

Happy couples can get a big resolution to a big fight—mean talk aside

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Being critical, angry and defensive isn't always a bad thing for couples having a big disagreement—provided they are in a satisfying relationship. In that case, they likely will have a "big resolution" regardless of how negative they were during the discussion, according to a study by a Baylor University psychologist.

Until now, there have been two opposing ideas on negative [communication](#) in conflict: one is to refrain from using it, while the other suggests doing so is a natural part of productive interaction to resolve conflict. But findings from the latest research indicate that "neither theory is quite right," said Keith Sanford, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and [neuroscience](#) in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences.

Sanford's study ("A latent change score model of [conflict resolution](#) in [couples](#): Are negative behaviors bad, benign, or beneficial?") appears in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Sanford said his goal was to understand conflict resolution as a process that involves change.

"How is it that a couple can have a big conflict and feel upset with each other, and then later proceed to a new point where the conflict is resolved and they feel happy with each other again?" he said.

He recruited a sample of 734 people in heterosexual marriages or cohabitation relationships. Each participant completed an Internet questionnaire that involved identifying a recent relationship conflict and answering questions about his or her use of negative communication. Importantly, participants also rated how upset they felt when the conflict was at its peak and also how they currently felt about the conflict.

"I used the difference between these two ratings as a measure of the extent of progress participants made toward resolution," Sanford said.

"What I found was that the results were different for people in satisfying relationships and people in unhappy relationships," he said. "For people in satisfying relationships, negative communication was associated with having bigger conflicts, but this effect was entirely harmless because big

conflicts were always followed by big resolutions.

"People in satisfying relationships resolved their conflicts regardless of whether they used negative communication or not. In contrast, people in unhappy relationships tended to have big conflicts, and they tended to have trouble resolving their conflicts—and this was often true regardless of the type of communication they used."

To the extent that negative communication played any role, it appeared to be detrimental for resolution, but this effect was mostly negligible, Sanford said.

"A person's level of relationship satisfaction was, by and large, a much stronger predictor of progress toward conflict resolution," he said. "It is important to keep in mind that communication may still be important in relationships for many reasons other than resolving conflicts. However, when it comes to resolving [conflicts](#), it appears that keeping a feeling of satisfaction alive in a relationship is more important than the type of communication you use."

Provided by Baylor University

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