

# Better Conflict Cheat Sheet

*“I can’t do this anymore!”*

If the ways you argue as a couple leave you saying or thinking something like this, and feeling frustrated or worse...stuck\*, here are some approaches to help you move through your conflict to make real progress:

## 1. Fight for “we” over “me”.

Make it a shared priority to search for a resolution you can both live with, which may not be either of your ‘perfect’ or ‘logical’ solutions.

## 2. Listen closely to fully understand each other.

You may need to take time apart if the issue is a major one. Process, pray, meditate, write your thoughts down to share them later. When you’re listening, stay focused and don’t let your thoughts turn to what you’re going to say in response. Your first and most important task is to repeat back what (s)he said in your own words to ensure you do understand.

## 3. Adopt an attitude of curiosity.

It’s too easy to fall into old patterns of being critical, cynical or assuming you already know everything your partner has to say. When you ask “why?”, assume that there’s something you don’t know yet, and that your partner has something valuable to offer.

## 4. Start with “why”, not the details of “what”, “where”, “who”, or “how”.

The question “why?” reveals underlying beliefs and values, and will likely be more unifying than the more detailed questions. As much as possible, find common ground.

## 5. For tricky issues, do what you need to do to stay calm and under control.

If it’s an issue that may become over-heated, pay attention to your body’s signals that you’re being triggered (flushing, starting to sweat, increased pulse, rising anger or gripping fear). If you’re triggered, take a long enough break that you’re both calm again before carrying on.



# Before You Split

## 6. Pause to reflect before you respond. Slow is your friend.

You've probably seen where knee-jerk reactions have led you in past arguments. Victor Frankl said it well: "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

## 7. Keep your tone kind and respectful.

Maybe your voice raises a little when you're passionate about something. You both may have different past experiences with voice volume – what's 'yelling' and what is not. Ancient wisdom says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

## 8. Care how your partner feels; avoid 'blame and shame'

Seek to understand how each of you feels about this issue. The more you 'get' how you're each feeling, the more you build your bond with each other. Ignoring or dismissing the feelings of your partner, or telling them their feelings are wrong has a negative impact on your heartfelt connection.

## 9. Lean into your collective creativity as you search for solutions.

Brainstorm. You have more creative potential than you think. Since a 'bad' idea can lead you in the direction of a great one, don't immediately throw out those you don't agree with. Chances are, the potential resolutions aren't binary and the best solution may be one you have to work on to discover.

## 10. Invite someone in to help.

There are some problems the two of you won't solve on your own. Some issues you may not find a resolution to – there's no perfect relationship! If you're experiencing distress, then see what a marriage counsellor, mediator or third -party expert such as a doctor or financial planner has to say.

\*humiliating, belittling or other harmful behaviour is not okay – see the Article entitled "Is your Marriage Unhappy or Harmful?" at [toninieuwhof.com](http://toninieuwhof.com)

"Never assume that loud is strong and quiet is weak." – George Santayana



# How to Prepare for a TOUGH Conversation

## 1. Set the stage.

Choose an aesthetically pleasing environment. Pick some flowers. Light a candle. Make sure the setting feels relaxing and not distracting.

## 2. Arrive fed, rested and energized.

Avoid having a potentially challenging conversation when you're running on empty – physically or emotionally. Have a brief nap if you're sleep deprived or eat something first if you're hungry.

## 3. Pray before you start.

Invite the Holy Spirit to help you bring love, truth and grace into your interaction.

## 4. Remind yourselves about each other's personalities in conflict.

Now is a good time to remind yourselves of how you both navigate conflict differently. Be intentional about reigning in your own unhealthy tendencies.

## 5. Agree on the agenda item(s).

It helps if you both agree on the primary issue, to keep you focused. If one of you strays into another topic, park it until you've dealt with the primary one or schedule another time to come back to it.



# Before You Split

## 6. Be intentional about healthy conflict resolution.

Review the Better Conflict Cheat Sheet before you get started. In a nutshell, treat each other with kindness and respect. No personal insults, jabs or sarcastic remarks, however subtle. When you're disagreeing, "you're just like your mother" is probably not a compliment!

## 7. Create an umbrella of safety.

Effectively resolving a complex issue may require brainstorming various solutions. To brainstorm, you will be more successful if you both agree not to react emotionally to the 'out there' options either of you generate. An idea that may be objectively 'crazy' may lead you to think of another option that is better and workable. So, decide in advance that this conversation happens under an 'umbrella of safety' – that is, under the protective cover of your mutual commitment to cultivating safe space for each other's emotions and ideas - and keep the driving rains of criticism, cynicism, irritability, fear and so on from washing away your collective problem-solving powers.

## 8. Don't believe the lie that you're not creative.

Some people say, as I have in the past as well, "I'm just not creative." Are you a human child of the living God? You may not be a painter or a designer, but you have creativity, whether you've fostered it or not.

## 9. Refuse pessimism.

Remember King David's words of confidence, "With your help I can advance against a troop; With my God I can scale a wall." Psalm 18: 29. You can accomplish what seems beyond your capacity when you lean into Jesus and depend on His strength.

## 10. Debrief and adjust.

After this planning meeting, perhaps a day or two later, debrief to reflect on how your conversation went from both of your perspectives. Was there a technique or skill you'd like to bring forward into your future meetings? Were there aspects of your communication process you'd prefer to avoid in the future?

