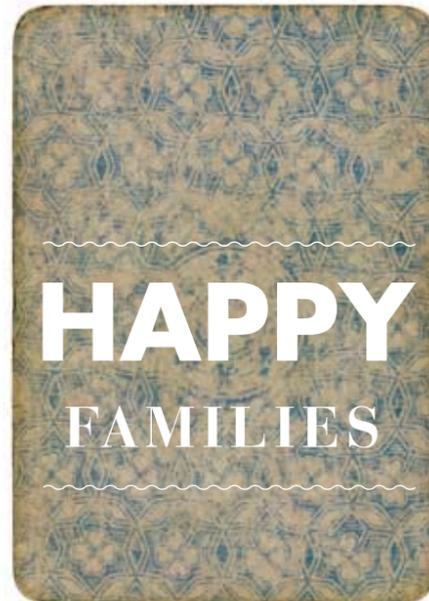




Conflict happens when you have different personalities coming together in one environment, such as in a family. This is something you cannot change, but you can learn how to deal with this conflict in a healthy, mature manner.



Do you remember the children's card game *Happy Families*? The picture cards featured illustrations of families of four, and the object of the game was to collect complete families. The player whose turn it is asks another player for a specific card; if he has the card, he hands it over, and if not, it becomes his turn and he asks for the card he needs. Dealing with conflict in families is a little like creating *Happy Families* – it is all about give and take.

Conflict is inevitable when we are living with people we care about. Whether it is between husband and wife or mother and children, conflict needs to be handled in an appropriate and mature manner, in order to diffuse issues that can become major problems if left unresolved.

Conflict can happen when family members have different views or beliefs that clash. Sometimes this conflict can occur when the people in the family unit misunderstand each other, but it is perfectly normal to disagree with one another about the way we feel about different things or how we cope in different situations. Communicating in a positive, non-aggressive manner can help to reduce conflict so the family members can reach a peaceful resolution, whether everyone involved agrees or not.

The support and love you get from your family is something that everyone needs in order to thrive. Nikki Bush, a creative parenting expert, and Bev Milun, a Johannesburg self-esteem coach, look at the common causes of conflict in the family unit, as well as healthy, mature and mutually beneficial ways to deal with it.

YOU AND YOUR PARTNER

“**TRUST ISSUES OFTEN STEM FROM A FEELING OF VULNERABILITY AND INSECURITY, BECAUSE WE REALISE WE CANNOT CONTROL OUR PARTNERS, NOR SHOULD WE WANT TO**”

Milun believes that one of the main causes of conflict among couples can be linked to unmet needs. “The ideal time to voice what you would prefer had happened is at the time of the hurt, disappointment or let-down, and that does not happen often,” Milun explains. She says this seldom happens because we get caught off guard and do not know how to cope with the initial shock of the situation or argument.

Problems such as trust issues, financial strains, or issues caused by stress and day-to-day life are also common causes of conflict among couples.

People often react far too quickly on issues close to the heart, and they tend to forget to stop, exhale and think through their response. “Often the hurtful stuff comes up first, because we feel raw in the moment and jab to defend ourselves, instead of just taking a few seconds to calm down and react from a calmer place,” says Milun.

So what are we doing wrong when it comes to having a healthy relationship with our partners? Milun believes that people are rarely totally open and honest with their partner about how they have made them feel. Another major problem that arises among couples is ego-defensiveness, where an individual will not admit that he or she was in the wrong, which can lead to the issue becoming very heated.

“Somewhere in our lives we were taught that being wrong is a problem, and by believing this, we are less likely to back down and own up to our errors. Often people would much rather seem stubborn and fight with their partners than take a step back and look at what they might have done to have caused the issue,” she explains.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Communication is often the first thing that goes out of the window when a couple is going through a stressful patch. Milun says these three steps will help to ensure that communication is a top priority.

- **Keep it clear.** Try your best not to allow any confusion or assumption to develop when communicating with your partner about issues that may arise between you. For example, ask your partner what exactly was meant by something he or she said, instead of assuming you know. Clarity in communication is key to avoiding conflict.
- **Be playful where possible.** A fun way to communicate with your partner is using technology or social media pages. We are often telling our children to get off their phones, but the reality is that adults could be spending a little more time on theirs, to add some fun to the communication process.
- **Write it down.** Couples often feel as if they lose touch with each other if they don't have meaningful conversations. Little, short, handwritten notes are so well received, because they are thoughtful and meaningful to your partner. These notes can be to let your partner know you love them, or just a simple “have a nice day”.

DEALING WITH TRUST ISSUES

“Trust is an essential component of any relationship, but it cannot be demanded or expected. If there is a lack of trust between two people, it is important to address the reasons for this,” says Milun.

Trust issues often stem from a feeling of vulnerability and insecurity, because we realise we cannot control our partners, nor should we want to. Milun believes healthy relationships stem from a mutual preference of two people to commit to each other, and to consistently work on any issues that arise with compassion and dignity. A lack of trust can lead to anxiety, which can filter into the interactions and emotions of the two people in the relationship, and can become very damaging to the relationship.

According to Milun, if a partner has not yet done anything to warrant a lack of trust, the person feeling insecure should look at past experiences that can be causing their insecurity and lack of trust; if they do not do this, there is very little chance they will be able to work on their own issues.

If you have been hurt and have agreed to move on, and work on the relationship and trust again, it is highly important to really forgive and let go of the hurt; if you do not do so, you will never truly be able to get over what happened. If the issue that has led to your lack of trust is something you feel you would never be able to get over, it is better to have a good, hard look at the future of the relationship. You cannot agree to forgive someone but bring the past up every time you feel insecure or upset.

For more information or to contact Bev Milun, visit www.bevmilun.co.za.

YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN

Children have their own personalities and often do not agree with the way things are done in the family group, which can lead to their becoming testy and confrontational, and can cause a lot of turmoil and conflict in the family.

Bush believes any change in family life or personal development is a potential cause for conflict – a pregnancy, the birth of a child, a high-needs child, a job change for a parent, or any other similar changes within the family network. “Any form of change can put added stress on the family unit until the adjustment has been made,” she explains. “Change means that our focus shifts to different things, and when someone feels short-changed on the attention front, whether it be your partner or children, that can often be the source of the conflict.”

Bush says children who are feeling short-changed or hard-done-by are the ones who often act out and cause conflict. “They like their parents to deal with them fairly and consistently, so when parents are very tired and stressed, this can take a back seat,” she notes.

It is important for parents who have lost perspective and patience to take a time out and regroup before dealing with issues relating to their children. Speaking from personal experience, Bush feels parents should know how to fill their own emotional cup before they try to do the same for their loved ones. “Parents need to learn how to ground and energise themselves, because most conflict arises due to inconsistency, lack of boundaries and attention-seeking.”



WHO'S THE BOSS?

Children are constantly testing the boundaries, as this is their way of finding out what they can and cannot get away with. “Modern parenting is characterised by giving many choices from a very young age – for example, asking your child what they would like to eat, instead of telling them to eat what they have been given,” Bush says, “and then we are left wondering why our children are fussy eaters.”

She explains that we cannot give our children complete *carte blanche* on what they do or do not want to do, because they will become used to this and act out when they are no longer allowed to do something. She believes parents need to learn how to play the choice game to their advantage, by making everything on the short list okay with you. By doing so, your children will still feel as if they are getting choices, but they won't realise that those choices were already pre-moulded by you.

“Some things just have to be done, or be done in a certain way,” Bush says. “Hold the line when necessary; you are the boss and you have to act like the boss too.”

For more information or to contact Nikki Bush, visit www.brightideasoutfit.com.

WAYS TO AVOID CONFLICT

Bush suggests some of the best ways to avoid unmanageable conflict between you and your children:

- **Read their needs.** Communicate with your children, learn what they want, and find a way to manage these needs.
- **Let go of the reins a little.** Give your children space to grow and learn, but also make sure they know you still have that control.
- **Be proactive.** Help your children to become media-savvy, so they are able to learn from their environment.
- **Eat together.** Try to have meals with your children a few times a week, at a table and not in front of the TV; this will encourage conversation and interaction.
- **Engage in play.** Play is children's natural way of expressing themselves, so try to spend some time in their environment and on their level.
- **Be present.** Make sure that you are mentally present when spending time with your children, so that they feel they are getting the attention they need. ■