

Causes of conflict in romantic relationships



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As long as people have gotten romantically involved with one another, there has been conflict within those relationships. Some people argue that conflict is bad for the relationship and will ultimately lead to the demise of that relationship. Others argue that the conflict is good for the relationship and will help it to flourish. Conflict can be both positive and negative for a relationship. It can both help and hinder the relationship. No matter what stage the relationship is in and whether or not the relationship is being helped or hurt, conflict is always happening in different contexts. Conflict is also caused by numerous reasons. These reasons include a lack of interpersonal communication skills, low levels of trust, physical abuse, an individual's past history in relationships, and many others.

Not many people in the world can say that they have had a 100% successful romantic relationship. Looking at the high divorce rate in the United States can prove this. However, there are those couples that have remained together for numerous years. As I am sure that conflict played a big part in ending a large number of relationships, I am also sure that the successful relationships have had their fair share of conflict and have even been helped by that conflict. In this paper, I have constructed nine propositions relating conflict to certain behaviors within romantic relationships. Each one will be defined, summarized, and supported according to the available research.

P1- Women that have been abused in the past are more likely to remain in an abusive relationship.

Unfortunately, thousands of women are abused everyday in the United States. This abuse can be physical, verbal, or psychological. Women, by

nature, seem to hold a higher sense of personal worth when involved in a relationship. From birth, women are taught by society to conform to certain expectations and definitions of what it means to be a female. Growing up, women always here phrases such as “ That’s not lady like” or “ You should be treated like a lady”. What does it mean to be a lady? According to most societies, it means that women are the weaker sex and are always in need of a man to take care of them. Men are taught, from birth, what it means to be a man. This definition is usually one of dominance and control. This is shown in phrases such as “ I am the man of the house”.

When a woman is abused earlier in life she is trained in that frame of mind that women are the conformists and men are the dictators. “ Violence by men is a major component of the larger social hierarchy of gender.” (Woods, 1999, p. 481). The abuse in these relationships usually instills feelings of inferiority, which goes along with their societal learning from childhood. Not only does this abuse give feelings of inferiority but also feelings of shame which lead to a sense of obligation to conserve the relationship to the best of her ability. According to a study done by K. M. Landenburger (1988), most women in these instances gave up on themselves before they gave up on their partners. If giving up on themselves, the logical conclusion is that they will eventually see the abuse as a social norm and will expect that in future relationships, thus repeating the cycle over and over again.

P2- Women who have had more sexual partners increase their likelihood of abuse in a romantic relationship.

Again, in this proposition, abuse is defined as physical, verbal, or psychological. As in any situation, the more exposure that a person has to a certain element, the more risk is involved pertaining to that element. In this case, women who have more sexual partners are exposing themselves to a greater risk factor of being intimate with that one that will engage in some sort of abusive behavior. With the increased exposure to a number of intimate partners, there comes a decreased sense of control for the women involved in these relationships. (Neufeld, McNamara, Ertl, 1999). When a person loses their sense of control, they become vulnerable and susceptible to incidence of abuse.

According to the Abusive Behavior Inventory, (Shephard and Campbell, 1992 shown in Neufeld, McNamara, Ertl 1999) the instance of abuse with a high number of partners went up significantly

in all aspects of the definition. However it seemed that the highest level of abuse occurred psychologically. The ABI also indicated that 5% of undergraduate females had over seven sexual partners in a six-month period. This group showed the highest incidence of abuse within those relationships. It seems to me that any people who expose themselves to a high number such as this are going to put themselves in a situation where the abuse would be expected, to an outside observer.

P3- High levels of insecurity cause high levels of dependency on romantic relationships.

Dependency is defined as the reliance of an individual on another person for the satisfaction of his/her needs. (Attridge, Berscheid, & Sprecher, 1998). In <https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-conflict-in-romantic-relationships/>

this case, insecurity can be defined as relational meaning a person will have doubts and uncertainties about the relationship that he/she is in. Insecurity is a sign that a person is lacking a perceived need in their life. Insecurity would then be the counterpart of dependency as a person would be lacking something therefore depending on something else. This is explained as “ Theory views the degree to which a person is dependent on a specific relationship as a function, not only of the number and importance of the needs the relationship currently satisfies for the individual, but also as a function of the extent to which those needs cannot be satisfied by alternative means.” (Attridge, Berscheid, & Sprecher, 1998, p. 33). When a person believes both that a relationship fills specific needs and that there are a lack of alternatives to fulfilling those needs a greater level of dependence is going to occur.

Different factors that may lead to insecurity include the appearance of another person that the partner appears to have an attraction to, or a perceived lack of interest from the partner. Whatever the cause for the insecurity, it seems to always lead to a further dependence on that relationship. The reason for this is a fear of losing the relationship, therefore resulting in a further need for the counterpart to preserve the relationship.

P4- Women are more likely than men to want a higher level of closeness in a romantic relationship.

Closeness in any relationship is important in order for the relationship to flourish. I believe that most people involved in romantic relationships feel this way and desire that closeness. However, it is my contention that women

perceive that closeness as playing a much bigger role than men do. As previously stated in Proposition 1, men and women are taught different things about gender roles from the time they are born. Women are “supposed” to be the caretakers of the relationships and men are “supposed” to be the hunter and gatherers that are independent and don’t need to always have that closeness. (Feeney, 1999).

In regards to closeness in romantic relationships, the partner that is more likely to initiate conversation about issues affecting the relationship is more likely to be the one who puts more value on closeness. In contrast, the partner who puts less value on closeness is more likely to avoid these conversations. In a study done by Judith Feeney, 37 out of 72 couples that were interviewed revealed that there was a difference of opinion when it came to the issues of closeness and distance. This doesn’t necessarily show that these women felt that the closeness factor was more important than the men did. As one man interviewed stated:

“ She didn’t seem to really want me to much of a part of her life. Because of that, because I hate being neglected, I tended to react by neglecting her. Like I was trying to find faults within her so I could make myself feel better. I was always trying to find faults with her.” (cf. Feeney, 1999).

This man clearly felt that closeness was more important to the relationship than his female counterpart. Despite this man’s view on closeness, 26 out of the 37 that reported different ideas about closeness and distance, said that the female in the relationship held a higher view of importance on closeness than the man did in their romantic relationship.

P5- People with a high level of distrust in their partner's feelings towards them, are more likely to have unstable romantic relationships.

All relationships need to be based on trust if they are going to succeed. If you don't trust the partner you are with or vice-versa, then that relationship will never have the strong foundation that relationships need in order to succeed. Distrust in a partner's feelings will form an emotional barrier between the two participants that are involved with each other. This barrier will eventually become the main focus of the relationship thereby halting all opportunities to focus on other aspects of that relationship. (Simpson, Grich, & Ickes, 1999). For example, if a man distrusts his significant other, he may always ask if she is happy, or if anything is bothering her. She always says that she is happy and nothing is wrong, but she doesn't understand why he keeps asking. This eventually becomes more than an annoyance to her and she finally starts telling him to stop asking. The man then thinks that she is mad and has further distrust in her feelings. This whole scenario demonstrates how the focus shifts from the relationship to his constant distrust in her feelings.

P6- People with low self-esteem are more likely to experience feelings of jealousy in romantic relationships.

Jealousy is one of the most powerful and dangerous feelings when dealing with conflict within romantic relationships. (Guerrero, 1998). Jealousy can cause depression, distrust, and /or anger, all of which are very harmful to relationships. When one person in a relationship has a low level of self-esteem, that person has feelings of inadequacy about him/herself in some

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aspect of his life. The inadequacies that the person feels causes him/her to feel like his partner can get something from someone or something else that he/she can't give. (Guerrero, 1998). Therefore, when the partner shows interest in something else (e. g. another potential mate, a job, or a new found friend), the other half of that relationship is consumed with threatening feelings that his partner is getting something, that he/she perceives as something that he/she can't give, from a source outside of their relationship. These feelings will cause conflict within him/her as well as within the relationship.

Because one person in the relationship has low self-esteem, he/she believes that he needs the relationship but his/her partner doesn't necessarily need him/her. (Attridge, Berscheid, & Sprecher, 1998). This will also cause the person to feel threatened when he/she thinks that there is a potential threat to that " security blanket". This threat will be shown in the form of jealousy.

P7- Men who are controlling to their partners are more likely to become physically abusive.

In many romantic relationships, one of the partners feels the need to be controlling. They usually do this by " restricting their partners social interactions, monitoring their activities, and reducing their decision-making power". (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999, p. 251). Men, by nature, have the need to feel that they are always in control. This is especially evident in romantic relationships. Some men however take it to the extreme. They feel the need to watch and control their partners every move. Sometimes this controlling behavior can turn into violent behavior. If a man, who is controlling, feels like

he is losing that control, he will many times move to more extreme measures to gain that control back. A survey done on battered women showed that most women reported their partner to be controlling and restrictive before the physical abuse began. Furthermore, most battering men reported that before they became physically abusive to their intimate partners, they made “ excessive attempts to limit the independence, decision making power, and social networks of their partner, in some cases they even felt entitled to control them”. (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999, p. 253).

P8- Couples that express empathy in conflict are more likely to develop a stable romantic relationship.

When in conflict it is always important to express empathy in order for the conflict to be constructive. Empathy can be explained as having a basic understanding of what the other person is thinking and feeling. Empathy, in my opinion, is one of the key ingredients to having successful communication. It is seen as being so important in romantic relationships that people have developed empathy-training workshops for people involved in romantic relationships. Many scholars have reported that the two main components of empathy are listening and suspending one’s own thoughts and feelings. (Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999). Both of these components are essential to developing and maintaining a stable and healthy romantic relationship.

Listening can be explained as a conscious attempt to listen to all information that a partner is trying to communicate to their counterpart. If one partner never listens to the other, it is impossible to know and understand what the

other person is thinking or feeling unless that person is a mind reader.

Without that willingness to listen it is therefore impossible to be empathic.

Suspending one's own thoughts and feelings is of equal importance. "A person cannot show any signs of empathy if that person is overly focused upon his/her self." (Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999, p. 236).

For example if a woman is expressing her concerns to her male partner about his lack of interest in going to the ballet, it is impossible for the man to be empathic if he is only focused on how much he hates the ballet. This then leads to conflict. However, if the man understands her wants and puts his aside, it will show empathy and promote better levels of communication. This will in turn result in a more stable relationship. This can also work in the exact opposite context where the woman understands how much the man dislikes the ballet and puts her feelings aside. This too will develop better communication practice.

P9- Men are more likely to withdraw from a serious discussion in a romantic relationship than women are.

Men are always said to be the ones in the relationship who want to avoid conflict. This is why I believe that men are more likely to avoid serious discussions about the relationship with their partner. Most of the time when there is a conflict between a couple that is romantically involved with each other, it is the sign that there is a problem in some aspect of the relationship. Most men learn throughout life to be problem solvers. This comes to be a problem if the conflict or "serious discussion" involves a problem that the man is unable to solve. If this is the case, the man is more

likely to withdraw from that “ serious discussion” than the woman is. (Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999).

This male withdraw pattern can also be explained by the fact that women are many times seen as having less control in a relationship and are therefore looking to change it. This has to start by discussing the relationship. Males on the other hand are many times seen as having more control in the relationship and therefore less open to the idea of change. This starts by withdrawing from the discussion about the relationship. (Vogel, Wester, Heesacker, 1999).

As you can see, conflict happens in all aspects of romantic relationships. Like I stated earlier in this paper, sometimes it is helpful such as the use of empathy. It is also sometimes hurtful as in the case where a more controlling male is more likely to become physically abusive. However, whether it is good or bad, it is unavoidable. In these nine propositions I have shown a small fraction of a small percent of the different contexts that conflicts can occur in romantic relationships. Whether or not you agree with my propositions, the main goal of this was to study them. As there will always be romantic relationships in existence, there will also be conflict within those relationships. If other conflicts are studied, it is conceivable that methods can be developed to make all conflicts within romantic relationships positive that will result in positive outcomes.