

# Predicting divorce: Study shows how fight styles affect marriage

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It's common knowledge that newlyweds who yell or call each other names have a higher chance of getting divorced. But a new University of Michigan study shows that other conflict patterns also predict divorce.

A particularly toxic pattern is when one spouse deals with [conflict](#) constructively, by calmly discussing the situation, listening to their partner's point of view, or trying hard to find out what their partner is feeling, for example---and the other spouse withdraws.

"This pattern seems to have a damaging effect on the longevity of marriage," said U-M researcher Kira Birditt, first author of a study on marital conflict behaviors and implications for [divorce](#) published in the current issue (October 2010) of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. "Spouses who deal with conflicts constructively may view their partners' habit of withdrawing as a lack of investment in the relationship rather than an attempt to cool down."

Couples in which both spouses used constructive strategies had lower divorce rates, Birditt found.

The data are from the Early Years of Marriage Study, supported by funding from the National Institute of Aging and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. It is one of the largest and longest research projects to look at patterns of marital conflict, with 373 couples interviewed four times over a 16-year period, starting the first year of their marriages. The study is also one of just a few to include a

high enough proportion of Black couples that researchers can assess racial differences in conflict strategies and their effects.

The researchers looked at how both individual behaviors and patterns of behavior between partners affected the likelihood of divorce. They also examined whether behavior changed over time, and whether there were racial or [gender differences](#) in behavior patterns and outcomes.

Astonishingly, the researchers found that 29 percent of husband and 21 percent of wives reported having no conflicts at all in the first year of their marriage---1986. Nonetheless, 46 percent of the couples had divorced by Year 16 of the study---2002. Interestingly, whether or not couples reported any conflict during the first year of marriage did not affect whether they had divorced by the last year studied.

Overall, husbands reported using more constructive behaviors and fewer destructive behaviors than wives. But over time, wives were less likely to use destructive strategies or withdraw, while husbands' use of these behaviors stayed the same through the years.

"The problems that cause wives to withdraw or use destructive behaviors early in a marriage may be resolved over time," Birditt said. "Or, relationships and the quality of relationships may be more central to women's lives than they are to men. As a result, over the course of [marriage](#), women may be more likely to recognize that withdrawing from conflict or using destructive strategies is neither effective nor beneficial to the overall well-being and stability of their marriages."

Birditt and colleagues found that black American couples were more likely to withdraw during conflicts than were white couples, although black couples were less likely to withdraw from conflict over time.

"We hope this study will lead to additional research on the complex

dynamics of conflict between husbands and wives, and the potential explanations for changes versus stability in conflict behaviors over time," Birditt said.

Provided by University of Michigan

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