

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, whether interpersonal or intrapersonal. Thus, learning to mitigate and manage conflict is an essential skill for maintaining healthy relationships, fostering personal growth, and navigating challenges with resilience and emotional intelligence. Case Study #18, titled “Shallow Talk and Separate Spaces,” provides a view of Sarah and Russel’s marriage and illustrates how they habitually approached conflict. Each partner felt the other was not doing enough to meet their needs, ultimately leading to negative spiraling and resentment (Braithwaite et al., 2000). Sarah, overwhelmed with work, school, and home duties, felt that Russel was not doing enough to help lighten her load, whereas Russel felt that Sarah was neglecting his emotional needs and that they were not spending as much time together. Ultimately, both parties resorted to personal attacks rather than the behavioral concerns that initially triggered the disagreement, resulting in an impasse. Repeated relationship disruptions that remain unresolved or are poorly handled can negatively affect couples’ mental health; however, successful conflict resolution can lead to positive outcomes, such as a stronger bond and a lasting relationship (Ha, 2013).

There are many ways to approach conflict, and depending on the methods one uses, it can either strengthen the relationship or further divide it. In this case study, once the personal attacks began, it became a competition to see who could say the most hurtful thing, often out of frustration with not being able to address the root of the problem: unmet needs and unclear communication. Without communication, there can be no constructive solution because neither party knows what the other wants, and continuing this negative cycle contributes further to the stress, which could eventually lead to negative health consequences and more division (Shrout, 2021). Sarah’s sister’s

solution was to “fight fair” by encouraging respectful communication, focusing on one issue at a time, and avoiding hostile or accusatory comments. This may work as an interim tool while the couple tries to figure out what works for them, but it may eventually turn into a competition over who can air their complaint first rather than a space for collaboration. It may also be a shallow tool that does not address the underlying emotions and unmet needs, which may lead to the conflict resurfacing in a different form. To create long-term resolve, Sarah and Russel should work on developing active listening, vulnerability, and a shared commitment to understanding each other’s perspectives.

Gender plays a large role in how people communicate, and there are differences in the ways individuals are socialized to express emotions and handle conflict, among other things. However, research is generally inconsistent regarding how gender affects conflict management (Rahim et al., 2020). There is a stronger possibility of generational differences in handling interpersonal conflict, but because we lack that information in the case study, we will not explore these influences. Classic gender socialization may play a role in the tension between Sarah and Russel’s conflict styles: research suggests that women are often socialized to take on relational maintenance and caregiving roles while men are more frequently socialized to value autonomy and emotional restraint (Steen et al., 2019). In this case, Sarah’s internalization of multiple responsibilities and reluctance to ask for help intensify her identity and face concerns, leading her to express emotions indirectly in the hope that Russel will notice her needs. Conversely, Russel’s difficulty in directly articulating emotional needs until they surface as criticism may reflect masculine norms that discourage overt vulnerability, leading to indirect or competitive

communication styles, which in turn contribute to his avoidance by playing golf. These gendered expectations may contribute to a demand-withdraw or competitive interaction pattern, where one partner seeks acknowledgment while the other defends identity. While gender socialization may provide a useful lens for understanding their approach and patterns, it is not a deterministic explanation and, in terms of conflict, lacks consistency.

Generally, conflicts can be categorized into four goal types: Type, Relational, Identity, or Facework (Hocker et al., 2021). In this scenario, both Sarah and Russel have time-related topic goals: Sarah needs more time to excel at all the tasks she wants to do, while Russel would like to spend more time with Sarah. In terms of relational goals, Sarah expects support from her partner when she's juggling so many things, and Russel expects his partner to prioritize him over other commitments and wants to spend more time with his wife. For identity goals, both partners want to present themselves as competent: Sarah as a wife, student, and employee, and Russel as a partner and employee. Russel felt particularly hurt by Sarah's comparison to herself, which implied that Russel was not as accomplished as she was and threatened his identity. Sarah, on the other hand, felt that her ability to manage multiple responsibilities was part of her identity and didn't want to appear to be failing in her roles. This caused tension, as Russel wanted to be seen as equally capable and deserving of attention, while Sarah struggled to balance the expectations of her various roles. Lastly, regarding facework, Sarah wanted to maintain the image of a capable, hardworking individual who could excel in all areas of her life without needing to ask for help. In contrast, Russell wanted to be seen as a helpful, understanding partner. However, his need for more time

together made him feel vulnerable, as he didn't want to appear needy or demanding. These conflicting goals contributed to the tension in their relationship, making it difficult to find a resolution that respected both their needs and self-perceptions unless their approach changed (Hocker et al., 2021).

Conflict management and mitigation are important components of maintaining a healthy, resilient relationship because they determine whether disagreements become opportunities for growth or sources of resentment. To prevent this and future conflicts from recurring, Sarah and Russel should practice vulnerability and clear communication that addresses their underlying relational, identity, and face needs rather than surface-level complaints and assumptions about what the other is thinking. Both parties should find a balance between their concern for self and concern for each other to adopt a more collaborative conflict style, in which both partners' needs are acknowledged and addressed rather than competing for validation (Rahim et al., 2020). By shifting from defensiveness and personal attacks to mutual problem-solving and active listening, they can create solutions that strengthen their relationship rather than reinforce division. This balanced approach reflects course concepts of constructive conflict management, which emphasize cooperation, empathy, and shared responsibility as key components of long-term relational stability (Hocker et al., 2021). By intentionally creating this space, Sarah and Russel can have honest dialogue and strengthen emotional intimacy while reducing defensiveness and unrelated personal attacks that previously led to resentment. Ultimately, by reframing conflict as a collaborative process rather than a competitive exchange, they can transform recurring tensions into opportunities for relational growth, strengthening trust and long-term stability in their marriage.

## References

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