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Avoidance of Conflict in Romantic Relationships

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Interpersonal Communication

### **Abstract**

The divorce rate in the United States in 2011 was 3.6 per 1,000 according to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention. Conflict avoidance in romantic relationships is a serious problem that could have contributed too many of these divorces. I have dove into the risks of using this method to deal with problems. I have also seen how it affects intimacy levels in romantic relationships.

### **Introduction of Study**

Avoidance in romantic relationships is nothing but disaster. Avoidance is “A way of handling conflict by ignoring it, pretending it isn’t really happening, or communicating indirectly about the situation” (McCornack, 2013, p. 255). There are different types of avoidance such as skirting and sniping. Skirting is when “a person avoids a conflict by changing the topic or joking about it” (McCornack, 2013, p. 255). Sniping is “Communicating in a negative fashion and then abandoning the encounter by physically leaving the scene or refusing to interact further” (McCornack, 2013, p. 255).

There are two different areas I have focused on in my research. The first area I have researched is risks when avoiding conflict and the second is conflict avoidance and its effects on intimacy in romantic relationships. Not many people think of what will happen in the short or long run when they avoid conflict instead of dealing with it. Avoidance might seem to be the best way to deal with conflict but it will more than likely come back to haunt you. And when it comes to intimacy, all of your built up anger will cause you to have less room in your mind for good thoughts about your significant other. You must know how conflict avoidance will affect your relationship before you chose it to solve all of your problems.

I chose to research conflict avoidance because I feel that it is very near the top of the list of causes for most failed relationships. This was one of the major causes of the ending of my first romantic relationship and I was curious if this was a common relationship ender. Dr. Micheal J. Hurd states in the article “Conflict Avoidance in a Relationship” that “Most of these problems can be resolved early on by simply expressing your hurt feelings to your loved one. Not in a hostile or offensive way, but simply as a matter of fact or as an expression of emotional hurt” (Hurd, 2012, p. 1). There is the option to solve the problem you and your significant other have as soon as it happens but we hardly ever do that; why? I’m hoping my research can answer this question.

## **Review of Scholarship**

### **Risks of Conflict Avoidance**

Avoidance can lead to many problems in the future. According to McCornack, the people who use this method to solve conflict think they are using a great method that is not emotionally draining and is lower risk than direct conflict. Cumulative annoyance is the most common risk involved in avoidance. In cumulative annoyance “repressed irritation grows as the mental list of grievances we have against our partners builds” (McCornack, 2013, p. 255). Eventually we will lose control of all of these repressed feelings and explode on our significant others. This really causes strain on the relationship because you are always thinking of the things that bother you about the other person and eventually it could ruin your relationship.

Pseudo-conflict is another possible risk in using the avoidance method. According to McCornack, pseudo-conflict is when there is a “perception that a conflict exists when in fact it doesn’t” (McCornack, 2013, p. 256). Pseudo-conflict is also more common now that social

media is so prominent. People can tag you in pictures or statuses that might cause your significant other to question your relationship. If you go into the conversation about the status or picture with no assumptions, pseudo-conflict will not occur. I am not quite sure why I chose conflict avoidance as my main problem solving method and I am very interested to see why others chose this as their primary problem solving method as well. It causes so many issues in the long run and they could mostly be avoided if conflict avoidance was not used.

### **Conflict Avoidance and Intimacy**

Intimacy is a key part of any romantic relationship. Intimacy is defined on Dictionary.com as “1. The state of being intimate” and “2. A close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group” (“Intimacy”, 2013). This is extremely important in a romantic relationship. Perceived conflicts are often one of the problems with using conflict avoidance. Even though there was not a significant change in men, the women did see a moderate change (which is enough to acknowledge).

Another study done by Denise Haunani Cloven and Michael E. Roloff at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Northwestern University found that “withholding is negatively associated with intimacy only up to a point. Once a threshold of intimacy is perceived, neither increases in perceived intimacy nor continued involvement in relationships is associated with further reductions in the withholding of relational irritations” (Denise Haunani Cloven, 1994, p. 159). So at some point certain forms of conflict avoidance, such as withholding irritations, no longer affects intimacy levels.

An article in Psychologies, a magazine about psychology, has an interesting take on the number one reason why they believe affairs happen. The main reason people have affairs is

because “they’re not sharing all of themselves, and so levels of intimacy drop. The relationship becomes routine, rather than being kept alive by fresh dialogue. Inevitably, each partner begins to feel lonely” (Perry, p. 1). According to Perry, this is due to conflict-phobia. People feel that they will create more conflict so they fear any conflict in the first place. There is a connection, although it may be small, to how people in romantic relationships can have intimacy issues because of conflict avoidance. I look forward to digging deeper into this and seeing how else conflict avoidance interferes with intimacy.

### **Research Plan**

Most studies that have to do with conflict avoidance in romantic relationships use surveys or other types of primary research. There are also studies that use a method of compiling journal articles and comparing them known as a literature review. One is “Do Professional Interpreters Improve Clinical Care for Patients with Limited English Proficiency? A Systematic Review of the Literature.” The researchers

conducted a systematic literature search, limited to the English language, in PubMed and PsycINFO for publications between 1966 and September 2005. We also searched the Cochrane Library. These searches produced 3,575 citations (see Appendix for exact search strategies). We also conducted a search for bibliographies on the World Wide Web using the search term *Medical Interpreters*. On the web we found multiple bibliographies, and from these we identified an additional 123 total, we generated 3,698 references from all data sources.

(Karliner E. A., 2007, p. 3)

I chose to do a literature review so I could see what other research has been done in this field.

A literature review is the most effective way for me to do research on this topic because I do not have the time or the money that it would take to do a direct study. This was effective because there are very few reviews of literature done on this topic. It was difficult because there are very few direct studies on the two specific topics I looked into: risks of conflict avoidance and conflict avoidance's effects on intimacy. I looked through every search engine that could potentially be helpful to find any study that has anything to do with these topics. I feel that this has been the most effective way for me to conduct my research.

## **Analysis**

### **Performing my Research Method**

I searched the web for any type of journal article that could have anything to do with the topic I chose. It has been very difficult to find research that others have done on these very specific topics. This has made it a little more difficult to find really good, solid research but I believe I have still found some very valid sources. This has caused me to look at my topic in different ways than I had originally planned. I have been taking it on piece by piece instead of in one big portion, looking into each keyword separately and try to see if I can find any connections.

The most surprising connection I made was with a University of Miami article, "Two Distinct Emotional Experiences in Romantic Relationships: Effects of Perceptions Regarding Approach of Intimacy and Avoidance of Conflict" and an article by Carol Gilligan, "Woman's Place in a Man's Life Cycle," which I discuss later in this section.

## **Risks of Conflict Avoidance**

I have found that the risks of conflict do not seem to stop people from using this method to solve their problems. In a study done by Hal Witteman, they found that not only was cumulative annoyance an issue but so were noncumulative annoyance and mutual cumulative annoyance.

Rebuffs, illegitimate demands, criticisms, and cumulative annoyance, did not account for all types of conflicts. Hence, two new 'primary' categories were added.

Noncumulative annoyance represents behaviors that occurred only once but that were not rebuffs, illegitimate demands, nor criticisms. Mutual cumulative annoyances occurred when both parties to the relationship performed some activity, such as arguing, and the respondent perceived conflict as a result of the accumulation of it over time.

(Witteman, 1992, p. 263)

Cumulative annoyance and mutual cumulative annoyance were the two most common distinctions occurring when the data was collapsed for measuring. This shows that cumulative annoyance is used in everyday communication and out of the methods for solving problems it is used more often than any other conflict type. This is not a good thing when it comes to romantic relationships or communication in any situation. As the article stated, conflict happens as a result of the accumulation of anger over time, or it is "perceived" to have happened because of the accumulation (Witteman, 1992, p. 263). People's perceptions are very important because even if accumulation is not the true problem if people think it is, it then becomes the real problem.

Some people fall into cumulative annoyance unknowingly. For instance you could notice that your significant other is leaving the toilet seat up and his/her underwear on the bathroom floor. You don't say anything and figure eventually he/she will figure out this is the wrong thing to do. One day you come home from a bad day at work and you see the underwear and toilet seat and lose it. You yell at your significant other like the world is ending and it's his/her fault. This can be avoided by communicating properly and approaching the problem the first time it occurs.

According to David Victor, pseudo- conflict is when "The resultant misunderstandings subsequently lead the parties involved to believe that a conflict based on misunderstood behavior exists when, in fact, no conflict actually does exist. Miller and Steinberg call this misreading 'pseudo-conflict,' that is, perceived conflict rather than actual conflict" (Victor, 2007, p. 2). This could happen when you see your significant other walking around campus with someone else and assume he/she is cheating on you with that person. You decide to confront him/her about it and you realize there was never any part of him/her that wanted to leave you or cheat on you with that other person. This can also be avoided easily with proper communication but it occurs often.

As I stated earlier, conflict avoidance was a major cause of the end of my first romantic relationship. I avoided conflict in almost all situations. We never argued about anything, I just went along with whatever he said most of the time. If he suggested anything that was unreasonable I would just say no and I very rarely had to explain myself, he just went along with it also. I feel that we both knew that there were problems but no one was brave enough to bring them up. In the end, there was one huge argument and it was all over. I believe that if we had



dealt with our problems as they came, the relationship would have come to a much cleaner, friendlier ending.

This has helped me learn that the risks in conflict avoidance are not worth it. If I see a problem in my current romantic relationship, I bring it up immediately. My partner is also great about doing the same thing. If he sees a problem we talk about it and most often fix it. This does lead to more day to day conflict but it is much more manageable than pinning it all up for one big fight. We also lead happier lives than we did in our past relationships. We know that we don't have to deal with cumulative annoyance, we can let our emotions out and deal with them one at a time.

### **Conflict Avoidance and Intimacy**

As stated in the article "Woman's Place in a Man's Life Cycle", Carol Gilligan quotes Freud as saying "women have less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection and hostility" (Gilligan, 1977, p. 433). This is the perfect example of how men and women view conflict differently. There are so many differences in how men and women view conflict that it makes sense for intimacy levels to be affected for one group more than the other. "Male gender identity will be threatened by intimacy while female gender identity will be threatened by individuation" (Gilligan, 1977, p. 434).

A study was done through the University of Miami about intimacy and conflict avoidance. They used students at the school as their participants and monitored their intimacy levels in different situations using an electronic journal. The participants took part in a control experiment to make sure they all knew how to properly use the electronic devices and how to

perceive and write down their emotions correctly. The researchers found that “Perceived conflict and intimacy were not strongly related among men, although the strength was moderately strong among women” (Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, 2005, p. 1127). This shows that women and men view and handle perceived conflicts in different ways.

According to Gilligan’s theory, the male’s views of intimacy might not have changed in the University of Miami study “Two Distinct Emotional Experiences in Romantic Relationships: Effects of Perceptions Regarding Approach of Intimacy and Avoidance of Conflict” because men already perceive intimacy negatively. Women generally have a positive view of intimacy so when conflict avoidance becomes involved they start to have a more negative view on intimacy. It could also mean that men do not place as high of a standard on intimacy as women do so when something happens that could effect that, women feel the effects more. Women feel that more is being damaged and men never held it to a high standard so in a way they could care less.

Conflict-phobia is a very interesting topic that Philippa Perry discusses in her article “The 6 affair triggers”. This would definitely lead to issues in intimacy because of your inability to show your true emotions. You would never be able to bring up anything that was bothering you. This would cause you to not be able to be fully intimate and share your true feelings with anyone. If your feelings were always good this would not be a problem but we all know that is very rarely ever the case.

According to Perry, conflict-phobia is one of the 6 most common affair triggers. As I discussed earlier, conflict-phobia could lead to “partners feeling lonely” and drops of intimacy levels (Perry, p. 1). In this article Perry also states that

airing their troubles and risking confrontation feels too frightening, so paradoxically, to save their marriage, they seek intimacy elsewhere. The straying partner is often careless, as if unconsciously they want to get found out, because this will force them to look at their relationship. When both sides take responsibility for their conflict avoidance there is a good chance they can learn new and more authentic ways of being together. (Perry, p. 1)

It amazes me that people would rather go out and find other romantic partners rather than solve their problems right away with their current partners. This shows just how afraid of conflict people can be. It seems crazy to some but it makes complete sense to others.

This article shows the extreme side of how conflict avoidance can affect intimacy in romantic relationships. This can happen but you have to remember that it could be much less obvious. From my experience, conflict avoidance is something that could and often does cause romantic relationships to end but it should not. You can work through most any conflict and get back to healthy intimacy levels. It just takes work and understanding from both partners.

### **Implications**

This study has proved relevant in many areas. One is I have linked the possible reason that men do not see a change in intimacy when conflict avoidance is involved but women do. They already have a negative or neutral view of intimacy so when something such as conflict avoidance happens, it doesn't change their viewpoint because they already saw intimacy as a negative thing. Women have a positive view on intimacy so when something such as conflict avoidance happens, their view of intimacy becomes negative. I have not found this connection in any other articles in my research.

I have also pointed out that there needs to be much more research in this field. This seems to be a very important topic in romantic relationships and this type of information would be very useful. Counselors and Psychologists could really help their patients or maybe even students by sharing this information. This further research could be used to save many marriages that most think have no hope of surviving just by figuring out how to help people express their negative feelings without being afraid of conflict.

I have also found that there is very little information about pseudo-conflict's effects on romantic relationships. It does not seem to be a very valid risk of conflict avoidance when it comes to romantic relationships. With the growth in social media I feel that eventually it will play a much larger role in romantic relationships. In the future I believe this will be a heavily researched topic.

### **Conclusion**

There are many issues that conflict avoidance can cause in romantic relationships. There are two main issues that I have investigated further in my research. The first is the risks involved in avoiding conflict and why people chose to take them over solving the problem immediately. The second is how conflict avoidance affects intimacy in romantic relationships. I feel that this is something that has not been looked at enough and needs to be researched more. Overall, I feel that I have contributed to the research of these specific topics with my research. Conflict will happen in everyone's lives, it's up to you how you chose to deal with it.

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