**Scenario**

**Scenario Summary**

Leonora and Joshua are having disagreements about Leonora returning to work after staying home with their child, Christa, who is now 3 months old.

There is constant rejection and retaliation as Leonora demonstrates anger by yelling at Joshua. Joshua continues expressing his opinions about the cost and care of day care centers and wants Leonora to wait until Christa is 5 years old and starts kindergarten. Leonora feels that if she is out of the workplace for 5 years it will be extremely difficult for her to re-enter and will have to start her career from the beginning and move backwards with salary and benefits. They both feel stress because of the economic pressures as well as freedom to continue the lifestyle that they were accustomed to before Christa arrived.

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**Role**

Tension and conflict continue and this problem is unresolved. Your assignment is to Work through this conflict in positive ways by using the Ten Guidelines on pages 332-333. Under each of the 10 guidelines you must outline what both Leonora and Joshua needs to say or do to work through this problem

Joshua

Husband

I know you want to go back to work, but our daughter, Christa, is only 3 months old and needs you. I' m not against you returning to work, I just think you should wait until Christa is in school, say kindergarten? Then she will be a little more settled in a learning environment and kind of in the groove both of us working while she is in school.

Leonora

New Mom

You want me to wait 5 years? Don't you realize I won't have a job at my present workplace? My employer won't hold a job opening for me, let alone my position. I will lose everything, including benefits. Then how long do you think it will take me to get a job? Re-entering into the work force is problematic. It is very difficult for a woman after childbirth. You are just not getting it, are you? Christa would start pre-school at 3 years old and kindergarten at 5 years of age. Do you honestly believe that waiting 3 years instead of years is going to make a difference in everything I just said or did you even listen to what I said? Or are you just set in your ways for you to be the breadwinner and me to be the psychological parent? That is the "stay at home mom psychological parent? What about our finances? Have you even considered the loss of income if I don't go back to work? You know you have not received an increase for a couple of years and we have depended on my income for many of the financial issues we have had to deal with!

**Deliverable**

Given the scenario, your role and the information provided by the key players involved, it is time for you to make a decision. If you are finished reviewing this scenario, close this window and return to this week's You Decide item, in your course window, to complete the activity for this scenario. You can return and review this scenario again at any time.

Before going further, we want to point out that not all negative facts and feelings need to be communicated. Before voicing a complaint, we might ask ourselves, “How important is it?” (Sanford 2006). Counselors suggest that if, after giving it some time and thought, we believe that raising a particular grievance is important, then we should do so. Similarly, when offering negative information, it is important to ask ourselves why we want to do so and whether the other person really needs to know. We turn now to ten specific guidelines for constructive conflict management.

## Guideline 1: Express Anger Directly and with Kindness

Family members may have the false belief that their intimates automatically know—or should know—what they think and how they feel. This incorrect idea is detrimental to relationships (Hamamci 2005). When complaints are not addressed directly, conflict goes unresolved, with lingering grievances sparked again and again by “subtle triggers.” Consider the following family situation:

* An ongoing point of contention in this family is the mother’s belief that her teenage daughter, Joyce, spends too much money on clothes and makeup, which she buys in upscale stores rather than more economical stores, like Wal-Mart. So when the father, who is scanning a newspaper, remarks, “I see Wal-Mart set a record for sales yesterday,” the seed is planted for an argument to sprout. (Tannen 2006, p. 123) The underlying conflict is voiced as follows: **Mom**: So? We don’t shop at Wal-Mart, so what’s the point? **Dad**: Okay. **Joyce**: What does that have to do with anything? **Mom**: Okay, I’m just saying— **Joyce**: Saying what? **Mom**: Yeah, so what’s the point? **Joyce**: What point, Mom? You don’t shop there either, Mom. **Mom**: Yes, I do. You could shop there for toiletries. **Joyce**: For clothes you shop there, Mom? **Mom**: No. **Joyce**: See, so why should we go shopping there for toiletries? … I don’t go shopping for toiletries anywhere because you buy them for me. **Mom**: No, but you buy makeup. **Dad**: Well, this year we can do all our Christmas shopping at Wal-Mart. (Tannen 2006, pp. 123–25)

Tension and conflict go unresolved.

Counselors advise expressing anger directly because doing so makes way for resolution (Bernstein and Magee 2004). For example, the mother might say, “I feel that you’ve been spending more than we can afford on makeup.” Counselors further advise that a grievance will be less threatening to the receiver when positive feelings are conveyed at the same time that the grievance is voiced.

Chronic stonewallers may fear rejection or retaliation and therefore hesitate to acknowledge their own or their partner’s angry emotions. Examples of stonewalling include saying things like, “I can’t take it when you yell at me,” or turning sullen and refusing to talk. It may sound impossible to fight more fairly when you’re angry, but “practice makes better,” Using “I” statements, avoiding mixed messages, focusing your anger on specific issues, and being willing to change are some guidelines worth trying.

If you’re angry and resentful, requests for change will be met with resistance and countercharge efforts: “It’s not my problem; it’s your problem.” But if you learn to approach each other with acceptance and empathy, you can create a collaborative context, and often people will make spontaneous changes. (“Loving Your Partner” 2000)

So, even better, the mother might say, “You always look nice, and I like the way that you choose to wear your makeup, but I feel that you’re spending more than we can afford on it.” Being direct is not the same as being unnecessarily critical.

**Guideline 2: Check Out Your Interpretation of Others’ Behaviors**

Because family members and partners in distressed relationships seldom understand each other as well as they think they do, a good habit is to ask for feedback by a process of *checking it out:* asking the other person whether your perception of her or his feelings or of the present situation is accurate. Checking it out often helps to avoid unnecessary hurt feelings or imagining trouble that may not exist, as the following example illustrates:

* **Family Member A**: I think you’re mad about something. (*checking it out*) Is it because it’s my class night and I haven’t made dinner? **Family Member B**: No, I’m irritated because I was tied up in traffic an extra half hour on my way home.

**Guideline 3: To Avoid Attacks, Use “I” Statements**

Attacks, sometimes interpreted as blame, involve insults or assaults on another’s character or self-esteem. Needless to say, attacks do not help to bond a couple (Sinclair and Monk 2004). A rule in avoiding attack is to use the word, *I* rather than *you* or *why.* For example, instead of declaring, “You’re late,” or asking “Why are you late?”—both of which can smack of blame—a statement such as, “I was worried because you hadn’t arrived” may allow for more positive dialogue. The receiver is more likely to perceive “I” statements as an attempt to recognize and communicate feelings; “you” and “why” statements are more likely to be perceived as attacks, even when not intended as such. Of course, making “I” statements may be too much to ask in the heat of an argument. One social psychologist has admitted what many of us may have experienced: “It is impossible to make an ‘I-statement’ when you are in the … ‘wanting-revenge, feeling-stung-and-needing-to-sting-back’ state of mind” (quoted in Gottman et al. 1998, p. 18). Of course, this is partly the point. Keeping in mind the possibility of expressing a complaint—at least *beginning* a confronta-tion—with an “I” statement can discourage family members from getting to that wanting-revenge state of mind in the first place.

Guideline 4: Avoid Mixed, or Double Messages

Mixed, or double messages contradict each other. Contradictory messages may be verbal, or one may be verbal and one nonverbal. For example, a family member offers to take the family to a movie yet sighs and says that he or she is exhausted after a really hard day at work. Or a partner insists, “Of course I love you” while picking an invisible speck from his or her sleeve in a gesture of indifference.

Senders of mixed messages may not be aware of what they are doing, and mixed messages can be very subtle. They sometimes result from simultaneously wanting to recognize and to deny conflict or tension. A classic example is the silent treatment. One partner becomes aware that she or he has said or done something upsetting and asks what’s wrong. “Oh, nothing,” the other replies without much feeling, but everything about the partner’s face, body, attitude, and posture suggests that something is indeed wrong (Lerner 2001).

Moreover, communication involves both a sender and a receiver. Just as the sender gives both an overt message and an underlying meta-message,9 so also does a receiver give cues about how seriously she or he is taking the message. For example, listening while continuing to do chores sends the nonverbal message that what is being heard is not very important.

Guideline 5: When You Can, Choose the Time and Place Carefully

Arguments are less likely to be constructive if the complainant raises grievances at the wrong time. One partner may be ready to argue about an issue when the other is almost asleep or working on an important assignment, for instance. At such times, the person who picked the fight may get more—or less—than he or she had expected.

Family members might negotiate a time and place for addressing issues. Arguing “by appointment” may sound silly and be difficult to arrange, but doing so has advantages. For one thing, complainants can organize their thoughts and feelings more calmly and deliberately, increasing the likelihood that they will be heard. Also, recipients of complaints have time before the argument to prepare themselves to hear some criticism.10

Guideline 6: Address a Specific Issue, Ask for a Specific Change, and Be Open to Compromise

Constructive relationships aim at resolving current, specific problems. Recipients of complaints need to feel that they can do something specific to help resolve the problem raised. This will be difficult if they feel overwhelmed by old gripes. Furthermore, complainants should be ready to propose one or more solutions. Recipients might come up with possible solutions themselves. When family members can entertain potential solutions to a definite problem at hand, they are better able to negotiate alternatives.

John Gottman found that happily married couples reached agreement rather quickly. Either one partner gave in to the other without resentment, or the two compromised. Unhappily married couples continued in a cycle of stubbornness and hostility (Gottman and Krotkoff 1989; see also Busby and Holman 2009).

## Guideline 4: Avoid Mixed, or Double Messages

[**Mixed**](http://devry.vitalsource.com/books/9781133795278/content/id/term282)**, or** [**double messages**](http://devry.vitalsource.com/books/9781133795278/content/id/term92) contradict each other. Contradictory messages may be verbal, or one may be verbal and one nonverbal. For example, a family member offers to take the family to a movie yet sighs and says that he or she is exhausted after a really hard day at work. Or a partner insists, “Of course I love you” while picking an invisible speck from his or her sleeve in a gesture of indifference.

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## Guideline 7: Be Willing to Change Yourself

The principle that couples or family members should accept each other as they are sometimes merges with the idea that individuals should be exactly what they choose to be. The result is an erroneous assumption that if someone loves you, he or she will accept you just as you are and not ask for even minor changes. In truth, partners need to be willing to be influenced by their loved ones and to change themselves (Lerner 2001).

Therapists note that, in some relationships, each person expects the other one to do the changing: “You have to understand, she’s [or he’s] impossible to live with” (Ball and Kivisto 2006, p. 155). One counselor team (Christensen and Jacobson 1999) has suggested “acceptance therapy,” helping individuals accept their partners and other family members as they are instead of demanding change—although these counselors also suggest that, paradoxically, showing acceptance can lead to a partner’s changing behavior. We need to balance acceptance of another against not being a doormat, but being willing to change ourselves is key.

## Guideline 8: Don’t Try to Win

Counselors encourage us to recognize that there are probably several ways to solve a particular problem, and backing others into a corner with ultimatums and counter-ultimatums is not negotiation but attack. Moreover, wanting to win a dispute with a loved one typically encourages us to use unnecessarily hurtful language, which nonproductively increases the recipient’s stress (Priem, McLaren, and Solomon 2010). We’re reminded that recipients of painful messages typically see them as more hurtful than do the senders (Zhang 2009). How we say things impacts how others perceive them (Young 2010). Even hurtful information can be conveyed with sensitivity.

Societies that emphasize competition, such as ours does, encourage people to see almost everything they do in terms of winning or losing (Fromm 1956). Yet research clearly indicates that for same-sex and heterosexual couples, the tactics associated with winning in a particular conflict are also those associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Clunis and Green 2005; Heene, Buysse, and Van Oost 2007; Houts and Horne 2008). Losing lessens a person’s self-esteem, increases resentment, and adds strain to the relationship. On the other hand, everyone wins when family members mutually agree on solutions to their differences (Carroll, Badger, and Yang 2006).

## Guideline 9: Be Willing to Forgive

A growing number of therapists suggest that being willing to forgive is critical to ongoing happy relationships (Fincham, Hall, and Beach 2006). Forgiveness “is the idea of a change whereby one becomes less motivated to think, feel, and behave negatively (e.g., retaliate, withdraw) in regard to the offender.” Forgiveness is not something to which the offender is necessarily entitled, but it is granted nevertheless.

Contrary to what many individuals believe, however, forgiveness does not require that the offended partner minimize or condone the offense. Rather, “an individual forgives despite the wrongful nature of the offense and the fact that the offender is not entitled to forgiveness.” Further, “forgiveness is distinct from denial (an unwillingness to perceive the injury) … or forgetting (removes awareness of offence from consciousness)” (Fincham, Hall, and Beach 2006, p. 416).

Forgiveness is often a process that takes time, rather than one specific decision or act of the will. Being willing to forgive has been associated in research with marital satisfaction, lessened ambivalence toward a partner, conflict resolution, enhanced commitment, and greater empathy (Fincham, Hall, and Beach 2006).

## Guideline 10: End the Argument

Ending the argument is important. Sometimes when individuals are too hurt to continue, they need to stop arguing before they reach a resolution. A family member may signal that he or she feels too distressed to go on by calling for a time-out. Or it could help to bargain about whether the fight should continue at all.

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the happily married couples that Gottman and his colleagues, as well as Wallerstein, interviewed knew how and when to stop fighting. Arguments can end with compromise, apology, submission, or agreement to disagree (Goeke-Morey, Cummings, and Papp 2007). Ideally, a fight ends when there has been a mutually satisfactory airing of each partner’s views.

## Toward Better Couple and Family Communication

Keeping a loving relationship or creating a cohesive family is not automatic. Doing so requires working on ourselves as well as on our relationships. A first step involves consciously recognizing how important the relationship is to us. A second step is to set realistic expectations about the relationship (Cloud and Townsend 2005). As one married woman put it,

You just have this idealized version of getting married, you know, everybody plays it up as so romantic and so wonderful and sweet. Now that I am married and now that I have gotten older and hit the real world I’m kind of like … It’s a lot more hands-on, you know, getting stuff done … than it is that idealized romantic notion that you get as a girl. (in Fairchild 2006, p. 13)

A third step involves improving our own (1) [**emotional intelligence**](http://devry.vitalsource.com/books/9781133795278/content/id/term107)—awareness of what we’re feeling so that we can express our feelings more authentically; (2) ability and willingness to repair our moods, not unnecessarily nursing our hurt feelings; (3) healthy balance between controlling rash impulses and being candid and spontaneous; and (4) sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others (Keaten and Kelly 2008). We can develop greater flexibility of thought, learning to think of several alternative workable solutions to problems and to have several ways of responding to a situation, not just one that habitually comes up by default (Koesten, Schrodt, and Ford 2009). Support is mutually reinforcing. When we can support others, they are more likely to be supportive (Priem, Solomon, and Steuber 2009).

With regard to the relationship itself, counselors encourage making time for play and incorporating new activities into relationships (Lawson 2004b; Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie 2009).[11](http://devry.vitalsource.com/books/9781133795278/content/id/N12-11) Social psychologist John Crosby points out that people may misinterpret the idea of “working at” committed relationships: Instead of working *at* relationships, “we may, with all good intentions, end up making work *of”* them (Crosby 1991, p. 287).

Some of us have grown up with poor role modeling on the part of our parents (Ledbetter 2009; Rovers 2006; Schrodt et al. 2009; Zimmerman and Thayer 2003). Regardless of how our parents behaved, we can choose to change how we communicate (Braithwaite and Baxter 2006; Turner and West 2006; Wright 2006b).

Training programs in couple and family communication, often conducted by counseling psychologists, have proven effective in helping to change negative communication patterns (Blanchard et al. 2009; Bodenmann, Bradbury, and Pihet 2009; Sevier et al. 2008; Yalcin and Karaban 2007). One program for married and cohabiting couples is ENRICH, originally developed by social psychologist David Olson at the University of Minnesota. A similar program is PREP (the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), developed by marital communication psychologists Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, with the overall aim of strengthening marriages and preventing divorce (Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg 2001; Schilling et al. 2003). Marriage Encounter and similar organizations offer weekend workshops, designed for mostly satisfied marrieds who want to improve their relationship (Yalcin and Karaban 2007). Advertising “psychological care for the whole family,” the Family Success Consortium offers programs for all couples, whether or not married ([www.familysuccessconsortium.com](http://www.familysuccessconsortium.com)).