

Privacy, Disclosure, and Conflict in Romantic Relationships: A Case Study of

Jennifer and Matt

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Introduction

As people enter romantic relationships, they bring their own backgrounds. Differences in these can lead to communication challenges, misunderstandings, and conflicting expectations; each person interpreting situations through their own lens. In this case study, Jennifer and Matt experienced privacy and disclosure at opposite ends of the spectrum as they grew up. Jennifer was raised to use discretion and "keep things to [herself] and work them out on [her] own" (Braithwaite & Wood, 2000, p. 133), while Matt, on the other hand, was taught that discussion was always open in his family.

The couple regularly visits Matt's parents' house, where Jennifer is expected to openly share information. She feels uncomfortable doing so, and Matt interprets her reluctance as a sign of distance. As a result, they struggle to understand each other's perspectives. During one visit, Matt discloses details of their relationship to his family, including their conflicting plans to have children, portraying Jennifer as putting her career first over starting a family. Jennifer believes these topics should remain private, making her feel exposed and violated. Her discomfort grows as she perceives Matt's openness as a breach of trust, while Matt feels hurt by Jennifer's withdrawal and perceived unwillingness to engage with his family. As Zhang and Zhu (2025) note, "Even with no malicious intentions, [disclosure of others' information] can still cause profound ramifications such as the straining of relationships [or] social embarrassment." In the end, Jennifer explains her side, and Matt yields to practice discretion and reach a consensus on sharing information that affects the couple.

This initial discussion and compromise lean toward a constructive approach. Jennifer and Matt take part in open dialogue and are willing to change to find a solution.

Jennifer expresses her discomfort, and Matt listens, ultimately agreeing to practice discretion. This shows that both sides are committed to compromise, adaptation, and respecting each other's boundaries. Their actions support a constructive conflict-resolution strategy (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 5). However, if Matt feels he is the only one adjusting, the power imbalance may lead to resentment and communication breakdowns, turning the situation destructive (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 4). Persistent imbalance could prompt Matt to withdraw or intensify the conflict to reassert autonomy, undermining collaboration and threatening relationship stability. To maintain constructive outcomes, ongoing negotiation and mutual acknowledgment of each partner's contributions are essential for a balanced power dynamic.

Styles & Tactics Assessment

Jennifer and Matt grew up in two distinct environments and approach communication, privacy, and disclosure differently, each shaped by their conflict styles. Three primary conflict styles emerge: avoidance, dominating, and collaboration. As Lee et al. (2019) suggest, disclosing personal information can significantly affect the intimacy in a relationship, depending on how the recipient interprets it. Matt's disclosure of sensitive topics to his family acted as the catalyst for increased tension, as Jennifer perceived his actions as a violation of trust. Their differing upbringings led them to approach the conflict in particular ways.

Jennifer demonstrates an avoidant conflict style throughout the case, especially in her discomfort with sharing personal matters with Matt's family. When Matt shares intimate details of their disagreements, Jennifer retreats emotionally and physically. She runs out of the room, saying, "I don't think I can look at your family, never mind have

dinner with them anymore.” Jennifer’s avoidance reflects her hesitation to engage with the conflict openly. This behavior, rooted in her upbringing, prevents open communication, leaving issues unresolved and causing tension (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 5).

Matt adopts a dominating conflict style, especially regarding privacy and disclosure; he expects Jennifer to conform to his family’s openness now that she is part of the family. For example, when Jennifer expresses discomfort about calling his mother “Mom,” Matt quickly shares this with his family: “Matt quickly revealed that Jennifer was uncomfortable about having to call her Mom.” Later, he also tells them about their disagreement concerning children, again without consulting Jennifer first, and even seeks opinions from others at the dinner table. Matt has expectations that Jennifer will engage with his family at the same level he does, overlooking her boundaries regarding privacy and unwilling to adjust his approach to accommodate her comfort level (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 5)

Jennifer and Matt start with differing views, but later engage in a collaborative approach during their conversation about privacy. Jennifer explains her family values: “In my family, we don’t talk about problems openly like this. This is something we need to work out together, and it’s difficult for me.” Matt is initially confused but seeks to understand, and they agree that compromise is necessary. Matt admits, “It was going to take a real effort on both parts to work this out.” Collaboration fosters mutual understanding but has limitations: it requires significant time, effort, and willingness from both partners, which may not always be feasible during emotionally charged situations. If power dynamics are ignored or one partner bears the burden of adjustment,

collaboration can reinforce imbalances rather than resolve them (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 4).

Emotional Assessment

Hocker et al. (2021) recommend keeping conflicts in the midrange of emotion and avoiding extremes of disconnection and unrestrained emotions to maintain constructive communication. Jennifer must express her concerns without withdrawing emotionally, while Matt needs to recognize the emotional boundaries Jennifer sets around privacy and disclosure.

By practicing mindfulness, Jennifer and Matt can better manage their emotional responses and prevent escalation (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 6). By acknowledging that their immediate reactions stem from personal experiences rather than intentional responses, they can begin to approach the conflict more rationally (Chun et al., 2025). In this case, Jennifer and Matt often use accusatory language that targets each other's personalities, rather than focusing on how specific behaviors affect their feelings and the relationship. This can intensify defensiveness and hinder productive communication. Incorporating an "X-Y-Z formula" can help clarify and specify what each person is feeling (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 6).

They could also consider metacommunication to determine how to approach their communication about the conflict. By recognizing their emotional needs and engaging in constructive dialogue, they can avoid a power imbalance that leads to resentment or withdrawal (Hocker et al., 2021, Chapter 4). Moving forward, both parties need to have a mutual understanding of the sacrifices required to maintain balance in the relationship; otherwise, Matt's framing of his compromise as something he is doing

solely out of love for Jennifer may lead to feelings of imbalance and resentment over time.

In general, using nonviolent communication to approach disagreements can promote empathy and strengthen skills for navigating heightened emotions, ensuring both partners address the root of the concern without attacking one another (Hocker et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Jennifer and Matt's conflict highlights the significant role that differing backgrounds, communication styles, and emotional needs play in relationships. While their initial approach leaned toward avoidance and domination, their shift toward collaboration shows the potential for mutual understanding and compromise. To maintain a healthy dynamic, both partners must remain mindful of potential power imbalances. Using strategies like mindfulness and metacommunication will help them address their emotional needs constructively, leading to a stronger, more resilient relationship that allows them to navigate future conflicts with empathy and respect. Being intentional in their conflict strategies is crucial; otherwise, they risk reverting to the behaviors that caused the issue in the first place.

References

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