

*Beyond Blame*

**Conflicts  
in Love**

Jeffrey A. Kottler

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## Conflicts in Love

The method described in this book for moving beyond blame and resolving conflicts, especially through internal processes, can be applied to the relationships with which you struggle the most—those close to home and heart. The more you care for somebody, the more energy you probably have committed to that relationship. Whether with spouse or lover, parent or child, sibling or friend, when one of these relationships is not going well, you are truly having a bad day. Or month.

These are people who really know you. They know how to get to you when they so choose. They are invested in getting you to do things that affect them directly. You cannot easily let go of them or write them off. You are bound to them by biological ties, vows of commitment, or strong feelings.

Michael and Gary have been friends since they were kids. Once upon a time they had much in common—they played games together, hung out with the same crowd, shared similar goals and interests. As adults, however, each man developed in quite different directions—vocationally, socially, and especially in terms of basic values. This, of course, is not surprising when you

consider the changes each person undergoes on a daily or weekly basis, much less over several decades. That is one reason it is difficult not only for friends to remain close over a period of many years, but also for spouses. Conflicts are inevitable between spouses and between friends like Michael and Gary, because individuals grow and change at different rates and in different directions.

Michael and Gary are linked together more by their past experiences than by their present compatibility. When they are not talking about the good old days, they are usually arguing—about where to meet for lunch, about who will pick up the check, about whose life is more fulfilling, about anything and everything. The truth is that Michael does not care very much for the time he spends with his old friend: he is tired of their arguments. Yet something stops him from walking away from the relationship. Call it habit. Call it obligation. Or call it love. He does feel deeply for Gary even though their time together is often tense and unpleasant.

### **What Is Different About Love Relationships?**

Before Michael can begin to understand what his conflicts with Gary are all about, before he can identify the underlying issues and work to change the way he responds internally and externally to his friend's provocations, there are some things that he must understand are unique and different about love relationships.

## **Failure to See Reality**

Any disagreement between two people represents a conflict of interests, a clash of goals. In conflicts with those you love, your feelings tend to cloud your judgment. You make excuses for those you love that you would never make for others. Someone at work might forget to do something for you, and you write him or her off in a minute. If someone you love does the same thing, you may make allowances for his or her behavior. This tolerance for neglect may lead to situations in which you begin to see a loved one not as he or she really is, but (a) as you prefer to see him or her, or (b) as you remember him or her to be.

Any attempt to resolve a conflicted relationship must take into account the distortions that are likely embedded in your perceptions of one another. In order to understand clearly why you are in conflict, the origins of the disagreement, and what you might do to change dysfunctional patterns, you first will have to do a careful “reality check” to make certain that you are responding to what is really happening rather than to your fantasy.

## **Enmeshment**

Love involves a connection to another that implies commitment, intense feelings, and mutual dependence. While the term *codependent* has gotten a bad name through overuse in recent years, this may simply mean that two people who care about one another have come to hold certain expectations, not an

unreasonable state of affairs.

When dependence becomes pathological or destructive, two people in a love relationship have fused to the point where they stop functioning as independent beings. *Enmeshment* is the term that best describes what happens when people, especially family members, become overinvolved in each other's lives. Conflict develops whenever a person seeks to express individuality or autonomy.

Love relationships present additional challenges in the conflict arena since you have to determine how your disagreements are serving to maintain the status quo of mutual dependency. Michael notices, for example, that his friend Gary is most inclined to start a fight just after he has related a story of how independent he has become in recent years. Gary feels left out, mourns the loss of their prior closeness, and takes perverse pleasure in experiencing intense engagement with Michael by picking a fight. At least Michael cares enough to argue with him, he reasons.

### **Emotional Intensity**

Love is, by definition, a strong feeling of caring. It is the name applied to that emotion of concern, that bond that holds two people together. It would only make sense that the more you care for someone, the more potentially explosive a conflict could become. Sometimes, if you could only care a little less, you

would not react in such extreme ways with such little provocation.

A friend or co-worker asks me to do something. I politely decline, pleading other commitments. My son asks for a ride to school. I also tell him that I have other things to do; he will have to walk or ride his bike. This time, however, we have the makings of a fine argument, perhaps even the possibility of a full-fledged conflict that could last well into the evening. Why do the most ordinary of disagreements sometimes turn into such out-of-control conflicts with the people we love? The answer is found in the intensity of our feelings for one another.

The more you care for someone, the more deeply you are committed to one another, the greater is the potential for explosive outbursts that can escalate into major conflicts. Any attempt to resolve disputes with loved ones must take into consideration the higher level of emotional intensity, which can make it more difficult to identify the patterns behind whatever is going on.

Furthermore, there may be a long history between you, one that creates lifelong bonds inextricably tying you together. This can complicate matters considerably because it is difficult to be sure exactly what you are really fighting about.

## **Underlying Conflicts**

A key element in resolving disputes is to figure out what you are really in conflict about. Just as there are unresolved issues from your personal past that affect the ways you respond to conflict in the present, so too are there underlying interactive issues that are part of every relationship's history.

Sometimes we fight over things that do not really matter because it is safer than getting into an argument about issues that are more risky and emotionally charged. A wife, for example, picks a fight with her husband over his habit of leaving his dirty clothes heaped over a chair, spilling onto the floor, rather than picking them up. He retaliates by attacking her for her lack of support during this busy season in his life.

What they are conveniently avoiding is the real issue they are both upset about: they have not had sex in over three weeks. Each time one of them attempts to initiate lovemaking, the other is too tired to respond. They are reluctant to talk about their sex life, which both feel has become routine and boring; they are afraid their lack of physical intimacy may escalate into an even greater conflict between them. So they argue about safer, more mundane matters, which may not lead to resolution of their underlying conflicts, but at least they do not rock the boat.

One other way that core issues between people become buried or displaced into other, less threatening interactions is in symbolic form. Certain

communications become a metaphor for the real conflict that lies beneath the surface. In the dialogue below, what do you think the couple is really in conflict about?

he: Have you looked at the plans for the new house?

she: Not really. I just glanced at them.

he: So what do you think?

she: They're okay. But I don't like the idea of a stucco facade. I would much rather have brick —it's sturdier.

he: Look, we've gone over this again and again. If we use brick we won't have enough money to decorate the interior the way we want.

she: So who cares about furniture and wallpaper if the damn house isn't solid in the first place!

he: Don't yell at me! What good does it do to spend all our money using more expensive materials if we have to sit on the floor?

she: You are exaggerating. I don't care if we just stay where we are. Why do we have to move at all?

he: Fine! Let's just forget the whole thing!

If we start with the assumption that what this couple is fighting about is a metaphor for their core conflict, we can look beneath the surface to decode their basic struggle. Their fight over the construction of their house is a symbolic representation of their disagreements over life-style. Throughout

their married life appearances have been most important to him while solid (but sometimes unattractive) foundations have been her priority. He cares most about the daily details of their life together—which restaurant they go to for dinner, which couples they socialize with, how they dress when they go out—while she is most concerned with the quality of intimacy they feel for one another. She would just as soon stay home as go out, as long as they are taking care of one another and the foundation of their relationship.

Each wants a home befitting his or her respective self-image. If this couple were to engage in dialogue about their real conflict, rather than its symbolic form, the conversation would go something like the following.

she: I want a simpler life, one in which we forgo luxuries in order to have more free time to do what we want.

he: I *am* doing what I want. And I like having money to buy nice things.

she: I would rather that we use the money we have to save for more security in the future.

he: Who knows if we will be alive to spend it in the future?

We have here a dispute over basic values, not a fight over a house. Until this couple begins to recognize what they are in conflict about, until they think differently about their struggles, they have little chance of resolving their differences. Without a change in the direction and style of their exchanges the conflicts between them are likely to escalate out of control.

You will confront a similar challenge in attempting to move beyond blame and resolve conflicts with a loved one. Before you can expect to settle a dispute with anyone, especially with someone with whom you are intimately involved, you will have to figure out the underlying issues that you are really disturbed about. Unless you can do so, a minor disagreement may spin into a conflict out of control.

## **How Conflicts Get Out of Control**

In examining the mechanisms of how fights escalate, family dynamics experts have noted several common elements. These elements can aggravate matters that are already sensitive and feelings that are already raw.

### **1. Heaping Issues on Top of One Another**

Adding more and more tension to an already stressful situation, family members bring in material from the past in order to marshal support for a weak argument.

“This is just like what you’ve done before. Remember the time you said you had taken care of the reservations but you really had forgotten? And another thing that has been bothering me...”

### **2. Personal Attacks**

Combatants stop dealing with issues and start attacking each other personally. No longer are they content to win a fight based on the merits of their perspectives; now they want to smear each other's character and destroy completely any credibility the other might have. The conflict has now moved beyond a dispassionate debate about a particular problem into the realm of humiliating someone as a human being.

"It figures you'd say something like that. A person of your gutter morality and incompetence has no choice but to resort to such tactics. I'm not surprised in the least by this, and *neither is anyone else.*"

### **3. Adding Weight to an Argument by Bringing in Others**

The last phrase in the preceding example, thrown in almost as an afterthought, escalates the personal threat of an attack by bringing in the alleged support of others to fortify one's position. When someone says to you "everyone knows what a louse you really are" or "just the other day I heard people saying the same thing about you," the person is trying to add weight to an otherwise groundless accusation. It works, too, as you are likely to respond even more defensively.

### **4. Other Factors**

There are also several other factors that can cause conflicts to spin out of

control:

- When issues move from shades of gray to absolutes of black and white
- When people expect the worst from others and then make their prophecies come true by treating them as if they are despicable
- When motives shift from attempting to settle a disagreement to trying to defeat an opponent
- When people are trapped (or trap themselves) in an untenable position
- When people are fighting over things that don't really matter in order to avoid issues that are really important

In each of these cases, trust between the individuals is breached. They have become suspicious of one another's motives. They seek to control the exchange as a first priority rather than concentrating on trying to reach a mutually satisfying agreement. They are no longer concerned with resolving their differences—only with saving face in others' eyes and placing blame elsewhere. Under such circumstances, one or both participants will resort to one of two postures, withdrawal or aggression; both are counterproductive.

### **Preemptive Intervention During Withdrawal and Aggression**

The object of conflict intervention is to change the patterns of interaction *before* things get out of control. This means being able to recognize the first signs and symptoms of imminent crisis *as they are occurring*. Depending on whether you observe a person withdrawing or engaging in aggressive high gear, you will want to act swiftly to change (1) the climate of the exchange, (2) the balance of power, (3) the style of interaction, and (4) the potential for loss of face.

Let's examine both possible scenarios and look at how they would be handled differently. In the first case, you sense the person is starting to close down and withdraw; in the second instance, you observe the beginnings of escalation.

### **Case #1: Withdrawal**

Initially, both Fred and his stepmother, Natalie, seemed equally vested in planning a surprise party for their father/husband. Since this was a relatively late second marriage for Natalie, there was an uneasiness between Fred and her based on his perception that she was a newcomer and thus not really part of the family. When Fred attempted to take over the planning, Natalie stepped in to assert her role as the primary decision maker.

Although she was pleased when Fred began deferring to her rather than arguing so vehemently about minor matters, as he had been doing a short while

ago, she sensed that this change did not bode well for their future relationship. Fred might give in on the planning of the party, but it would be at the expense of increased resentment and future escalation of tension between them.

How did Natalie notice this change taking place? She monitored closely throughout the exchange not only her own progress toward the stated agenda but also Fred's reactions and responses. She observed the following symptoms:

1. A change in Fred's demeanor (passivity, acquiescence, complacency)
2. A change in the climate (from heated debate to disengagement)
3. A change in style (perfunctory agreement without challenges)
4. A change in content (from the controversial but important issues to those that are more safe and superficial)
5. A change in communication (from equal interaction to one-sided exchanges)

Notice in the dialogue between them how obvious these signs are.

Natalie: So what do you think about inviting his friends from college?

Fred: (Shrugs) Sounds fine.

Natalie: So you think that's a good idea?

Fred: (Impatiently) Sure. Yeah. Whatever you want.

Natalie will need to intervene if she wants to bring the interaction back to a level of congruent engagement without reaching the previous destructive levels. She can accomplish this in several ways.

*Immediacy.* “I sense that you have given up talking to me. I feel sad about that because I very much value your input.”

*Labeling what you see.* “I notice that you have become more passive, as if you no longer care what we decide.”

*Parallel matching.* Adjust your behavior in terms of intensity and level of engagement to that of the other person. When Fred becomes quiet, Natalie tones herself down rather than picking up the slack. This gives him the chance to reengage.

*Exploring underlying issues.* “I don’t think we are really arguing about the party. We both care for your father and we seem to be competing for his approval. Let’s talk about what is really bothering us.”

*Capitulation.* “I seem to be doing most of the talking. How about if I back off for a while and you decide the rest of these things?”

Each of these interventions signals that Natalie has noticed the change that has taken place, recognizes this is a crucial juncture in her relationship with Fred, and has elected to do something to change the pattern and style of interaction rather than allow things to deteriorate further. She has chosen to take some risks rather than be complacent, to confront problems rather than

avoid action because of fear of making a mistake. You will find that other people will give you a lot of latitude in your efforts to be helpful when they sense you are only trying to work things out.

### **Case #2: Aggression**

Discussions between brothers James and Jonathan about where they would vacation together had been proceeding quite well. James wanted to head for the beach, Jonathan for the ski slopes. They were at the point where Jonathan was about to give in (withdraw) when he abruptly changed direction and started blaming James for manipulating him. James helplessly watched things between them turn ugly as Jonathan became more aggressive and belligerent. Specifically, the following signs were in evidence:

1. Abandoning issues for personal attacks (“You always do this to me.”)
2. Using threats to influence the outcome (“Forget it. I won’t go.”)
3. Increased hostility (“You are such an asshole!”)
4. Escalation of the argument (“Since we can’t agree on this, maybe we should just not go!”)
5. Movement away from issues toward pointless arguments (“Besides, I just got new skis and now I can’t use them.”)

As in the first case, if you do not intervene to change the direction in which

the conflict is headed, serious damage is possible. In this example, however, efforts are made to deescalate the aggression and blaming rather than initiate direct confrontation:

*Reflection of feelings.* “I can see that you are really upset about the way things are going.”

*Limit setting.* “If you would lower your voice and calm down a bit, then we could talk this through.”

*Apology.* “I am sorry for pushing you. I hope you will forgive me so that we might resume the discussion.”

*Redirection.* “We seem to have gotten off track. Let’s back up and start again.”

*Self-disclosure.* “I am also upset with the way this is going. I love you, and I am sorry that we are treating each other this way.”

In any situation in which one person has escalated the conflict, it is clear that the stakes for that person are high. The person who is more in control needs to intervene in such a way that any loss of face is restored so that negotiations may begin again. The one time when efforts to resolve disputes are likely to fail is when aggression has escalated to the point where actual verbal or physical abuse is in evidence.

## **When Family Disputes Get Out of Control**

Studies have shown that an individual is more likely to be harmed by a relative than by anyone else. This applies not only to physical forms of abuse but also to emotional cruelty.

Interestingly, abusing our family members is a relatively recent phenomenon among our kind. In the days before doors were invented, when we lived in caves or open spaces, it was impossible to inflict harm on a child or spouse without everyone else in the tribe knowing about it. Once privacy was “invented” through demarcated living quarters, it became possible for people to do things without being closely monitored.

With the advent of privacy, it has become possible for people to take out their frustrations on and act out violent conflicts with those they purport to love the most. These are the most passionate of disagreements, the ones that are the most chronic and the most destructive and that elicit the greatest sense of helplessness. They are the conflicts that most often mask hidden motives, buried resentments, and unresolved issues from the past.

As the following phone conversation between a daughter and her mother illustrates, each participant feels helpless to change the way they interact. Their struggle is a repetition of the basic conflict they have been living out since the daughter first demanded, when she was still in the crib, that the mother choose between her and her father as the most important person in the house. By

refusing to set limits or establish appropriate boundaries, the mother has “taught” her daughter to abuse her.

mother: Dear, can I get you anything when I am shopping today?

daughter: Why are you always bothering me? Don't you know I'm busy this time of day? *[She just drives me crazy with her offers to help.]*

mother: I'm sorry, honey, I was just trying to help. *[I guess I should have known better.]*

daughter: Damn it, mother! Being sorry doesn't help. You interrupted my train of thought. What did you want anyway? *[I hate being so rude to her, but I can't help it.]*

mother: Nothing important. I just wanted to hear your voice. *[She is so busy and now I've aggravated her. I don't blame her for being mad.]*

daughter: Look, Mother, you just can be such a pest. Why don't you get a life or something, and leave mine alone? You're always meddling. *[If I don't keep her in line, she will really get out of hand telling me what to do.]*

mother: I don't mean to. I just wanted to say hello. *[If I make her any more angry, then she will never let me see her.]*

This is just another in a series of abusive conversations in which each participant makes excuses for inflicting or tolerating pain. Blame is directed either outward or inward, but in both cases negative feelings grow to the point where resolving the conflict is much more difficult than it ordinarily would be.

## **Combating Abusive Behavior**

The bottom line is that abusive behavior is a *very* effective way for

someone to get what he or she wants. So what is the incentive for such a person to change? The abuse will not stop until it is no longer tolerated.

### **Confront Your Own Denial**

Once you accept the reality that someone in your life is treating you in disrespectful, abusive ways, you will feel increasingly uneasy about what you are experiencing. This is the stage I discussed earlier as intensifying your discomfort: in order to be motivated to change, you will first have to feel uncomfortable, if not downright miserable, with the status quo.

The function that denial serves, as a defense mechanism, is to protect you from an onslaught that your mind feels would be too much for you to handle. Unfortunately, the side effect of this process is that it permits you to continue suffering in silence, partially anesthetized to the pain you are suffering.

When you are ready to dismiss denial as an ally, you must be prepared to deal with all the discomfort it has been protecting you from facing.

“It took a friend who approached me to get my attention. After one especially vehement attack, he whispered to me, in astonishment, how could I take that? I asked him what he was talking about. I hardly noticed. I had become so used to the yelling and ranting and raving, I thought it was normal. Then I started to feel even worse.”

The feelings of anger and resentment that are being blocked by denial of the abuse are what will motivate you to take a stand against further disrespect.

### **Respond to Violations of Your Rights**

It is difficult to change the rules of any relationship in midstream. Imagine sending out a memo that reads: "I have decided to no longer permit you to treat me the way you have been. The next time you speak to me in a raised tone of voice, threaten me, or otherwise act inappropriately, I intend to do the following...."

It is one thing to resolve to do things differently and quite another to be taken seriously. Just because you express to those who are treating you poorly that you do not like the way things are going does not mean they will alter their styles. In some cases they may even laugh at you and redouble their attempts at domination.

You therefore must be prepared not only to declare your intentions but to follow through with them. Whereas in later chapters you will be exposed to a number of specific ways to combat abusive or manipulative behavior, it is important at this point to realize that you must do *something* even if you do not know what that might be. One thing for sure, you know what *not* to do, and that is to endure abuse as if it is all you are entitled to.

Whatever strategy you select, whether a form of direct confrontation or indirect control, you will need to remind yourself constantly that you deserve better. You are entitled to reasonable treatment, and you will never get what you want unless you go after it.

### **Knowing Your Needs and Expressing Them**

You have two kinds of needs—those you know about and those you do not. If you are unaware of what you really want from someone, and are thus unable to articulate what it is that you wish, how is it possible for you to ever feel satisfied in that relationship?

It would certainly be nice if people could read our minds and know what it is we are looking for even before we know ourselves. What a delightful surprise it would be to have those desires satisfied before we even had to ask. But in reality, except in unusual circumstances between lovers who are communicating on a similar plane, such expectations are ludicrous.

A husband asks his wife how her day went, but what he really wants is for her to tell him how much she missed him. She answers his question. He feels rejected and pouts. She ignores him. An argument is about to begin.

One brother tells another that he is skiing beautifully. He has never seen him ski quite so well. “Thanks,” he mutters sheepishly and then points to the

beautiful scenery around them. The first brother had been fishing for a compliment about his own skiing and now feels hurt. At the first opportunity he snaps at his brother, who is now feeling hurt as well.

A woman asks a friend for an opinion about a recent decision she made. Taking her at face value, the friend offers input that opposes the decision. Actually feeling quite insecure, the woman had been looking for support rather than an opinion. Now she feels put down and belittled even though she got exactly what she asked for.

This is the kindling that starts the flames of conflict. You feel demeaned, misunderstood, neglected, perhaps even taken advantage of by someone who has no idea what you wanted in the first place. It is one thing to feel angry at someone who knowingly withheld something you wanted; it is quite another to be disappointed because that person could not anticipate your needs before even you were aware they existed.

That is why it is so important that you take responsibility for identifying your own underlying needs and desires, and then making certain they are clearly stated so they can be fully acknowledged and understood. I know this sounds good, but it is quite another thing to put this commitment into action.

The first step is for you to know what your needs are. Perhaps a better word to use might be *desire* or even *preference* or *want* since *need* implies that it

is something you require in order to survive. Although life might feel empty or unpleasant without certain elements such as reassurance from peers, a primary love relationship, or civil interaction with one's parents, these are not actually necessary in order for you to live. Except for food, water, shelter, and a few other basics, everything you want is a desire rather than a need.

With that distinction in mind, what are some of your wants and desires that have remained hidden or unexpressed? This is hardly a choose-from-a-list question since the possibilities are endless. Nevertheless, perhaps a few of the following items will trigger your own dormant desires that you have been reluctant or unable to ask for in your relationships:

- I want to be told that I am valuable, cherished, that my presence is important.
- I wish to feel that it is safe to ask you for something and have you say no; I wish it to be equally safe to say no to you.
- I want to be spoken to in a calm manner that demonstrates respect for me and for what I have to say.
- I want to know that I have made an impact on you, that you have heard, understood, and responded to what I offered.
- I prefer that you initiate things with me as often as I do with you.
- I would like shared responsibility for decisions that are made rather

than either one of us shouldering an unfair burden.

- I want you to check out how I am feeling and care enough about the answer to respond appropriately.
- I want to know that it is safe to make a mistake with you and that I will be forgiven.
- I would like you to reach out to me when you sense that it is hard for me to express what it is that I want.

This last item on the list is the great equalizer. How lovely it is when someone is sensitive enough to be able to read what you might be wanting, and to be willing to check out that perception. I would not count on this as a usual state of affairs, but it is not unreasonable to wish that we all could attend closely enough to each other that we could, on occasion, help people state more clearly what it is they really want.

### **I'll Scratch Your Back. Will You Scratch Mine?**

It is difficult for people embroiled in conflict to talk to each other in a civilized way when most of their recent interactions have been tainted. They are on guard, defensive, and mistrustful. One of the most common, and sometimes most unhelpful, strategies of my profession is to invite people to come into therapy sessions and talk about what is wrong. If all you think and talk about are negative facets of a relationship, if all you do is complain about the injustices

being done to you, you will continue to feel steeped in bile and blackness.

One delightful alternative, quite effective with conflicted couples although certainly applicable to any love relationship, is to focus on positive, loving things that you can do for one another. They might include initiating more hugs, calling one another on the phone, giving one another undivided attention for a predetermined period of time, expressing feelings of affection. The object of these tasks is to balance the anguish of conflict with other aspects of a love relationship that are more nurturing and supportive.

While this strategy may appear quite simple and effective, it only works when both people are willing to set aside the conflict temporarily in order to work on a more positive style of interaction. Unfortunately, because some people *like* the power and control associated with conflict, it is not always easy to put these commitments into practice. As we shall see in Chapter Nine, this is as true for problems in relationships at work as it is for those at home.

## About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

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Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

Advanced Group Leadership (1993)

On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

[Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients](#) (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

[The Compleat Therapist](#) (1991)

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[The Imperfect Therapist: Learning from Failure in Therapeutic Practice](#) (1989, with Diane Blau)

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