mindhealth FACT SHEET

RELATIONSHIPS · COMMUNICATING WELL

Healthy relationships

It's rarely about never fighting: it's about how you repair.



How we talk
Criticism vs a soft start

Feeling unheard
Both wanting to be understood

Walls go up
Defending, shutting down

01 Conflict is normal: contempt isn't

Every close relationship has conflict; it is not a sign something is broken. What matters is how we handle it. Relationships get into trouble when disagreements curdle into criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling and, most corrosive of all, contempt. The encouraging news is that these are habits, and habits can change.

02 Start soft, repair often

How a hard conversation begins usually predicts how it ends: a harsh start-up ("you always…") triggers defensiveness, while a soft start-up ("I feel… when… I'd like…") invites the other person in. Just as important is repair: a small gesture that says "we're still okay" after things go sideways. Strong couples don't avoid rupture; they are quick to reconnect.

03 What genuinely helps

- Soft start-ups: speak to the issue, not the person
- Listening to understand, not to reply
- Owning your part with a genuine repair
- Taking a break when flooded, then returning
- Couples or individual therapy when patterns stick

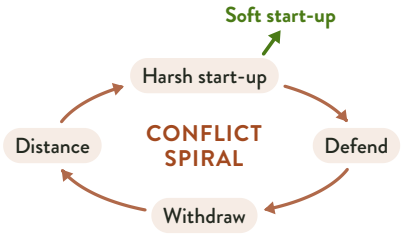
A PRACTICAL STORY

From a harsh start to a soft one



THE PATTERN

The conflict spiral



A harsh start pulls both people into defend-and-withdraw. A soft start-up breaks the spiral.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

If the same arguments keep circling, or you feel more distant than close, support can help: ask your GP about a Mental Health Treatment Plan. This is about everyday conflict, not abuse: if you ever feel controlled, frightened or unsafe with a partner, contact 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), or call 000 in an emergency.

PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

The soft start-up

1. Name the feeling: "I feel…"
2. Describe the situation, not their character
3. Make a clear, kind request

Aim to understand, not to win.

DID YOU KNOW?

Attachment theory, which shapes much of today's thinking about close relationships, began with British psychiatrist John Bowlby's work in the 1950s and 60s.

Bowlby, Attachment and Loss, 1969

THE KEY TAKEAWAY

The goal isn't to win the argument: it's to stay on the same team while you have it.

Need support right now? Lifeline **13 11 14** · Emergency **000** — available 24/7. More options: **mindhealth.com.au/urgent-help**

TALK TO US WHEN YOU'RE READY

Parramatta and online, Australia-wide · **Book at mindhealth.com.au**

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