

Managing Conflict in Marriage: Techniques and Interventions for Addressing and Resolving Disagreements in a Healthy and Productive Manner

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This article aims to present effective techniques and interventions for managing conflict in marriage, emphasising the importance of fostering a healthy and productive approach to addressing disagreements. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of any relationship and when managed constructively, it can serve as a substance for growth and improve communication. This research work examines the role of emotional regulation, active listening, empathy, and effective communication strategies in promoting constructive conflict resolution within marital relationship. A comprehensive review of the literature on conflict management in marriage is conducted, incorporating both theoretical frameworks and evidence-based interventions. Techniques such as the Gottman method, Emotional Focused Therapy and Imago Relationship Therapy are discussed, highlighting their important principles and practical applications in marital counselling. The study also explores the impact of cultural and individual differences on conflict management styles and emphasised the need for specific interventions to meet the important needs of each couple. Furthermore, the study addresses the challenges that arise when couples fail to resolve conflicts effectively and the potential consequences for marital satisfaction and overall relationship health. Prevention and intervention strategies for managing conflicts before they escalate are discussed, along with recommendations for future research and practice in the field of marital counselling. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on conflict management in marriage, providing valuable insights and practical strategies for promoting healthy and productive conflict resolution.

Keywords: Marriage Counselling, Conflict resolution, Communication strategies, Emotional regulation, Active listening, Empathy, Gottman Method, Emotional Focused Therapy, Imago Relationship Therapy, Conflict management style

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of any marriage relationship, and the manner in which couples handle and resolve conflicts plays a very important role determining marital satisfaction and overall relationship health (Gottman, 1999, Johnson, 2008; Hendrix, 2007). Effective conflict management involves a range of skills, including emotional regulation, active listening, empathy, and clear communication (Halford et al., 2018; Christensen et al; 2020). This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the key techniques and interventions for addressing and resolving conflicts in a healthy and productive manner within the context of marital counselling.

Several therapeutic approaches, such as the Gottman Method, Emotionally Focused Therapy and Imago Relationship

Therapy, have demonstrated efficacy in promoting constructive conflict resolution among couples (Gottman & Silver; 2015; Johnson et al., 2005; Luquet, 2006). These evidence-based interventions emphasised the importance of fostering emotional connection, understanding and mutual respect in handling disagreements and promoting marital satisfaction (Johnson, 2004, Hendrix & Hunt, 2019)

However, it is essential to recognise that individual and cultural differences can significantly influence conflict management style and preferences (Falconier et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2018). As such, therapists must be prepared to a specific interventions to meet the important needs and circumstances of each couple, taking into account factors such as personal values, communication patterns, and relationship dynamics (Levant et al., 2016).

In the study, the study will examine the current state of research on conflict management in marriage, with a focus on practical techniques and interventions that can be applied in therapeutic settings. By promoting a healthy and productive approach to conflict resolution and marital counsellors can support couples in building stronger, more resilient relations that can withstand the challenges of everyday life (Gottman, 1999, Johnson, 2008; Hendrix, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

A substantial body of research has investigated the important factors involved in effectively managing conflict within marital relationships. Central to this research are the concepts of emotional regulation, active listening, empathy, and clear communication, which form the foundation of several prominent therapeutic approaches to conflict resolution (Gottman; Johnson, 2004; Hendrix, 2007).

Gottman (1999) Ground-breaking work on marital stability identified four key predictors of divorce: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. The Gottman Method, an evidence-based approach to couples therapy, seeks to counter these destructive patterns by fostering emotional connection, understanding, and mutual respect. By teaching couples how to manage conflict constructively, the Gottman Method aims to enhance marital satisfaction and promote long-term relationship success (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Emotionally Focused Therapy developed by Johnson (2004), emphasises the role of emotional attachment in marital relationships, Emotional Focused Therapy posits that conflict arises when partners feel disconnected or emotionally threatened, and seeks to repair and strengthen attachment bonds by promoting empathy, vulnerability, and responsiveness between partners. Study has demonstrated the efficacy of Emotionally Focused Therapy in reducing marital distress and improving communication, particularly in the context of conflict resolution (Johnson et al., 2005).

Imago Relationship Therapy developed by Hendrix (2007), is another prominent approach to conflict management in marriage. Imago Relationship Therapy seeks to help couples understand the unconscious factors that contribute to relationship difficulties, and to foster empathy and compassion by reframing conflict as a vehicle for healing and (Hendrix & Hunt, 2019). By teaching couples how to communicate effectively and address their core emotional needs, Imago Relationship Therapy aims to transform conflict into an opportunity for deeper connection and understanding.

In addition to these therapeutic approaches, study has highlighted the importance of considering individual and cultural differences when addressing conflict in marriage. Cultural factors, such as collectivism vs. individualism, can influence conflict management styles and preferences

(Falconier et al., 2015); Kim et al., 2018).

Similarly, personal variables such as gender role norms and attachment styles may impact how couples approach and resolve disagreements (Levant et al., 2016). As such, it is essential for therapists to specify interventions to meet the important needs and circumstances of each couple (HALFORD ET AL., 2018).

Overall, the extant literature emphasises the importance of emotional connection, empathy, and effective communication in managing conflict within marital relationships. By integrating evidence-based interventions with a sensitive to individual and cultural differences, therapists can support couples in managing conflicts in a most peaceful and productive manner, fostering stronger, more resilient relationships in the process (Christensen et al., 2020).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The main purpose of this study is to explore and synthesise effective techniques and interventions for managing conflict within marital relationships, with the aim of promoting healthy and productive resolution of disagreements.

Specifically, this research aims to:

- Review the existing literature on conflict management in marriage, focusing on evidence-based therapeutic approaches such as the Gottman Method, Emotionally Focused Therapy, and Imago Relationship Therapy.
- Identify the importance of effective conflict resolution, including emotional regulation, active listening, empathy, and open communication.
- Discuss the importance of considering individual and cultural differences in specific conflict management interventions to meet the specific needs of each couple.
- Provide practical recommendations for therapists and couples seeking to improve their ability to address and resolve conflicts in a manner that fosters emotional connection, understanding, and mutual respect.

This study aims primarily to contribute to the development of evidence-based practices that enhance marital satisfaction, promote long-term relationship success, and support couples in managing the challenges of everyday life in marriage.

Research Questions:

This study aims to address the following research questions.

1. What are the key components of effective conflict resolution in marriage, as identified by existing study and evidence-based thematic approaches?
2. How do individual and cultural difference conflict management styles and preferences, and what

implications do these difference have for specific interventions to meet the important needs of each couple?

3. What specific techniques and interventions can be employed to enhance emotional connection, understanding and mutual respect in the context of marital conflict?
4. How can therapists and couples effectively integrate evidence-based practices into their approach to conflict resolution, with the aim of promoting healthy and productive outcomes?
5. What are the potential limitations of current study on conflict management in marriage, and what directions should future studies take to further advance the field?

Hypotheses:

- Effective conflict management in marriage is characterised by the presence of key components such as emotional regulation, active listening, empathy, and clear communication, which are central to evidence-based therapeutic approaches like the Gottman Method, Emotional Focused Therapy, and Imago Relationship Therapy.
- Individual and cultural differences significantly influence conflict management style and preferences, necessitating the specifying of interventions to meet the important needs of each couple in order to promote positive outcomes.
- Specific techniques and interventions that enhance emotional connection, understanding, and mutual respect in the context of marital conflict including the practice of empathy, vulnerability, and responsive communication, as well as the identifications and addressing of core emotional needs.
- Therapists and couples can effectively integrate evidence-based practices into their approaches to conflict resolution by engaging in on-going education and training, seeking consultation and supervision, and actively incorporating feedback from client's and peers.
- Current study on conflict management in marriage may be limited by factors such as methodological challenges, sampling biases, and a lack of longitudinal studies, highlighting the need for future research that addresses these limitations and further advances the field.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a comprehensive review and synthesis of the existing literature on conflict management in marriage. The following steps were taken to conduct this study:

- **Literature Search:** Relevant articles, books and other scholarly sources were identified through a search of electronic databases.
- **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** Studies were included that focused on conflict resolution in the context of marital relationships. Sources were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed, did not present original research, or were not relevant to the research questions.
- **Data extraction and Analysis:** Relevant data from each source was extracted and analysed, with a focus on identifying important themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. This information was synthesised to develop a comprehensive understanding of the most effective techniques and intervention for managing conflict in marriage.
- **Writing and Revision:**
- The findings of the literature review were organised and presented in a most clear and concise manner, with an emphasis on answering the research questions and providing practical recommendations for therapists and couples.

This study aims to provide a valuable contribution to the field of marital conflict resolution, highlighting the most effective strategies and interventions for promoting healthy and productive resolution of conflicts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

The literature review yielded several key findings related to effective conflict management in marriage. The following themes emerged as central to promoting healthy and productive resolution of disagreements:

- **Emotional Connection:** Effective conflict management hinges on the ability of couple to maintain a strong emotional connection, fostering empathy, vulnerability, and responsiveness to one another's needs. Therapeutic approaches like Emotionally Focused (EFT) Therapy emphasised the importance of emotional connection in managing conflict. Emotionally Focused Therapy is an evidence-based approach to couples therapy developed by Drs. Sue Johnson and Les Greenberg. EFT focuses on the role of emotions in relationships and aims to help partners understand and regulate their emotions, enhance emotional connection, and create a secure attachment bond. Let's explore a brief overview of EFT and a case study to illustrate its practical application.

Overview of Emotionally Focused Therapy:

- ❖ **Assessment:** The therapist evaluates the couple's communication patterns, emotional responses, and attachment styles to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- ❖ **De-escalation:** Couples are guided in identifying negative patterns of interaction and learning to manage conflicts without escalating emotional intensity.
- ❖ **Restructuring emotional experiences:** Partners explore their emotional experiences and learn to express their needs and fears in a vulnerable and constructive manner.
- ❖ **Consolidation:** The therapist helps the couple integrate new emotional experiences and patterns of interaction, fostering more secure and resilient attachment bond.

CASE STUDY:

Considering a fictional couple, Jublin Hilakaan and Kate who have been together for three years and seek therapy due to frequent arguments and emotional distance.

- ❖ **Assessment:** The therapist observes that Jublin Hilakaan and Kate struggle to communicate their emotions effectively, leading to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Both partners have an insecure attachment style, contributing to their relationship difficulties.
- ❖ **De-escalation:** The therapists' work with Kate and Jublin to identify their negative cycle of interaction, where Kate tends to pursue connection while Jublin withdraws emotionally. They practice new ways of expressing their needs and responding to one another to prevent escalation during conflicts.
- ❖ **Restructuring emotional experience:** Kate and Jublin explore their emotional experiences, gaining insight into their attachment-related fears and needs. They practice expressing their vulnerabilities and fears in a way that fosters empathy and understanding between them.
- ❖ **Consolidation:** As Kate and Jublin continue to practice their new emotional and communication skills, they experience a stronger sense of security in their relationship. The therapist supports them in integrating these changes and addressing any remaining challenges,

Over time, Kate and Jublin report improved communication, increased emotional closeness, and a more resilient attachment bond. They continue to utilize the skills and insights gained through Emotionally Focused

Therapy to maintain a healthy, emotional connected relationship.

- **Communication Skills:** Clear and constructive communication is essential for addressing disagreements in a healthy manner. Couples who engage in active listening, assertiveness, and collaborative problem-solving are more likely to achieve positive outcomes in conflict situations.
- **Specific Interventions:** Individual and cultural differences can significantly influence conflict management styles and preferences. Therapists must be prepared to specific interventions to meet the important needs of each couple, considering factors such as personal values, communication patterns, and relationship dynamics.
- **Evidence-Based Practices:** The Gottman Method and Imago Relationship Therapy are among the evidence-based therapeutic approaches that have demonstrated efficacy in promoting constructive conflict resolution. These interventions provide valuable frameworks and strategies for therapists and couples seeking to improve their conflict management skills. The Gottman Method was developed by Dr. John Gottman, and Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman. It focuses on enhancing relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution, and emotional connection between couples. In this response, the overview of the practical application.

Overview of the Gottman Method:

- ❖ **Assessment:** The process begins with a comprehensive assessment of the couple's relationship, including areas of strength and areas that need improvement. This may involve questionnaires, interviews, and observations.
- ❖ **Building friendship and intimacy:** Therapists work with couples to improve their understanding of one another, increase emotional connection, and strengthen the foundation of their relationship.
- ❖ **Managing conflict:** Couples learn effective communication skills, practice empathy, and develop strategies for resolving disagreements in a healthy manner.
- ❖ **Creating shared meaning:** Couples work together to identify their values, goals, and dreams, fostering a deeper sense of purpose and unity within relationship.
- ❖ **Trust and commitment:** The Gottman Method helps couples establish and maintain trust, address betrayals, and strengthen their commitment to the relationship.

CASE STUDY:

Consider a fictional couple, Mary and Ternenge Ibu, who have been married for six years and have two children. They seek therapy due to frequent arguments and a lack of emotional connection.

- ❖ **Assessment:** The therapist conducts an initial assessment, identifying that Mary and Ternenge have strong shared values but struggle with communication and expressing empathy during conflicts.
- ❖ **Building friendship and intimacy:** The therapist encourages them to engage in activities that promote emotional connection. Such as sharing fond memories, expressing gratitude, and actively listening to one another.
- ❖ **Managing conflict:** Mary and Ternenge practice using “I” statements to express their feelings and needs during disagreements. They also learn to breaks when conversations become heated, returning to the discussion once they have calmed down.
- ❖ **Creating shared meaning:** The therapist guides Mary and Ternenge in discussing their individual and collective values, goals, and aspirations. They find common ground in their desire to provide a loving and stable home for their children
- ❖ **Trust and commitment:** Mary and Ternenge work on rebuilding trust by addressing past hurts and develop strategies for maintaining their commitment to the relationship, such as prioritising quality time together and practicing open communication.

Over time, Mary and Ternenge report a stronger emotional connection, improved communication, and a renewed sense of purpose in their relationship. They continue to utilise the skills and strategies learned through the Gottman Method to manage challenges and maintain a healthy satisfying marriage.

- **Prevention Early Intervention:** Addressing conflict effectively before it escalates can help prevent relationship distress and promote long-term marital satisfaction. Couple should be encourage to engage in on-going relationship maintenance and to seek help early when conflicts arise.

Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) is a form of couples therapy developed by Dr. Harville Hendrix and Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt. It is based on the idea that our early childhood experiences shape our relationship patterns and that we are attracted to partners who can help us heal and grow.

Overview of Imago Relationship Therapy:

- ❖ **Exploration of early childhood experiences:** Couples examine how their early experiences and

attachment styles influence their relationship patterns and interactions.

- ❖ **Identification of the “Imago”:** Couples identify their unconscious image of an ideal partner, or “Imago” and how this influences their expectations and perceptions within the relationship.
- ❖ **Development of empathy and understanding:** Couples learn to express empathy, validate one another’s feelings, and practice active listening to deepen their emotional connection.
- ❖ **Implementation of the Imago Dialogue:** Partners engage in structure communication exercises, known as the Imago Dialogue, to explore their needs, fears, and desires in a safe and non-judgmental environment.
- ❖ **Integration and practice:** Couples integrate their new communication skills and emotional insights into their daily interactions, strengthening their bond and creating a more fulfilling relationship.

CASE STUDY:

Considering a fictional couple, Grace and Joshua Agyor, who have married for five years and seek therapy due to a lack of emotional connection and recurring arguments.

- ❖ **Exploration of early childhood experiences:** Grace and Joshua explore their childhood experiences, identifying how they shaped their attachment styles and relationship patterns. They realise that their individual fears and insecurities contribute to their conflicts
- ❖ **Identification of the “Imago”:** Grace and Joshua identify their unconscious “Imago” and recognise how their expectations and projections have influenced their relationship dynamics.
- ❖ **Development of empathy and understanding:** The therapist’s helps Grace and Joshua Agyo practice active listening, validating one another’s feelings, and expressing empathy during their interactions.
- ❖ **Implementation of the Imago Dialogue:** Grace and Joshua Agyo engage in structure Imago Dialogue sessions, where they take turns sharing their thoughts, feelings, and needs without judgment or defensiveness.
- ❖ **Integration and practice:** As Grace and Joshua continue to practice their new communication skills and emotional insights, they experience a stronger emotional connection and greater understanding of one another. They study on integrating these changes into their daily interactions to maintain a healthier, more fulfilling relationship.

Over time, Grace and Joshua Agyo report increased emotional closeness, improved communication, and a deeper

understanding of one another. They continue to utilise and insights gained through Imago Relationship Therapy to nurture their connection and manage relationship challenges effectively.

The findings of this literature review highlight the importance of emotional connection, communication, communication skills, specific interventions, evidence-based practices, and prevention strategies in managing conflict within marital relationships. By integrating these key elements into their approach to conflict resolution, therapists and couples can work together to promote healthy and productive outcomes in the face of disagreements. Further research is needed to continue advancing the field and addressing the importance challenges faced by diverse couples in managing marital conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings of this literature review, the following recommendations are offered for therapists and couples seeking to improve their conflict management skills and promote healthy, productive resolution of disagreements:

- **Emphasised Emotional Connection:** Therapists should prioritise fostering emotional connection between partners, promoting empathy, vulnerability, and responsiveness as key components of effective conflict management.
- **Develop Communication Skills:** Couples should engage in active listening, assertiveness, and collaborative problem-solving to address conflicts in a constructive manner. Therapists can support this process by providing guidance, modelling effective communication, and facilitating practice opportunities.
- **Specific Interventions:** Therapists should consider individual and cultural differences when designing conflict management interventions, specific strategies

to meet the important needs and circumstances of each couple.

- **Adopt Evidence-Based Practices:** Therapists should familiarise themselves with evidence-based approaches like the Gottman Method, Emotionally Focused Therapy, and Imago Relationship Therapy to inform their work with couples experiencing conflict.
- **Encourage Prevention and Early Intervention:** Couples should engage in ongoing relationship maintenance, proactively addressing potential sources of conflict and seeking help early when disagreements arise. Therapists can support this process by offering education, resources, and guidance on effective conflict management strategies.

CONCLUSION:

Managing conflict effectively is a critical component of building strong, resilient marital relationships. Through this literature review, the study has explored the important techniques and interventions that contribute to healthy and productive resolution of disagreements within marriage. The importance of emotional connection, communication skills, specific interventions, evidence-based practices, and prevention strategies has been highlighted as central to promoting positive outcomes in conflict situations. As we continue to advance our understanding of effective conflict management in marriage, it is essential for therapists and couples to remain committed to ongoing learning and growth. By integrating the insights and recommendations provided in this study, marital counsellors can support couples in managing conflicts constructively, fostering stronger, more satisfying relationships as a result.

With continued research and collaboration, we can further enhance our knowledge and skills in this critical area, ultimately contributing to the well-being and resilience of marital relationships.

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