



Conflict Resolution

By Bill Cloke, PhD
www.billcloke.com

There is an acronym WAVE and it stands for:

Wait

Acknowledge

Validate

Empathize

Step 1. Wait. When a conflict erupts tempers flare no rational conversation can take place. So, it is best to wait and calm down. This is a time for reflection. Think about what is happening within and between you and your partner. You can take 20 minutes to two days but agree that no matter what you will talk about what is bothering you. When people are angry, they are thinking through the fight or flight part of their brain that has to do with survival. When you calm down, you're thinking through the front part of your brain where compassion and understanding reside. So, it's vital that you let yourself cool off, so you can think and talk more rationally. No arguments are resolved in an angry state. You have a right to your anger but it's important to know how to manage it so you can regulate your emotions.

Anger is a secondary emotion and is triggered by hurt, humiliation, guilt, shame (some form of humiliation) sadness, and emotional pain. Anger is best seen as an indicator that something is going on underneath. Anger lets us know that something is wrong; some internal land mine has been triggered. Think about what is making you angry but also what you may have done to make your partner angry. Anger is a complex emotion because it can be layered. There can literally be 5 different reasons why you are angry, and it takes time to find out what is stimulating your anger.

Step 2. Acknowledgment Acknowledgement lets your partner know that you hear

them. When arguments escalate it's because there is no acknowledgement. Conflicts escalate because your partner does not feel heard so they up the ante and say it louder. When your partner feels acknowledged it de-escalates the conflict. Conflict and anger break the emotional connection. The best method for reconnection is to acknowledge what your partner is saying or feeling. Don't just repeat word for word but summarize your understanding in a way that communicates your sense of what your partner is feeling and thinking. Acknowledgement breaks the negative cycle of attack/defend, defend/defend or attack/attack conflict styles. Acknowledgement does not mean **agreement** it simply means that you hear what is being said

Step 3. Validation. There is almost always a valid reason for why people get angry. Validation is an understanding *why* your partner is upset. During your talk after the cool down take some time to find out what is bothering your partner so you can validate their right to feel the way they do. Validation is way of communicating that you understand what your partner is experiencing. When couples are having trouble, it is often because they are too busy defending to really comprehend what is being said or felt. Try to not make assumptions without checking them out. Taking it personally, criticizing, defending, contempt, swearing, name calling or stonewalling are communication killers. Acknowledgement and validation break the negative cycle. Stay in the moment and don't bring up the past or things said in confidence.

Step 2. Empathize. The most important activity you can engage in as you are calming down and allowing the anger to subside is empathy. Empathy can be described as "Vicarious Introspection." It is the activity of seeing what your partner is experiencing from behind their eyes. Empathy is not sympathy; it is objectively understanding what is going on from the point of view of the other. Empathy involves looking, seeing and understanding. Then you can each take responsibility for your part of the problem no matter how small it may be in your mind. Empathy is especially difficult because it is an abstract thought process and requires self-knowledge, so you know where you leave off and your partner begins.

4. Brainstorm about the Problem. Once each person feels understood and has tried to voice their concerns, you can make a statement about what each of you think the problem is. Something like: "When you ignore me, I get angry and then you get angry

with me. I think the problem is that we are spending too much time arguing about what happened instead of talking about what each of us wants and needs moving forward.” Once there is an agreement about what the problem is start brainstorming for possible solutions. “In the future if I tell you that I feel ignored, start by letting me know that you understand instead of getting angry with me. Then let me know you hear me.” By placing solutions in a future context, you can focus on results rather than criticism and blame. Communication works best when you talk about your own feelings, wants and needs regarding a solution in the future as opposed to arguing about who did what to whom. In my experience when any two people try to talk about what happened they never agree, so why not move forward. When people feel judged or criticized, they feel trapped in a bad place they can’t get out of. Instead offer a future based solution where each of you can succeed. Solution focused discussions are the best way to resolve disagreements and conflicts.

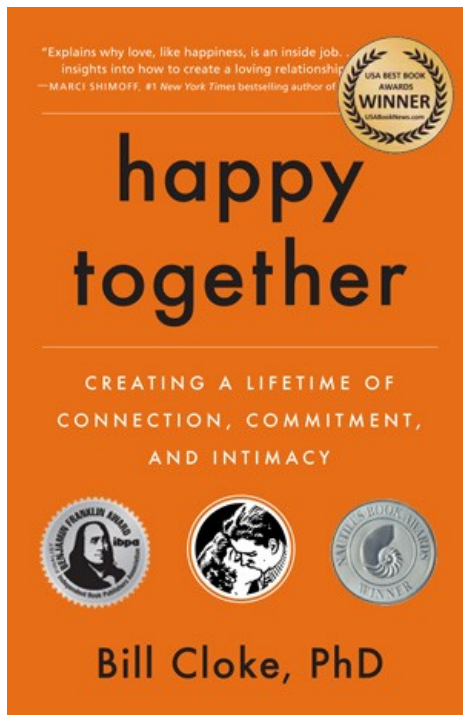
Step 5. Make a Plan. At this point each person can make a statement about what they will do next time. "I promise to listen to you, so you won't have to yell to be heard." Develop an overall plan of action. Break it down into workable parts. What is each person going to do to improve their behavior? There are no good guys or bad guys, each person has a part to play in the problem and in the solution. If you can see what you are doing to create the problem, it enables you to understand what both of you can do to make it better.

Step 6. Take Action and Get Feedback. Trying to do those things that have been agreed upon demonstrates a commitment and concern for the needs and feelings of your partner. When they can see you trying to do those things that you have agreed to it creates more love and intimacy. This is how conflict resolution can be a source of intimacy. At this point it’s important to provide feedback as to how the plan is going. Take time to talk about the positive aspects and then work towards considering what will improve the process. Being compassionate, understanding, respectful are the key processes in conflict resolution. If you are not doing one of these, you are off track. Doing things that you know are important to your partner creates good feeling.

It is of paramount importance that you understand that the way you treat your partner during conflicts can either create love and understanding or break the connection and destroy trust. The health of relationships is dependent on how you handle conflict. Conflict is natural and happens with all couples. Conflict resolution is reliant on each person looking at themselves to understand what they specifically can do to make the

relationship work better. Your concern, respect and caring for one another, your ability to put your relationship first and place the love you have for one another at the center of any discussion or conflict will create more harmony and positive solutions. All resolution begins with self-reflection, moving toward a willingness to listen, and ends with compassion and empathy. This is a roadmap to follow. Clearly life is very complex and there are no perfect solutions but knowing where you are going will create shorter conflicts and more positive outcomes.

Obviously, this chart is an idealized roadmap to resolution. Conflict is never seamless or perfect. This is a template to come back to and provides a positive direction. The values here are real and they work. If you can implement this process, you will absolutely have better outcomes.



More insightful information on solving conflicts and relationships in general can be found in Dr. Cloke's book: ***HAPPY TOGETHER: Creating a Lifetime of Connection, Commitment, and Intimacy*** available for purchase online at amazon.com.

“*Happy Together* explains why love, like happiness, is an inside job. Dr. Bill Cloke gives great insights into how to create a loving relationship that lasts.”

— Marci Shimoff, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Happy for No Reason*

Please visit HappyTogetherBook.com or BillCloke.com for more information.