

# Thinking objectively about romantic conflicts could lead to fewer future disagreements

August 19 2021, by Lindsey Rodriguez

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Consciously channeling the perspective of a neutral third party can defuse romantic conflict and prevent future disputes, according to a study of 716 Americans my colleagues and I [published in the journal](#)

## [Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice.](#)

We surveyed men and women across the U.S. who were living at home with their [romantic partner](#) in May 2020—at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. We asked them to identify a recent [disagreement](#) with their partner. Then we randomly assigned them to briefly write about that recent relationship conflict.

We asked half the participants to write about the disagreement from their own perspective. The other half we asked to assume the point of view of an imaginary neutral third party, such as a mutual friend, who had the best intentions for both members of the couple. We also asked them to take this neutral perspective in future disagreements with their partner.

People wrote about a variety of topics, including arguments over money, disagreements about parenting and remote schooling and differences in ways to handle COVID-19 safety precautions.

When we followed up with them 14 days later, those who considered the disagreement from a neutral third party's perspective reported greater reductions in romantic conflict and aggression than those who continued to view conflict through their own eyes. For example, those who took the new perspective said they had 30% fewer disagreements and 51.3% fewer incidents of relationship aggression—such as yelling or hitting—over the previous two weeks compared with those who thought about the event from their own perspective.

The [quality of your close relationships](#) is among the strongest predictors of happiness with your life, and even [how long you live](#). Disagreements and disputes are inevitable given how deeply romantic partners' lives become intertwined as they navigate daily life together. The fact that conflict exists is less important than how the couple manages it.

Whereas resolving conflicts collaboratively allows couples to live together harmoniously, communicating about disagreements in a combative way can hurt relationships and take a toll on both partners' mental and [physical health](#).

Romantic conflict, including [domestic violence](#), [escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) because of fear and uncertainty about health, jobs and finances as well as orders to [stay home](#) as much as possible.

Given the importance of constructively resolving conflict, researchers are seeking ways to help people reduce stress, feel better and live together harmoniously.

We believe that our finding that shifting your perspective about a recent disagreement reduced the frequency, severity and intensity of romantic conflict during an especially challenging time is important. It's an effective, free exercise that couples can easily implement in everyday life.

We suspect that seeing disagreements in a new light helps people take a step back, let go of their ego or pride and appreciate both sides of the issue, often culminating in identifying a solution that satisfies everyone. Taking a neutral perspective seems to open doors for more understanding and more empathy, and less anxiety and anger.

This is just one example of work our team is doing to show that taking a neutral perspective on [conflict](#) with others can improve [mental](#) and [behavioral](#) health as well as the [quality of relationships](#).

Now we are experimenting with how to improve the instructions we give the people who participate in our studies about how to reframe their perspectives to see if there are alternatives that work better and last longer. We are also testing downstream effects on partners—that is,

whether asking one person in a couple to modify their [perspective](#) can affect how their partner approaches conflicts as well.

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