



### **The High-Conflict Couple**

A Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy & Validation

By Alan E. Fruzzetti

12-minute read

#### ***Synopsis***

*The High-Conflict Couple* (2007) is a guide to overcoming the common relationship pitfalls that lead to conflict and animosity. Drawing upon years of psychology research and therapy experience, Alan E. Fruzzetti explains where conflict comes from and how it can be reduced.

#### ***Who is it for?***

- Couples tired of fighting with each other
- People who struggle to accept the things they cannot change
- Anyone wanting to be more present in their own life

#### ***About the author***

Alan E. Fruzzetti, PhD, is associate professor of psychology and director of the Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Research Program at the University of Nevada, Reno. He provides extensive training, supervision, and consultation for DBT treatment programs and DBT research in the United States and abroad. Fruzzetti is also research director and member of the board of directors of the National Educational Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder and a co-developer of the Family Connections Program.

## ***What's in it for me? Learn to understand yourself and improve your closest relationships.***

Conflict is a core part of many relationships; perhaps it's a problem in yours. When things get heated and tempers flare, you may find that your judgment gets impaired or you lash out, leading to problems. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Alan E. Fruzzetti has a wealth of experience that will help you regulate your emotions and resolve problems in a way that builds longer, more meaningful relationships.

In these blinks, you'll learn how to get to the root of your conflicts, gaining valuable skills to help you understand yourself better along the way. By giving you the tools to identify exactly what you need, you'll discover what it takes to stop fights before they even occur.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- that being together and togetherness are two very different things;
- how to support your partner's emotions; and
- why mindfulness matters.

## ***Being mindful of your emotional state helps you avoid unnecessary fights.***

Think back to the last big fight you had with your partner. Do you remember what caused it, and the emotions you felt leading up to it?

While it's easy to recall being angry or upset, identifying the feelings themselves can be really hard. We all know that emotions are a central part of relationship conflict, and there's nothing wrong with that. The problem is when they get the better of you and you end up saying something you regret, or find yourself in an argument that's going nowhere.

Because as important as emotions are, our understanding of them is often surprisingly limited. And it doesn't take much to knock us off balance.

## ***The key message here is: Being mindful of your emotional state helps you avoid unnecessary fights.***

Everybody has a baseline emotional state where they're able to think clearly and communicate well. *Emotional arousal* occurs when something knocks you out of this baseline. It's not necessarily a bad thing – in fact, research shows that small to moderate amounts of stress keep you alert and improve your performance at tasks.

But, once you move past this moderate level, performance gets considerably worse. Some people reach this point faster than others, but the end result is

the same for everyone: instead of thinking clearly, your only goal becomes reducing your feelings of negative arousal.

In relationships, high emotions affect your ability to communicate well. And once you've been knocked off your baseline by negative feelings, your thinking becomes more downbeat and judgmental.

Say you've been looking forward to spending more time with your partner, but he comes home late. Instead of being clear about how his actions make you feel, if you're in a state of emotional arousal you might make a nasty comment about him never being around. This would probably knock your partner off his baseline, and the rest is ugly conflict.

Luckily, there are ways to train yourself to stay balanced. One of the most effective is mindfulness, or being more aware of how you're feeling. In other words, if you can recognize when you're reaching emotional arousal, you'll be much better at managing it.

A great way to practice is by learning to describe your feelings without judgment. Ask yourself: What's going on? What physical sensations am I feeling? This will help lower your arousal and put you in a state where you can assess the situation without creating unnecessary conflict.

## ***Make quality time with your partner fun by staying mindful and creating meaningful shared activities.***

It sounds obvious, but in order to come together and reduce conflict, you need to – well – come together.

You see, it's not about physical proximity – if that was all it took, few couples would ever have any arguments. No, in this context, coming together means being mentally lined up, as well.

If you've been struggling with conflict in your relationship, you've probably trained yourself to be ready for battle at any minute. Instead of providing peace and comfort, shared time becomes associated with negative emotional arousal.

But don't worry, there's a way to turn things around.

## ***The key message here is: Make quality time with your partner fun by staying mindful and creating meaningful shared activities.***

Just because you and your partner are in the same room, it doesn't mean you're in the same emotional space. Many couples spend a lot of time *passively together*: close by, but not paying attention to each other. For example, if you're in the same room but you're both on your phones, you might be physically together, but you're not fostering closeness. Large amounts of passive time in a relationship can actually

increase feelings of loneliness and contribute to negative emotions.

By contrast, being *actively together* is when you and your partner are occupying the same emotional space. This doesn't mean you're holding a scintillating conversation – it could just mean you're aware of how your partner's feeling and enjoying her company.

So how do you accomplish active together time? The secret is mindfulness. Instead of retreating to your own world, notice your partner. Don't be critical or judgmental – just be present. What is she doing? What do you like about her? When you begin appreciating her presence, the positive emotions that follow will help to bring you closer.

Once you've learned to appreciate your partner, make a point of engaging in more activities as a couple. This could mean hiking, catching a movie, or grabbing coffee. Whatever you choose, it shouldn't strain your budget or be a giant production. The point is to share life experiences in a setting removed from stress or anxiety. To get past conflict, you need to relearn what it's like to have fun together.

### ***To have healthy conversations, you need to be direct and upfront about your wants.***

Now that you've learned how to have fun with your partner again, it's time to talk.

Effective verbal communication has two key elements: accurate expression and validation. This means one person talks clearly and honestly, while the other person listens and acknowledges. In a good conversation, these roles switch back and forth, with the two sides taking turns listening and talking.

But for the conversation to work, the two parties need to come into it with mindsets that allow them to play their roles well. Luckily, these skills aren't hard to learn – it all comes down to staying aware of your goals and listening carefully.

### **The key message is: To have healthy conversations, you need to be direct and upfront about your wants.**

To express your emotions accurately, it helps to know what you want going into a conversation. Unfortunately, negative emotional arousal works against you; if you're out of balance you're likely to attack your partner's behaviors instead of telling him how you feel.

If your ultimate goal is to have your partner do more work around the house, calling him lazy won't help. But, if you wait until you're more emotionally balanced and then explain that doing all the chores yourself makes you feel frustrated, it might make a difference. To make sure you're going into the conversation with the right mindset, pick a time when you and your partner are both relaxed and without distractions.

A core part of accurate expression is being honest and not casting judgments. Tell your partner how you feel and why. And don't beat around the bush – being indirect can easily be misinterpreted. If you were hoping to spend the day with your partner because you've both been traveling for work recently and you miss him, say so! Comments like "I was hoping you'd stay home for once" aren't helpful.

Consider what you want out of your conversations. Sometimes it'll be to solve a problem; other times you might want to be closer emotionally. That's totally fine, just be open with your partner. Think about it like going to a restaurant: you have to tell the waiter what you want in order to get it. And your conversations are the same, so don't be afraid to say, "I want to talk about my day, and I just need you to be supportive." You'll both come out of it happier and feel more nourished emotionally.

### ***Validate your partner's emotions to build trust and quality communication.***

Talking's all well and good, but relationships are about conversations, not speeches. Once a partner tells you how she's feeling, the other half of the equation is letting her know you're listening. This is where validation comes in.

In this context, validation means *communicating understanding and acceptance*. So, while you don't have to agree with your partner, you do have to acknowledge her emotions. Over time, this kind of active listening builds trust and reduces negative feelings, laying the foundation for real communication.

### **The key message of this blink is: Validate your partner's emotions to build trust and quality communication.**

Validation can be as simple as eye contact or nodding. The core idea is just that you let your partner know that you're present and you hear what she's trying to tell you. Sometimes you'll need to verbally acknowledge what you're told. Statements like "I know you're disappointed" show that you care, and may be comforting to your partner.

This comfort is important because it reduces negative arousal and builds closeness, which is vital for real communication to happen. Think about it. The better the experience of opening up to someone, the more likely you are to continue talking to them in the future. Validation tells your partner: this person cares about what I have to say and will listen to me. Which makes her more willing to open up, leading to better conversations.

And there's a nice side effect: it makes you feel better about yourself, too. You can probably remember a time when you said something hurtful in a conversation. Thinking back on it, it's not a proud moment, right? If

you practice validation, you'll never have to worry about that again.

Validation can mean recognizing actions, emotions, desires, or opinions. Whatever the topic, make sure to take it in, listen closely, and let your partner know she's being heard. Don't be afraid to ask questions to clarify your understanding. For example, saying something like "I'm sorry to hear you didn't get the promotion you wanted. Are you upset?" goes a long way to establishing trust and helps both of you understand the real issue at hand, instead of starting a fight.

### ***Analyze your problems if you want to find the root cause and come up with a solution.***

Good communication won't stop problems popping up in your relationship, but it will give you the tools to manage them. Notice the use of the word *manage* instead of *solve*. That's intentional. Talking about solving a problem implies that you do something and it goes away forever.

But that's not how most relationship issues work. Think of them like your bills: sometimes they're predictable and sometimes things pop up suddenly, but you know you need to keep an eye on them because finances are always changing. Relationships are the same way.

### **The key message here is: Analyze your problems if you want to find the root cause and come up with a solution.**

The first step to managing a problem is identifying it, which can be trickier than you think. A lot of the time, arguments get derailed and you don't address the underlying issues that cause them. The only way to really understand what's behind your fights is to sit down and discuss them together. Use clear expression and validation skills to learn how your partner is feeling and get to the heart of the problem.

For example, if you and your partner tend to argue over who does the dishes, there's likely a deeper cause. Maybe your partner is averse to this particular chore because his skin gets irritated by hot water. By sitting down and discussing both sides, you may find a way forward. Perhaps your partner can take over other chores that won't aggravate his skin issues, such as sweeping or doing the laundry.

Whatever the problem, it's important to be specific and detailed when analyzing it. Don't fall into the trap of saying "you always do this." Break it down. You could even consider using a flowchart – it might give you flashbacks to math class, but it can be helpful because it allows you to see exactly which behaviors follow which actions.

When you've identified the problem, it's time to generate solutions as a team. Come up with a list of several possible fixes and talk them over. What are the

pros and cons? Are there any ways to combine options? Remember, negotiations involve giving up some things to win others. Through careful communication, you should be able to find an approach that works for both of you.

### ***Accept the things you can't change by finding new meaning in your partner's behavior.***

Here's a secret: you're never going to solve all of your problems.

Of course, that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. With good communication, you and your partner should be able to manage most issues that come up. But part of being in a relationship is learning that getting close to someone means you won't always get your way.

So you have a choice: despair or acceptance. You can choose despair, but that leads to suffering and negative energy – if you look hard enough, you'll always find things you want to change but can't.

If you choose acceptance, on the other hand, you'll find yourself on a path to peace and comfort.

### **The key message is: Accept the things you can't change by finding new meaning in your partner's behavior.**

If you've been trying and failing to get your partner to change, take a moment and consider your mindset. Perhaps you need a new strategy. Stop putting energy into *fixing* your partner and instead, embrace the things you can't change. You might even learn to love these things.

It may seem counterintuitive at first, but this approach gives you the opportunity to learn more about yourself and your own emotions. Perhaps your partner tends to roughhouse with your children right before bedtime, making it hard for them to fall asleep and leading to tiredness the next morning. Take note of all the ways you try to address this behavior. Now make a point of stopping for a few weeks. Don't tell your partner about it, just stop.

Chances are this will lead to frustration and disappointment when the unwanted behavior continues. That's ok! Accept your emotions and develop healthy, soothing rituals to deal with them. As more time passes, the behavior might start bothering you less.

If it's still annoying you, try looking at your partner's behavior another way. Use mindfulness to assess the situation, and think about how the things you don't like about your partner are linked to the things you do. For example, your partner's tendency to play late in the day likely reflects love for your children and their ability to live in the moment. By reconsidering your partner's behavior, you start to eliminate the suffering that occurs when what you want doesn't match up with what actually exists.

Remember, there's always a bigger picture, and focusing on differences and drawbacks is a choice. Choose acceptance and love instead.

### ***Final summary***

The key message in these blinks:

**Relationship conflicts occur when emotions boil over and you and your partner stop communicating effectively. But it doesn't need to stay that way. By practicing mindfulness in your conversations and making an effort to be present in your relationship you can start to reconsider your problems. Recognize each other's emotions as well, and you might discover a path forward together after all.**

Actionable advice:

**Make a list of small, considerate things you can do for your partner.**

Small, affectionate gestures with no strings attached are a great way to spend quality time with your partner and practice mindfulness. Make a list of some small meaningful gestures: things like cooking a favorite meal or handling a chore. When you do something from the list, notice how you feel, be mindful of your partner's reaction, and recognize the affection you feel toward them.

### **Got feedback?**

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