## Self Esteem: The Root of (Almost) All Conﬂict

Getting divorced? Tired of ﬁghting? Want to ﬁnd another way? Perhaps understanding what drives conﬂict would help to de-escalate it, or at least keep it from getting worse. Here’s the answer most of the time: self-esteem.

Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves based primarily on our individual abilities to master developmental steps as they present themselves during our individual life spans. It is mastery that makes us feel good about ourselves from the inside out. It is mastery that allows us to feel good about ourselves even when we are not fed good feelings by other people. It is mastery that gives us the kind of self-esteem that allows us to endure dificult times even when we feel that we have failed. And it is mastery that gives us the self-conﬁdence that we need to admit our mistakes and learn from experience.

But there is another source of self-esteem, namely the good feelings about oneself that derives from the praise given by others. This source of self-esteem is particularly important to children who readily observe that they have a lot to master compared to people older than themselves. But it is also important to adults.

### As a mental health provider, I've seen how self-esteem impacts divorces. Learn the strategies through my articles to navigate divorce without escalating conﬂict. You must learn to prioritize respect and mature communication to protect your self-esteem and foster a healthier post-divorce relationship.

Most people enter marriage believing that they as a couple will have a better life together than they would have had when single, sometimes a much better life. In part this is based on an idealized view of marriage and a belief in the automatic happiness that it will bring. And in part it is based on an idealized view of one’s prospective spouse. Too often the glow around the being of the person we plan to marry is based more on our wishes and needs than on who the person really is. But all honeymoons end and when they do most of the glow evaporates leaving the real person in the light.

When the glow goes away, we begin to see warts that were previously invisible. The more real the other person becomes, the less we idealize them. In healthy marriages, those based on reality and not on wishes, the warts are seen as simply another part of the person we love. In marriages that lead to divorce, however, the warts appear cancerous and repugnant even when they are not.

How a person manages his or her feelings about the warts usually determines the level of conﬂict that couples experience when they divorce. The choice is to either poke them or not poke them, to aggravate them or not aggravate them, to treat them with respect or disrespect, to make an issue out of them in a way that makes the other person feel bad or to handle them in a more neutral fashion.

Jack and Jill are getting a divorce. They have simply fallen down the hill too many times. Jack blames Jill for tripping and pulling him with her. Jill blames Jack for bumping her on the hillside and not holding ﬁrm when she tried to catch herself from falling. Neither wants to take responsibility for his or her contribution to the fall.

### As a psychiatric therapist, in exploring the root of divorce, conﬂict is

***self-esteem. Get practical insights and guidance to mitigate damage during divorce proceedings. You should learn to uphold dignity, manage emotions, and pave the way for a smoother transition into single life.***

Jack doesn’t want to take responsibility because he has always been expected to be strong and keep his family safe. He doesn’t want to be seen by his peers as less than a man and so blames Jill.

Jill, on the other hand, does not want to appear dependent and weak. She blames Jack and casts herself as a victim to protect her self-esteem. Besides, she knows that she has never been able to count on him, not really. To her way of thinking, this is yet another example of why they should divorce. She decides to punish Jack for his carelessness and irresponsibility, and decides to make him pay. She launches an assault in court to show the judge that she is faultless and that she has good reason to get rid of Jack.

Jack, feeling hurt and insulted, refuses to acknowledge his part in the fall. He is not going to put up with Jill’s making false allegations about his competence and makes sure everyone knows the truth, including the judge. He brings in character witness after character witness to prove that he is a good man in an efort to repair the damage to his self-esteem.

Jack and Jill have ﬁnally shown each other who they are. They are angered and repulsed by the other’s behavior and develop a strategy to defeat the other person’s agenda. Part of the strategy is to show the world what a pathetic human being the other is. The ﬁght is on. If it goes too far, there will no turning back.

The conﬂict between Jack and Jill is not about the children or the assets, but about their sense of worth and value. They have reached this point as a result of damage done to the way they felt about themselves during the marriage. They feel disappointed and disillusioned as a result of the other’s behavior. They also feel ashamed that they have been unable to hold their marriage together.

The more that self-esteem is based on something other than reality, the more likely it is that a person will experience narcissistic injury, i.e. a wound to one’s

self-esteem.. The deeper the wound, the more likely it is that that person will strike out to feel better about him or herself. The more that spouses strike out at each other, the more likely it is that conﬂict will develop. The more often one person attacks the self-esteem of the other person, the more likely it is that the conﬂict will become chronic, a pattern of interaction that can be dificult to change, particularly if the wounds are deep.

By the end of too many marriages, spouses have called each other names and belittled each other out of frustration, anger, and disappointment. Both partners carry unhealed or partially healed wounds that are painful and make each person more vulnerable to criticism. A small level of conﬂict becomes a bigger level of conﬂict which can spiral out of control and result in a malignant tearing apart of whatever feelings of love, trust, and cooperation that might remain.

Divorce is an experience that makes most people feel bad about themselves. For most people it is a sign of failure and inadequacy. When a person is left, it is common for that person to wonder why the person who previously cared about and admired them has come to conclusion that they are no longer desirable or ﬁnds them so repugnant that they can no longer stand to live under the same roof.

Even the leaving spouse sufers a blow to self-esteem. Divorce is the opposite of mastery, at least in the eyes of the people who are divorcing. Most people (narcissists aside) are left with the feeling that they have messed up again, especially as their chain of failed relationships lengthens.

When there is a high degree of conﬂict in a divorce, it is almost always a result of narcissistic injury, usually to both people. The adversarial nature of the legal system used to help people move from marriage to being single may add to the intensity of the conﬂict especially when one or both people misuse the legal process as a club, a way to ventilate anger and regain self-esteem at the same time. The more contentious the divorce, the more likely it is that damage will be done to one or both people, which often fuels conﬂict after the divorce.

When faced with the prospect of a divorce, you have a choice to make, i.e. whether to use the experience to exact yet another pound of ﬂesh or to move beyond the current state of afairs to a better place, including a better relationship with your spouse. This is particularly important when there are children to consider.

But how can unnecessary conﬂict be avoided? What does it take to prevent a state of chronic conﬂict? How do two people move from hating each other to feeling neutral about and no longer troubled by the past, including their past relationship? The answer is easy even though making it happen is dificult.

When the conﬂict between two people is based on injury to self-esteem, the ﬁrst step is to stop the bleeding by refraining from causing damage to the other person’s self-esteem and restoring one’s own in a manner that does not fan the ﬁres that burn. That means not attacking the other person’s self-esteem, not calling that person names, not insulting him or her, and not making the other person feel small. It means being respectful, managing one’s emotions in a mature manner, giving credit where credit is due, and apologizing for hurt unjustly inﬂicted. It means being fair, honest, and considerate, and thinking before speaking.

It also means managing the process of divorce appropriately, learning from one’s mistakes, taking responsibility for one’s part in the demise of the marriage, and adjusting to being single again in a manner that promotes growth and allows

healing to take place. It means coming out on the other side of the divorce process with self-respect and the feeling that one has done it well.

### Discover from the help of mental health experts how self-esteem drives divorce conﬂicts. Explore the strategies to heal and move forward respectfully. Whether you're divorcing or supporting someone through it, learn to preserve self-worth and foster a constructive post-divorce relationship for the sake of all involved.

Self-esteem that lasts is based on mastery. An imbalance in self-esteem on the part of people involved in divorce leads to conﬂict that may perpetuate the imbalance.

It is mastering the end of a marriage that promotes a healthy self-esteem in both people and minimizes the odds that conﬂict will continue beyond the divorce. Do it for yourself. And if you have children, please do it for them.