

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Conflicts tend to generate intense levels of energy and tension. Handling conflicts poorly is effortless because we've all been hurt and can easily notice others' mistakes. Our feelings get hurt, our pride wounded, and we feel unappreciated and unseen. Situations of conflict escalate quickly, and our emotions can lead to hurting others and damaging relationships. However, before each conflict, there's a brief yet critical window that determines whether we will navigate the exchange successfully or disastrously.

If we are not ready to respond positively, we will almost always react negatively.

Fighting effectively and constructively — staying connected during tough discussions and tender feelings — is a skill that we can each learn. Conflict Revolution doesn't happen easily or by accident, it's a journey that requires effort, self-awareness, and commitment, but the rewards include greater understanding, deeper intimacy, and more resilient relationships.

Our goal with this exercise is to set you up for success by helping you create your own unique "Rules of Engagement" to use while navigating any kind of conflict. By developing your own Rules of Engagement, you can learn how to fight well, feel confident, and build a stronger, more harmonious connection with those who matter most to you.

Good Flight — Good Fight

Many similarities exist between skillful piloting of an aircraft and engaging in a successful conflict in a relationship. Both involve three essential elements for excellence: **PREFLIGHT** (Are you prepared?), **DURATION** (What will occur throughout the experience?), and the **LANDING** (How smoothly will it conclude?).

PREFLIGHT PREPARATION



Just as we prepare for a flight by choosing a destination and trusting in a well-screened pilot, we should assess our emotional state and readiness before tackling conflicts. You will need to take into consideration factors that might affect effective communication. Evaluating your physical and emotional state ensures a safe space for productive conflict resolution, much like a pilot's readiness check before takeoff. Both parties of a conflict are co-pilots on this journey; are you both ready to engage constructively? Major airlines use the "IM SAFE" checklist to ensure any pilot is equipped and ready to fly. Likewise, consider these factors to evaluate how they may impact your ability to navigate clearly.

"IM SAFE" checklist:

- I** -illness
- M** -medication
- S** -stress
- A** -alcohol
- F** -fatigue
- E** -emotion



PREFLIGHT PREPARATION continued

Being a safe person and preparing a safe space for conflict gives you the freedom to listen, empathize, collaborate, feel compassion, and express yourself freely.

Much like the aviation crew checks the plane's status before takeoff, you must evaluate your readiness for a challenging conversation. When evaluating whether it's an appropriate time to have a difficult conversation, it's important to check your readiness and make sure you're in a good place. While feeling tired is common, excessive or chronic exhaustion hinders clear communication. Avoid starting tough talks late at night; it's better to rest and discuss them when refreshed. For example, starting difficult conversations at 11 p.m. after a stressful day will probably not be helpful. Minor illnesses like the sniffles don't necessarily need to stop conflict resolution, but severe health issues might warrant postponing.

*Questions to ask yourself:
(preflight checklist)*

- Do I need food?
- Am I hydrated?
- Am I distracted?
- How tired am I?
- Am I frustrated/irritable?
- Do I have enough energy?
- Do I have enough time?
- Is there a clear path ahead?

Know your flight plan:
Know your destination:

- What are you trying to accomplish?
- How do you want to feel afterward?

DURATION OF FLIGHT



Keep in mind, you are the one flying this plane. How you respond in this conversation will determine your outcome. Approach it like you're a co-pilot, not a flight attendant or an adversary. Recognize that the other person has a unique perspective, ideas, needs, and concerns. Aim for a smooth journey; rely on your communication guidelines to maintain a safe and aware environment, considering your words, tone, and body language. If either of you become dismissive or defensive of one another, your relationship *will* experience turbulence. Hasty and thoughtless reactions are the least effective. Take a big deep breath in and slowly let it out before responding.

**LIFE-GIVING
words & phrases:**

- 'I' statements like, *"I felt frustrated when..."*
- *"I want to work on this."*
- *"I'm not done; my goal is to improve."*
- *"I'm committed to resolving this."*
- *"You're the person I want to address this with."*
- *"You matter to me."*
- *"I'm a bit confused now, but I'm here to seek clarity with you."*
- *"I apologize for being defensive; I'm dedicated to improving this with you."*

**TURBULENT
words & phrases:**

- 'You' statements that breed blame and shame like, *"You made me feel..."*
- Global statements like, *"You always... You never..."*
- Dismissive Tone or eye-rolls
- Critical statements like, *"You're mean," "You don't know what you are talking about," "You're crazy,"* etc.
- *"Fine, whatever."*
- *"It doesn't matter"* when it does matter.
- Sarcastic attitude: *"Oh yeah, because you're soooo perfect."*



DURATION OF FLIGHT continued



IN CASE OF EMERGENCY:

When things get challenging, and you encounter turbulence, disengage from autopilot mode. In this context, autopilot signifies a lack of self-awareness in your actions and falling into detrimental patterns. If the situation seems to be spiraling, consider what actions you should take:

- 1 **TAKE A BREAK** — Conflict has a way of wearing us down, and sometimes, we need to step back from a hard conversation to regroup and re-evaluate ourselves. Taking a time-out is a much wiser choice than allowing the situation to deteriorate into a crash landing. Decide, whether on your own or together, how much time you need to collect yourself before returning to the conversation. It's *essential* to set boundaries for the break to prevent it from turning into a prolonged silent treatment. If you're the one requesting the time-out, take responsibility for reinitiating the conversation after you've had time to reflect. If you tend to avoid confrontations, it might be tempting to deflect and avoid returning to the discussion, but doing so can create emotional distance and detachment. When you ask for a break, it's *your responsibility* to reconvene with the other person after you've had a chance to think and reflect.
- 2 **CHANGE COURSE** — During tough conversations, one or both parties can easily become flooded by emotions or thoughts. Physical movement helps regulate emotions and clear thinking. It calms the situation, dispersing intensity and promoting rational dialogue. Moving while talking offers fresh insights and shifts mental states, enabling more productive communication. Ultimately, it's a valuable strategy for emotion management, tension reduction, and improving understanding in difficult discussions.
- 3 **TAKE ACCOUNTABILITY** — Accountability in conflict is essential for personal growth, improved relationships, and better communication. It signifies emotional maturity, aids conflict resolution, and fosters self-reflection and emotional management, leading to clearer communication and trust. Moreover, it prevents conflicts from escalating any further, ensuring more positive interactions with others.

Visit donandrene.com/defensiveness for resources to help you evaluate your self-defensive patterns.

Some examples of common defensive patterns include:

- Denial of responsibility
- Blaming others
- Playing the victim
- Avoidance and procrastination
- Rationalization and justification
- Making excuses
- Deflecting criticism
- Using humor to deflect seriousness
- Withholding information
- Stonewalling and silent treatment
- Shifting blame onto others
- Projecting insecurities onto others
- Minimizing the issue
- Going on the offensive
- Criticizing or attacking in return
- Passive-aggressive behavior
- Escalating conflicts
- Shutting down emotionally
- Sarcasm as a defense
- Denying one's emotions
- Overintellectualizing
- Intellectualizing emotions
- Dismissing others' feelings
- Self-deprecation
- Overcompensating
- Seeking external validation
- Perfectionism
- Refusing to accept feedback
- Ignoring or denying problems
- Playing the martyr
- Avoiding confrontation
- Chronic busyness
- Numbing emotions with substances
- Escaping through distractions
- Escaping through work
- Bluffing and pretending
- Suppressing emotions
- Holding grudges
- Fear of conflict
- Fear of vulnerability
- Fear of intimacy
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of failure
- Fear of abandonment
- Pessimism

LANDING & CONCLUSION



The final part of a successful flight involves a safe and smooth landing, which requires coordination, skill, and careful execution. Likewise, the last thing that happens in a conflict is often the most important. The goal here is re-connection, and the final words you speak will leave a lasting imprint in the mind and heart of your partner. Refer to the previous list for life-giving words and phrases to ensure a smooth landing. You may be tempted to get the last word in (*Whatever! Fine! You win!*) to prove you're right, but this will bring disconnection. If the conversation has been stormy and bumpy, you'll need to put in extra effort to ensure you're re-connected and back on solid ground. Generally, it's the absolute last thing you feel like doing after a conflict.

First, **hug it out.** — Yup. We said it. Now do it.

Embraces like hugs reduce the secretion of cortisol, a stress hormone, while also lowering blood pressure and heart rate during tense moments. The simple act of sharing a hug can help restore your connection and ease your guard. Hugging communicates to the nervous system that you are safe, loved, and that you are not alone (a much-needed message after a difficult conversation).



Second, it's important to do an **individual check-in** regarding each of your attitudes, postures, and defensiveness that may have spilled out during the discussion. There should be no hint of condemnation in this reflection. The goal here is restoration - with ourselves and with one another. Some days can be tougher, and that's when we need to take a moment to reflect with God. He's a constant source of safety, always there for us, and has a clear view of our hearts. Turning to Him can help us better understand what's going on inside us and in our relationships. When it comes to any relationship, it's worth remembering that Christ is the only one who's truly perfect. He encourages us to remain in a teachable posture, open to learning and growing.

Effective conflict resolution skills improve with practice. You don't have to strive for perfection, and it's important not to place unrealistic expectations on yourself or others. Remember, you are **co-piloting** your relationships. For smooth landings, remain ally co-pilots that can stay connected rather than becoming enemies who crash and burn.

Individual Check-in:

- How did you do in the conflict?
- Consider your attitude and actions.
- How was your posture towards the other person?
- Reflect on what behaviors you did and did not do, then ask for forgiveness if necessary.

CREATING YOUR OWN RULES OF ENGAGEMENT:

Establish your own set of 5 Rules of Engagement that you personally commit to and follow during conflicts. These rules should promote your personal growth and help you achieve productive resolutions and reconnection.

Review these rules daily for the next two weeks and apply them when conflicts arise. After each conflict, assess your adherence to these rules (*keep them accessible, like on your phone or refrigerator*) and reflect on how you did. The goal is not just to create a plan, but to **DO your plan**.

*You may use the questions below to help you create your Rules of Engagement.
(It's helpful to consider the ways you saw your family of origin respond to conflict.):*

- How would you like to address the patterns you've inherited from your family of origin, whether it's continuing or discontinuing them?
- When and where do most of your conflicts typically arise in your life?
- What strategies do you have for taking a time-out and resuming conversations when needed?
- If it's relevant, what guidelines do you follow regarding drinking/being intoxicated while handling conflicts?

After two weeks, evaluate your progress and consider the reasons behind your actions. Are you consistently following your plan, or do you find yourself deviating from it when emotions run high? It's essential to assess whether these rules can effectively guide you away from unproductive patterns and toward healthier conflict resolution. Are you willing to let these rules influence your behavior and encourage you to navigate conflicts differently? Be honest with yourself about your commitment, as it greatly impacts your relationships' success. Planning for a smooth landing in conflicts increases the likelihood of a positive outcome and strengthening your relationship.

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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

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