

# THE CHOOSE-YOUR-OWN-ADVENTURE GUIDE TO SOLVING RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

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Hello there, friend. What's that I hear? You're pissed off at someone? Someone is pissed off at you? You have a fight in your life and you don't know what to do? Well, you've come to the right place. Whether it's with your mom, your aunt, your best friend Stan, or maybe even the mailman, I've got the solution to all your relationship problems!

Below is a "Choose Your Own Adventure" for resolving your conflict. Yes, my friend, your conflict is an adventure. A rage-infused shit-festering adventure full of four-letter words and smashed cell phone screens, I'm sure. But an adventure nonetheless.

Simply start with the first question below and navigate yourself to the end. By the end, you'll know exactly what to do about your conflict.

If not, well then fuck you, buddy:

But even if there's not a flaming dumpster fire of a relationship in your life right now, reading through each decision tree is still a worthwhile exercise in not being a terrible human being. I invite you to follow along at home. So, let's get to it!

## QUESTION #1: ARE YOU TRYING TO CHANGE THE OTHER PERSON AND/OR ARE THEY TRYING TO CHANGE YOU?

By "change the other person," I mean are either of you trying to change the other person's personality, habits, and/or values? You want them to be more social or less social, or more jealous or less jealous, or from the north instead of the south or from the south instead of the north. You want to change their character, their culture, their way of life.

- If you are trying to change them, go to **ENDING #1A**
- If they are trying to change you, go to **ENDING #1B**
- If neither of you are trying to change the other person, go to **QUESTION #2**

## ENDING #1A: YOU ARE TRYING TO CHANGE THE OTHER PERSON

In two words: stop it. It's a losing battle. You can't change people. The most you can do is set an example in hopes that they change themselves. This is the fundamental principle of having good boundaries. And any relationship that doesn't have good boundaries will inevitably turn to shit.

But let's say this person does eventually decide to change themselves. The change will be so gradual and incremental that you will hardly be satisfied by it. So, don't get your hopes up. And definitely don't wait around for it to happen.

It's simple: you either appreciate and/or love the person as they are, or you don't. That's your choice. I know it's painful. But it's the only way to keep things healthy.

## ENDING #1B: THEY ARE TRYING TO CHANGE YOU

If someone in your life is trying to change you—that is, they are punishing you emotionally for not conforming to their desires or values—then you are stuck in a lose/lose situation.

If you do try and change for them, you're essentially betraying your own values and self-worth to make someone else happy. This can work in minor cases, but in the long-run, it's a self-destructive strategy. You are essentially making them happy by making yourself miserable. Except no one wants to be with a miserable person, so you will eventually make them miserable as well.

The other option is to tell them to fuck off. Which is what I wholeheartedly recommend.

Look, here's my "How to Create Strong Boundaries for Idiots" Guide—but if you need more details, here:

- **Step One:** Tell them that this is who you are and they can take it or leave it.
- **Step Two:** If they don't accept it and keep trying to change you, you leave the relationship.

Both steps are equally important. You must decide on what you are willing to tolerate and not willing to tolerate in your relationship. If you can't do that, then you are simply at a loss of control and will always feel reactive to the other person. This is bad.

Once you have decided what you will and will not tolerate, you express this clearly. "Hey, I really like watching Teletubbies and if you can't handle that, then this isn't going to work!" OK, a more serious example, "Hey, my religion is really important to me and if you can't respect that then this isn't going to work."

The second step is then probably the hardest. Because you have to stand by your statement. If they violate your boundary, there have to be consequences. A lot of people are good at expressing the boundary but they don't stick by it. As a result, the people around them learn to ignore what they say.

Other people are good at the second step but bad at the first: they are great at cutting people off but bad at expressing why. If you don't express what boundary has been crossed, then you don't give other people the chance to ever adjust how they treat you. Therefore, you need to state your boundary *and* act upon it.

### OPTIONAL GREY BOX FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO IDEA "HOW" TO END A RELATIONSHIP

There's a term I made up called "VCR Questions," which is basically any question where people ask how to do something that *feels* difficult but is actually incredibly simple.

You can read a full explanation of VCR questions in this article, but a simple example is something like, "How do I quit my job?"

Well, it's simple, you go to your boss and tell him/her you want to leave. Done.

But the twist is that it's *not easy*. It's emotionally painful and causes lots of anxiety. So people avoid it. And part of that avoiding it is convincing themselves that it's far more difficult and complicated than it actually is.

Enter the perennial "How do I break up with him/her?" VCR question. It's probably the most common VCR question I get. Someone wants to end a relationship, but it feels difficult, so

they convince themselves that they don't know how to do it, even though it's very simple.

Well, here's a painfully obvious, blow-by-blow method for ending a relationship with somebody. This grey box assumes that you've already set a boundary and the person in question has violated it. It also assumes you've decided to end it but are anxious about doing so. Here you go:

Step 1: Tell the person why this relationship isn't working for you: they violated your boundary, you just aren't feeling it anymore, you have different life paths, whatever. Preferably, do this in person. But if doing it in person complicates things greatly, or you are in any way concerned for your safety, then do it over the phone, email, or text (in that order).

Step 2: Tell them it's over. "I can't be friends with someone who doesn't respect my X," is always a good line to go with. Or "I can't be in a relationship with someone who doesn't respect me for Y." Or, "I can't be with someone who doesn't make me feel Z." Or, if it's a family member, "I can't have someone in my life who undercuts my self-respect by doing Z." Something like that.

Step 3: This person will get upset. They will lash out. They may apologize. They may cry. Don't be swayed by the drama. Remember the reason you're here.

(The only exception to this is if the person apologizes and promises to change their behavior towards you AND they haven't already apologized and promised this before. Note: *Most people deserve a second chance. Few people deserve a third.*)

Step 4: Don't respond to texts, emails, invitations, etc. Remember, the relationship is over. Therefore, start acting like it's over. Chances are that this person will try to make up for whatever they did wrong. If they're a boundary violator, they won't respect your declaration of the relationship ending. After all, they didn't respect your boundaries IN the relationship, why would they respect them OUT of the relationship? You must stand firm.

Step 5: If the person begins to harass you, block them. You might feel guilty. But they had their chance, remember? There are over seven billion people in this world. There's only one of you. Take care of you first.

Caveat: If the ex-communicated person is a family member or someone you work with, you will likely still see them at groups and large events. Be polite and respectful, but always stick by your boundary. In cases of family members, sometimes, after years have gone by, they will come around and change a little bit. If you feel comfortable, you can test restarting a relationship with them slowly. But always be on the lookout. And as the old saying goes: forgive but never forget.

## **QUESTION #2: ARE YOU TRYING TO PROVE YOUR WORTH TO THE OTHER PERSON?**

This gets a bit deeper and more complicated and is definitely going to require some painful honesty.

What I mean by "prove yourself" is that you are trying to show this other person that you are better or more valuable as a person than they seem to think you are. Maybe it's earning the approval of a father who never showed it to you. Maybe it's proving to your wife that you're responsible and respectable. Maybe it's proving to your group of friends that you're smart or cool.

Basically, if the motivating force of the conflict is, “Oh yeah? I’ll show you!” then you’re trying to prove something. And that’s not good.

- If you are trying to prove yourself, go to **ENDING #2A**
- If you are not trying to prove yourself, go to **QUESTION #3**

## **ENDING #2A: YOU ARE TRYING TO PROVE SOMETHING TO THE OTHER PERSON**

Congratulations, you are officially codependent.

“Whaaa?! But *they’re* the asshole!” I hear you say.

Let me explain.

When you’re trying to prove something to somebody, and getting really upset because it’s not working, you’re basing your self-worth on their opinion of you, rather than your opinion of yourself.<sup>1</sup> This is essentially what codependence is: you and another person are mutually dependent on one another to maintain your self-esteem.<sup>2</sup>

How do you stop trying to prove yourself? Well, like in the Grey Box of Ending a Relationship, we’re back to a VCR question. The solution is simple, yet feels difficult.

Basically, you decide that you’re already enough. That you don’t need your mom to approve of you, that you don’t need your friends to like your outfits, that you don’t need to be as strong or smart or funny or cool as your sibling. That you don’t need to get attention from men or women to be sexy and confident.

You just decide. Yes, it’s a decision. A hard one, especially if you’ve never felt that you were enough before, but a decision nonetheless.

Here, let’s play make-believe: What would your life look like if you believed you were enough and didn’t ever need to prove anything to anyone again? How would you change your behavior? Your decisions?

...

*There, now go do that.*

The caveat here is if it’s a work relationship. Sometimes you’ve got to prove to your boss or your co-workers that you’re worthy of their trust and respect. And, well, for short periods of time, that’s fine. It’s when it becomes a long-term cycle of approval-seeking that things start to get toxic. And that’s when you’ve got to quit and remove yourself from the situation.

## **YOU NOW ARE ENTERING: THE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP ZONE**

### **QUESTION #3: ARE YOU BOTH WILLING TO COMPROMISE?**

Well done, reader. If you’ve made it this far, it means the root cause of the conflict is not the relationship itself, but rather a simple difference in perspective and/or values. This is good news! This means the relationship isn’t a toxic cesspool and doomed to failure!

The next step is to understand the conflicting values between you and the other person. She likes the apartment to be spotless. He doesn’t mind if it’s a little dirty. She loves to wake up

early. He loves staying up all night. She calls her mother every day. You call your mother once a year.

The conflicts that emerge from these disagreements stem from contradictory values. All the classic relationship fights—managing finances, how to raise kids, cleanliness, health—are all fights around differing value systems.

First, before we continue with the “Choose Your Own Adventure,” let’s review the proper way to communicate in a conflict.

## **BREAK TIME: BEFORE WE CONTINUE, LET’S MAKE SURE WE’RE FIGHTING WELL**

So, you and someone in your life have a difference in values. How do you make sure you communicate about those value differences without making things worse?

Here are a few guidelines:

**1. Your emotions are your responsibility.** It’s important and useful to communicate your emotions. But you have to communicate them in a way that signifies you maintain responsibility for them.

For example, a bad way of fighting is saying something like this:

*“You are so fucking disrespectful when you don’t call me.”*

...versus a good way:

*“I feel disrespected when you don’t call me.”*

It’s a subtle, but important difference. The first one makes it sound like it’s THEIR fault you feel this way. The second one is simply stating that you feel this way and asking them for help.

Conflicts often get derailed because they get lost in the blame game of “You’re like this,” and “No, I’m not, you are!” These fights over emotional responsibility are lost causes. They just drain you and are unproductive. Instead, state how you feel, and state what triggered you to feel that way. And finally, if the other person gets defensive, acknowledge *their good intentions*, while simply telling them of the bad result.

**2. Look for the values behind the emotions.** If you can’t get past the emotions, then you’ll never get to the values. And values are always where the fights are.

Our values are what we believe to be important and true in life. When something contradicts our values, we react emotionally. For instance, if you value the safety of your kids, and some dickhead careens at 80 miles per hour down your street in his car while your kids are playing outside, you will (justifiably) get incredibly pissed off. It’s not about the emotion, it’s about something you value being threatened.

Conflicts emerge when people have contradicting values. Both people think they’re “right.” Both people don’t understand the other person’s perspective. Once you get past the emotions, you can start naming and identifying these values. Only then, will you actually see where you and the other person differ.

**3. What it really means to compromise.** If conflict is based in differing values, then compromise isn’t simply doing something to make someone feel better, *it’s the willingness to do something that you don’t feel is important, but someone else does.* Put another way, it’s when you do something you don’t value, but you do it because you value the relationship.

Some values are easy to compromise on. My wife hates it when I leave my clothes on the floor. I don't really care. But it's easy for me to pick them up. Similarly, I hate it when she leaves lights on all over the house. It's easy for her to turn them off.

Other values are difficult to compromise on. If one parent is deeply religious and wants to raise the children religiously and the other parent is atheist and is disgusted by religion, then you have a serious value conflict that will be incredibly difficult to compromise on.

So, that leads us to our next question. Are you both willing to compromise? In other words, is the root of the value conflict such that you're both willing to act against it for the sake of the relationship?

- If yes, go to **QUESTION #4**
- If no, go to **QUESTION #5**

#### **QUESTION #4: IS THE PAIN OF COMPROMISE WORSE THAN LOSING THE RELATIONSHIP?**

So you've got two people with different values who are communicating clearly about those values and are willing to attempt compromising on those values for the sake of the relationship.

That leaves only one important question left: is it worth it?

I wish this question was easy to answer. But it's not. In fact, it's often agonizing to answer. A common version of this dilemma is a long-distance relationship. Both people would rather date someone they live near. Yet they also want to date each other. Is it worth it? It's incredibly hard to actually know.

Here's a little test to help you figure it out. Ask yourself the following questions:

- "If I ended my relationship with this person, how happy/sad would I be tomorrow? In a month? In a year?"
- "If I stayed and compromised with this person, how happy/sad would I be tomorrow? In a month? In a year?"

Answering these questions will give you an important perspective on your long-term happiness. Most of us are heavily biased towards the short-term, while we neglect to realize that often, in the long-run, we'd be much better off.

Generally speaking, when you have a relationship in which you think the pain would get WORSE as time goes on, then it's something you should get out of. If it's something you think will get better as time will go on AND you feel that with a decent degree of certainty, then it's worth considering staying.

In the end, most relationships in life are replaceable. Most values are also replaceable. So it comes down to how replaceable each one is.

- If the compromise is worse than losing the relationship, go to **QUESTION #5**
- If the compromise is better than losing the relationship, go to **ENDING #5B**

## QUESTION #5: IS THE CONFLICT SOMETHING YOU CAN LIVE WITH?

So here's the big secret about fighting in a relationship: *you don't necessarily need to resolve anything.*

In fact, most long-term happy relationships (whether they're marriages, family, or friendships) have unresolved conflicts that repeat from time to time over years or even decades.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, here's a subtle but important argument for needing a little conflict in your relationships: it shows you who is actually committed to you and who is just there for their own benefit.

People who love you will stick by you, even when you drive them crazy. People who don't will jet (or even worse, throw a huge fit) the minute you stop benefiting them in some way. Therefore, periodic, low-level conflict can be a little bit healthy.

And let's be real: you're never going to meet anyone who has all your values all the time. People are different. And sometimes we get upset about those differences. And, in many cases, that's fine.

So how do you know if you can live with the conflict?

Well, values tend to fall under two categories: moral values and just run-of-the-mill "I like stuff" values. We generally reserve our moral values for things that are incredibly important and/or sacred to us. If our conflict with somebody is over a moral value, chances are we will have a hard time maintaining respect and/or trust with them. And once the respect and trust go, a healthy relationship becomes impossible.

So the key here is asking yourself, "Does this conflict change my respect or trust for the person?"

If the answer is no, then you can probably live with it. If the answer is yes, then you probably can't.

- If you cannot live with the conflict, go to **ENDING #5A**
- If you can live with the conflict, go to **ENDING #5B**

### **ENDING #5A: CALL IT QUILTS, YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE EACH OTHER MISERABLE.**

Look, if someone in the relationship is unwilling to compromise, and that unwillingness to compromise harms trust and/or respect, then the relationship is going to deteriorate and eventually fall apart. Even if you stay in it, it will become something wholly unsatisfying, a blight on your daily life, something that you avoid within yourself like a bad habit or an impure thought. It will follow you and hold you down wherever you go. And it will eventually force *you* to lose respect and trust for yourself.

After all, the only way to tolerate distrust and disrespect in your life is to distrust and disrespect yourself.

It's time to end it.

### **ENDING #5B: STICK IT OUT, YOU'RE GOING TO BE FINE (PROBABLY).**

If you are able to compromise in a way that's not too painful... and/or you're able to live with a periodic conflict that doesn't harm the respect and admiration you have for one another...

Then you're fine. Let it go. Forgive and move on. Laugh about it. Share a beer. Take it seriously, but also not too seriously. Like a sore joint or a cut in your mouth, it's a thing and it's there and it's uncomfortable and hurts from time to time, but it's also part of you and at no point does it make you regret or wish to forgo being you.

So go on, live with it.

## Footnotes

1. Technically, we always care what other people think of us. What matters is whose opinion we give priority to: theirs or ours.
2. In my dating advice book for men, I refer to codependence as "neediness."
3. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last* by John Gottman.