

Eight Dates Date 2: Agree to Disagree

Addressing Conflict

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Remember

A date is a time set aside for meaningful conversation and connection. Activities like ball games, comedians, movies, or other forms of entertainment can be added to a date, but they cannot be the date itself. If someone else is doing the entertaining, it takes away from the purpose of the date, which is to talk and engage with each other.

Pre-Date Homework (Individual)

Take 15 to 20 minutes before the date to reflect on your own conflict style. Focus on yourself rather than your spouse.

As you prepare, think about these questions:

- When conflict begins, do I move toward my spouse, shut down, defend myself, criticize, or try to fix things too quickly?
- What usually makes me feel unheard, disrespected, or emotionally flooded?
- What helps me stay calm, open, and engaged during disagreement?
- Do I tend to view conflict as a threat, a failure, or an opportunity to better understand my spouse?

Also reflect on this truth: **conflict is not the enemy**. In healthy relationships, some conflict is ongoing because two different people bring different personalities, family histories, values, preferences, and emotional needs into marriage. The goal is not to eliminate all conflict. The goal is to handle it in a way that protects connection.

Optional faith reflection:

Take a few quiet moments to ask God for humility, gentleness, wisdom, and self-control. For couples who desire it, James 1:19 can serve as a quiet guide: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (ESV).

Theme

“How do we stay connected when we do not agree?”

Estimated Length

90 to 120 minutes

Setting

Choose a neutral, comfortable environment where both partners can talk privately and without distraction. Phones should be silenced, and the goal should be conversation, not entertainment or problem escalation. Avoid having this date in a place where either person feels trapped, rushed, or on display.



Possible locations include:

- A quiet dinner at home after the kids are in bed
- Sitting on a back porch, patio, or deck
- A picnic table at a quiet park
- A peaceful coffee shop during a less busy time
- A private table at a calm restaurant
- A walk at a park or neighborhood trail, if both partners can stay focused while talking
- A living room with soft music in the background
- A rented cabin, weekend getaway, or hotel lounge area
- A church courtyard or peaceful outdoor space
- A scenic drive with time set aside afterward to stop and talk face-to-face

Try to choose a place that feels emotionally safe, not emotionally loaded. It is usually best to avoid places tied to past arguments, crowded environments, loud restaurants, family gatherings, or situations where alcohol, screens, or constant interruptions may pull attention away from the conversation.

For this particular date on conflict, it can help to choose a setting that feels calming and steady. Some couples do best sitting side by side. Others do better sitting across from each other. The goal is to create a space where both people can stay present, speak honestly, and remain respectful.

Optional faith-sensitive addition:

For couples who would find it meaningful, choose a place that helps both of you feel grounded, peaceful, and open to humility, prayer, and reflection without making that feel forced.

Opening the Date (10 to 15 minutes)

Purpose Setting

Before beginning, read this aloud together:

Conflict is inevitable in every close relationship. The goal of this date is not to win, force agreement, or prove who is right. The goal is to better understand each other, reduce harm during conflict, and learn how to stay emotionally connected even when we see things differently.

Some problems are solvable, and some are recurring. Even when we cannot fully solve an issue, we can still learn to talk about it with greater respect, gentleness, and understanding.

Optional faith addition:

We also recognize that strong marriages are shaped not only by truth, but by grace. We want to speak honestly, listen carefully, and respond with kindness.

Ground Rules

- Take turns speaking. Do not interrupt.
- Listen to understand, not to correct.
- Use a gentle tone and a soft start-up.
- No contempt, sarcasm, eye-rolling, mocking, or name-calling.
- No kitchen-sinking. Stay with the issue at hand.
- No mind-reading or assigning motives.



- Speak from your own experience using “I” statements.
- Emotional honesty matters more than perfect wording.
- If either partner becomes overwhelmed, take a break and return.

Helpful Reminder Before You Begin

When conflict starts harshly, it usually ends poorly. Begin gently.

Instead of saying:

- “You never listen.”
- “You always do this.”
- “What is wrong with you?”

Try:

- “I want to talk about something important, and I want us to do it well.”
- “I felt hurt when that happened, and I want to help you understand why.”
- “Can I share what this was like for me?”

Part I: Understanding Our Conflict Patterns (20 to 25 minutes)

Individual Reflection (Silent, 5 minutes)

Each partner reflects privately on the following questions before sharing:

- When conflict begins, what do I usually feel first?
- What do I tend to do when I feel hurt, misunderstood, or criticized?
- What did conflict look like in my family growing up?
- What part of conflict is hardest for me?
- What do I most need from my spouse when tension rises?



Guided Sharing (15 to 20 minutes)

Take turns answering. The listening partner only reflects back what they hear.

Prompts:

- When conflict starts, I often feel...
- One thing I do in conflict that may not help is...
- In my family growing up, conflict usually looked like...
- What I most need from you during disagreement is...
- One thing I wish you understood about my reactions is...

Listener Response:

- What I hear you saying is...
- That makes sense because...
- Thank you for telling me that.
- I can see how that would affect you.

Do not correct your spouse's feelings. Focus on understanding their experience.

Part 2: Solvable Problems and Recurring Problems (20 minutes)

Discussion Focus

Some conflicts are **solvable**. These are often practical issues like schedules, chores, parenting routines, finances, or planning. Other conflicts are more **recurring** because they are tied to differences in personality, values, preferences, needs, pace, family background, or deeper dreams. These issues may not fully disappear, but they can become more manageable.

Discuss together:

- What kinds of issues between us are usually solvable?
- What kinds of issues keep coming back?
- When a conflict repeats, what do we each tend to do?
- How do we know when we have shifted from problem-solving into hurtful patterns?

Key Question

- Is this a problem to solve, or is this a difference to manage with understanding?

This question can lower pressure and help couples stop trying to force instant agreement.

Part 3: The Four Unhelpful Conflict Patterns and Their Better Alternatives (20 to 25 minutes)

Gentle Reflection

Many couples fall into destructive patterns during conflict. Take time to identify which ones show up most easily for each of you.

1. Criticism

Criticism attacks character instead of naming a concern.

Instead of:

- "You are so selfish."

Try:

- "I felt hurt when I did not hear from you, and I needed reassurance."



2. Defensiveness

Defensiveness protects self instead of taking responsibility.

Instead of:

- “That is not my fault.”
- “You do the same thing.”

Try:

- “I can see my part in that.”
- “I did not mean to hurt you, but I can understand why it landed that way.”

3. Contempt

Contempt communicates disgust, superiority, ridicule, or disrespect.

Examples include:

- Sarcasm
- Mocking
- Sneering
- Eye-rolling
- Belittling language

The better alternative is respect, appreciation, and remembering that your spouse is not your enemy.

4. Stonewalling

Stonewalling happens when one partner shuts down, withdraws, goes silent, or emotionally leaves the conversation.

The better alternative is self-soothing with a planned return:

- “I am getting overwhelmed. I need 20 minutes to calm down, but I want to come back and finish this.”

Couple Discussion

Take turns answering:

- Which of these patterns do I slip into most often?
- Which one hurts me the most when it happens between us?
- What is one better response I want to practice?



Part 4: Accepting Influence and Understanding Deeper Meaning (20 minutes)

Discussion Focus

When couples stay stuck, it is often because each person is fighting for more than the surface issue. Beneath conflict there may be deeper hopes, fears, values, wounds, longings, or dreams.

Take turns answering:

- This issue matters to me because...
- Underneath my frustration, I think I may be feeling...
- One fear I carry into this conflict is...
- One hope or dream underneath my position is...
- One part of your perspective I can respect, even if I do not fully agree, is...

Key Question

- What might this issue represent to you at a deeper level?

The purpose here is not to surrender your own viewpoint. The purpose is to better understand what lives underneath your spouse's intensity.

Optional faith reflection:

Sometimes love grows when we pause long enough to remember that the person in front of us is not just presenting an argument. They are revealing part of their heart.

Part 5: Agreeing to Disagree Without Disconnection (20 to 25 minutes)

Exploring Healthy Conflict

Agreeing to disagree does not mean avoiding the issue or pretending nothing matters. It means accepting that unity is not the same as sameness. A healthy couple can hold difference without losing tenderness and respect.

Take turns answering:

- What helps me feel respected even when we disagree?
- What makes disagreement feel unsafe for me?
- How do I know we are still okay even if this is not fully resolved today?
- What does emotional connection during conflict look like to me?
- When have we handled disagreement well in the past?

Meaning-Making

Together, complete this sentence:





In our relationship, healthy conflict means...

Write down your shared definition.

Examples:

- We stay respectful even when upset.
- We begin gently instead of attacking.
- We take breaks when flooded and return.
- We listen before trying to persuade.
- We do not have to agree on everything to stay connected.

Part 6: Repair and Responsibility (15 to 20 minutes)

Gentle Reflection

Healthy couples are not couples who never misstep. They are couples who learn to repair. Repair attempts are small efforts to de-escalate tension and reestablish connection.

Examples of repair attempts:

- “Can we start over?”
- “I hear that this matters to you.”
- “I am getting defensive. Let me slow down.”
- “You are not my enemy.”
- “I can see why that hurt.”
- “Let me try saying that more gently.”
- “Can we take a short break and come back?”

Each partner answers:

- One way I tend to make conflict harder is...
- One trigger I need to take more responsibility for is...
- One repair attempt I can make sooner is...
- One repair attempt from you that I want to get better at receiving is...

Listener response:

- Thank you for owning that.
- I appreciate your honesty.
- That helps me understand you better.

No debating facts here. Focus on ownership and care.

Optional faith addition:

For couples who desire it, this can be a quiet moment of confession, grace, and beginning again.

Part 7: Self-Soothing and Coming Back Well (10 to 15 minutes)

Flooding Awareness

Sometimes conflict becomes unproductive because one or both partners become emotionally flooded. When this happens, clear thinking and careful listening become harder.

Signs of flooding may include:

- Racing heart
- Feeling hot or shaky
- Wanting to escape
- Going blank
- Feeling panicked, numb, or overwhelmed
- Becoming sharp, reactive, or hopeless

Discuss together:

- How do I know when I am flooded?
- What helps me calm down?
- How long do I usually need before I can re-engage well?
- What helps me believe you really will come back to the conversation?

Agreement for Breaks

Complete this together:

“When one of us feels overwhelmed, we will ask for a break respectfully, calm ourselves, and return to the conversation within ____.”

Part 8: Building a Better Conflict Rhythm (15 minutes)

Conflict Care Requests

Each partner makes one clear, realistic request for how to handle conflict more effectively this week.

- One thing that would help me feel safer during conflict is...
- One way you could help me stay engaged instead of shutting down is...
- One thing I will work on in myself this week is...
- One gentle phrase I want us to use more often is...

Requests must be:

- Specific
- Behavioral
- Achievable
- Respectful



Examples:

- I feel safer when voices stay calm.
- I do better when we take a 20-minute break and come back.
- I feel more heard when you summarize what I said before responding.
- I need us not to bring up five old issues when discussing one current issue.
- It helps me when you begin with gentleness rather than intensity.

Closing Ritual (5 to 10 minutes)

Appreciation Exchange

Each partner completes:

- One thing I appreciate about the way you showed up tonight is...
- One thing that gives me hope about us is...
- One strength we have as a couple, even in conflict, is...
- One way I want to love you better during hard conversations is...



Closing Statement

Read aloud together:

Disagreement does not have to divide us. Tonight we chose to listen, to slow down, and to stay engaged with one another. We may not resolve every issue in one conversation, but we can continue building a relationship where honesty and connection grow together.

Optional faith closing:

Lord, help us to be people of truth, grace, patience, and peace. Teach us to love well even when we do not fully agree. Amen.

Take-Home Practice for the Week

- Notice your early signs of defensiveness, flooding, or withdrawal.
- Practice using a softer start-up when bringing up concerns.
- Use at least one repair attempt during the week.
- When conflict rises, ask: "Is this a problem to solve or a difference to manage?"
- Revisit your shared definition of healthy conflict once this week.
- Practice taking a respectful break and returning well.
- Name one deeper feeling under your frustration before discussing the issue.

Therapist Tip

If strong emotions arise, slow the conversation and help each partner name the feeling underneath the reaction. Many conflict cycles are driven by hurt, fear, shame, loneliness, disappointment, or feeling unseen. Progress often comes not when couples erase disagreement, but when they learn to handle it with greater safety, gentleness, and care.

For recurring conflict, the goal is often not total resolution. The goal is to reduce gridlock, increase understanding, and help each partner feel heard, respected, and emotionally safer in the relationship.