looks possible but isn't quite right for your spouse ask, "What would you need to have happen or changed to get this solution to work for you?" (Caution - do not try to force a solution on your spouse or try to manipulate your spouse into accepting a solution - it will likely backfire if you do.)

Do not refer to past times when things did not work. This format is for now and the future.

If you cannot agree on any solution, pick one that you agree to try.

STEP EIGHT:

PLAN HOW YOU WILL PUT THE SOLUTION INTO ACTION

Agree to put this solution into effect. Plan how and when you will do it. (Note: Be prepared to work out bugs in the plan along the way. Set another time to give and get feedback about how well it is working.)

STEP NINE:

IF YOU ARE NOT IN AGREEMENT

If you still cannot agree on a solution, decide on another time and set another date and go through the process again. Until then, get more information about possible solutions. For example, read books, ask other people how they handle this issue, and bring this information to the next brainstorming session.

STEP TEN:

GO AND HAVE FUN

Let go of the issue for now. You know that there is a time set to address it again, so it will not get ignored. It will percolate while you are involved in other activities. When you come back to it, you will both be fresh about it.

Repeat this process until you've reached a solution that works for both of you.

If you are unable to find 30 minutes to do this, consider that it means you are avoiding dealing with important issues in your relationship. If this is the case, your relationship may be in deeper trouble than you realize. Seeking professional help may be a necessary next step if you intend to stay in your relationship.

Avoiding issues creates more problems than it solves.

NOTE: These procedures are a guideline. Adapt this format to your relationship.

Bea Mackay, 2007 ©