

Exercises

WE ALL HAVE ISSUES

We have created a list of 25 topics that could represent fundamental differences in your personalities that could create conflict, or fundamental differences in your lifestyle needs that may also be a source of conflict. Lifestyle needs are basic to your identity, and to who you are as a person.

This exercise is an opportunity to get to know each other in new ways, and to be curious about what your potential sources of conflict might be during your relationship. Look over each item. Pick the top three to five that jump out at you. Write down how you feel about each of the issues you selected. Do you feel it's a significant conflict right now? Do you think it will be a source of conflict in the future? You're going to discuss these on your date, so take some time to consider the topic. Some couples chose to explore every topic and wrote down how they felt about every area. Do what seems reasonable for you.

Remember that you're ultimately seeking an understanding of your partner's interior world, and creating shared meaning together. If punctuality is important to your partner, and you think punctual is arriving no more than an hour late, discuss why it's so important or not so important to each other. There's usually a story underneath every strong emotion. Be ready to tell each other your stories and seek the understanding that'll help you manage your conflicts skillfully and with compassion.

As you think about what you need, keep it positive—what you *do* need as opposed to what you *don't* need or want. Also, try to make that positive need as specific as you can so it's

like a recipe for success with you. For example, "I would like you to respect me" isn't as good as, "I would like you to turn off your electronic devices at dinner so we can just talk to each other."

EXPLORE AND BE READY TO DISCUSS.

- » How are we the same and how are we different?
- » How can we accommodate and accept the differences between us?
- » Are there differences we cannot accept?

- 1 **Differences in neatness and organization.** One person may be neat and organized, while the other is more disorganized and doesn't mind a bit of mess.
- 2 **Differences in punctuality.** One person is always on time or early, and the other is more casual about time, and often late.
- 3 **Differences in doing tasks and getting things done.** One person may be a multitasker, doing lots of things at the same time, and the other likes to focus on one thing at a time.
- 4 **Differences in emotionality.** One person is very emotionally expressive and the other is not so expressive. One person might value exploring one's emotions more than the other, who believes more in action than introspection about feelings.
- 5 **Differences in wanting time together versus time apart and alone.** One person wants more time alone than the other, who wants more time together. These reflect basic differences in wanting autonomy versus interdependence.

- 6 Differences in optimal sexual frequency.** One person wants sex more often than the other.
- 7 Differences in talking about your sex life.** One partner wants to talk about your sex life and be able to make it better over time, while the other person prefers to have this area of your life kept spontaneous and unexamined.
- 8 Differences in finances.** One person is much more financially conservative, a worrier and a planner, while the other wants to spend a lot more than the other, and has a philosophy of living for the moment.
- 9 Differences in adventure.** One person is adventurous and willing to take some risks when venturing into the unknown, but the other person is more cautious and risk-averse, and wants any adventure to be worked out in advance so that it's mostly planned and predictable.
- 10 Differences with respect to relatives.** One person wants more independence from relatives, and the other wants more closeness and connection.
- 11 Differences in how to approach household chores and childcare.** One person wants an equal division of labor, while the other doesn't agree with this principle, or feels it's unrealistic.
- 12 Differences in how to discuss disagreements.** One person wants to be able to fight openly and be as emotionally expressive as possible, while the other may require a more logical, calm, and rational approach to conflict, without much emotionality.
- 13 Differences in expressing anger.** One person is comfortable expressing or receiving anger, wants the freedom to express anger, and tends to get over anger easily. The other person sees anger as potentially destructive and disrespectful and wants anger to be mostly eliminated from your interactions, and may be more likely to take anger personally, or even hold grudges.
- 14 Differences in how to raise and discipline children.** One person tends to be stricter with children and believes that it's essential for children to be respectful, while the other person emphasizes empathy and understanding of children and thinks children should have freedom and be emotionally close to their parents.
- 15 Differences in how to deal with sadness.** One person prefers to ignore moments of sadness or despair, to problem-solve and "get on with life" using action, while the other wants to be able to talk about sadness and be listened to empathetically.
- 16 Differences in preferred activity level.** One person prefers to be very active, while the other prefers calmer and less active forms of recreation.
- 17 Differences in socializing.** One person is more extroverted and gregarious, and gets energized by being with people, while the other person finds being with people an effort and is energized by solitude.
- 18 Differences in influence/power.** One person prefers to be more dominant in any decision making you might face, while the other prefers equality in power.
- 19 Differences in ambition and the importance of work.** One person is far more ambitious and oriented toward work and success, while the other focuses more on quality of family life and fun with the partner.
- 20 Differences with respect to religion and spirituality.** One person values spiritual activities or religious values more than the other.

- 21 Differences with respect to drugs and alcohol.** One person is far more tolerant of the use of recreational drugs and alcohol than the other.
- 22 Differences in independence.** One person feels a greater need to be independent versus interconnected than the other.
- 23 Differences in excitement.** One person feels a greater need to have life be exciting or adventurous than the other.
- 24 Differences in fidelity.** There are major differences in how loyal sexually or romantically you want to be, or have been, to each other.
- 25 Differences in having fun.** One person tends to be serious and doesn't think much about the concept of "having fun," while the other is more playful and less serious.

FIGHT FAIR AND REPAIR

Out of the many couples who did the exercise that follows, went on this date, and asked each other the open-ended questions, only one had a fight. That's right: Discussing conflict led to conflict, but only for one of the couples. If it happens to you on this date, or on any of the dates, it's really okay. Fights are going to happen in any relationship—it's inevitable and it's healthy—but research shows that couples who are genuinely happy in their marriage or relationship handle their conflicts in gentle, positive ways. They listen to their partner's perspective, they seek to understand their partner, and they work together to find a compromise that works for both.

This is easy to read in a book, but sometimes we say and do things that damage our partner. We forget about seeking understanding, and we give a 20-minute diatribe on why we're right and they're wrong. We get defensive, we criticize, we show contempt, and we turn away at the very moment we should be turning toward each other. We call these *regrettable incidents*—our nice term for a fight, and "master couples" know how to minimize the damage from words said in the heat of an argument. In John and Julie's research they divided their couples into "masters" and "disasters." Master couples stayed together happily. Disaster couples split up, or stayed together unhappily. When it came to conflict, the masters always knew how to repair the damage done during a regrettable incident.

**WE TURN AWAY AT
THE VERY MOMENT
WE SHOULD BE
TURNING TOWARD
EACH OTHER.**

» A time when I felt belittled.

» A time when I felt very unsafe.

» A time when I was assaulted and attacked.

STEP 4: Accept responsibility and own up to your part in the fight. Perhaps you've been overly stressed or preoccupied, or you haven't made time for your partner, or you haven't been a good listener. What can you own up to in how you contributed to the argument? It's important to avoid blame here. We discovered in our research that taking responsibility—even for a small part of the problem in communication—presents the opportunity for great repair. It's highly effective.

STEP 5: Discuss how you both might do things differently the next time. What's one way your partner can make it better if this type of incident happens again? What's one way you can make it better? Create a plan together to minimize hurt feelings and avoid an incident in the future.

Speed Dating

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Conflict happens in every relationship and marriage, and it's a myth that in a happy relationship you'll get along all the time.

» Relationship conflict is an opportunity to get to know your partner better and to develop deeper intimacy as you talk about and work through your differences.

» There are two types of conflict:

— Solvable problems are situational and about the topic. There isn't usually a deeper meaning to the conflict or a person's position.

— Perpetual problems are fundamental differences in your personalities or lifestyle needs. All couples have perpetual problems, and these account for 69 percent of conflicts. Perpetual problems can become gridlocked problems, and when partners feel criticized, rejected, or unaccepted by the other partner, this can be a sign you've entered into gridlock.

» Approach your differences with curiosity rather than correctness. Have a genuine desire to understand the stories that are underneath the issues.