

# Manage Conflict: Accepting Influence

By Zach Brittle

This one is mostly for the men.

Not just the men, to be clear, but mostly. In heterosexual relationships, the research shows men often need a little more help than their partners when considering issues of influence, respect, and power. Men are wired to crave these things. They are trained to chase them from an early age and are rewarded for achieving them, usually with more influence, respect, and power.

The thought of relinquishing these cherished gifts is difficult to accept. I know, because I'm not that great at it. I love feeling strong and right. I love winning. But I can tell you with certainty that when it comes to relationships, if one partner is "winning," then both partners are losing. That's why it's critical that you (both) learn to **Accept Your Partner's Influence**.

This critical skill is not limited to heterosexual couples. It's essential in same-sex relationships as well, but the research shows that gay and lesbian couples are notably better at it than straight couples. That said, Dr. Gottman's long-term study of newlywed couples — mostly heterosexual — revealed that:

*"...even in the first few months of marriage, men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages, and are less likely to divorce than men who resist their wives' influence. Statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self-destruct."*

The study doesn't suggest that men should give up all their power, but it does reveal that the happiest, most stable marriages were those where the husband did not resist power sharing and decision making with his spouse. Sounds pretty simple, right?

The problem is that even the most thoughtful, progressive, egalitarian men aren't aware of their tendency to resist influence. Our training is too precise. And the rewards are too tempting. Even when we commit to emotional intelligence and availability, we're evolutionarily prone to protect our sense of safety (and pride). So what's to be done?

The first step is a careful inventory of your conflict style. This is where your awareness of your capacity for one or more of the Four Horsemen will come in handy. When we cannot receive influence it usually manifests via stonewalling, contempt, criticism, or defensiveness. The use of these behaviors communicates that your commitment to "winning" is stronger than your commitment to your partner.

A second step is to commit to making "accepting influence" part of your initial contract. As pre-marrieds and newlyweds, your notion of commitment is largely untested – or at least it's not as tested as it will be. You'll set yourself up for success by committing first to personal accountability. With that commitment established, you can invest in more complex conflict management strategies to help you navigate the relationship.

The reality is that five or ten or fifty years from now, you're not going to look very much like you do now. It's not just that your hair will be grayer. You'll have changed the way you think about money, and politics, and personal relationships. Ideally, you will become wiser. Kinder. More generous. But this will not happen naturally. It will happen through testing.

The tests may take the form of addiction, bankruptcy, cancer, or threat of divorce. You may be tested with an inability to have children. You will definitely be tested by actually having children. You will be on opposite sides of these and many other issues throughout the lifespan of your relationship. If you do not allow yourselves to influence one another, the tests will win and your relationship will lose.

By making "accepting influence" part of your initial contract, you can achieve mastery over your test together. The best way to do this is to adopt the notion of "yield to win." Remember, if one of you is winning, then both partners are losing. The notion of "yield to win" suggests that perhaps both

partners – and thus the relationship – can win by yielding or accepting influence.

Pay attention to your conflict patterns over the next few weeks. Pay attention to both your natural inclination and your actual verbal responses. Do you escalate? How? Why? What if you didn't? Dr. Gottman suggests actively looking for the parts of your partner's point of view that makes sense to you. In this way, you can begin the "yield to win" process. By identifying and empathizing with your partners point of view, you are more likely to find a solution that honors both partners. That's the secret.

Accepting Your Partner's Influence is actually a pretty great strategy for gaining more respect, power, and influence. Dr. Gottman has observed, "The wives of men who accept their influence are far less likely to be harsh with their husbands when broaching a difficult marital topic." This means that the relationship is winning and that you'll (both) be more inclined to honor and respect each other as the relationship matures.

It's tougher than it sounds — for both men and women — but it's the pathway through conflict and toward a sound relationship for couples who master this skill early.

*This article can be found online at:*

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/manage-conflict-accepting-influence/>