

# Competitive Conflict Style

Why we seek it, how to spot it, when it becomes high conflict, and how to make it safe.

## PART ONE

### Why People Like Low-Stakes Conflict

Not all conflict is destructive. Low-stakes conflict — the kind that doesn't threaten the relationship — serves real psychological functions. Understanding why people are drawn to it makes it easier to recognize when it's healthy friction and when it's starting to cost something.

- **It confirms we matter.** Opposition is attention. Disagreement says: you're worth engaging with. Indifference is far more threatening than pushback.
- **It creates certainty.** An argument has structure — a position, a tension, a resolution. Ambiguity is much harder to sit with than conflict.
- **It's a form of intimacy.** People rarely fight with strangers. Conflict requires stakes, which signals closeness.
- **It produces aliveness.** The physiological arousal of conflict — elevated heart rate, sharpened focus — feels similar to excitement.
- **It externalizes internal discomfort.** If something feels unresolved inside, a concrete external problem to solve can be temporarily relieving.
- **It tests the relationship.** Some people use low-stakes conflict to ask: will you stay? Can we survive this?

## PART TWO

### How People Seek It Out

Competitive low-stakes conflict shows up in everyday life in ways so normalized we often don't notice them. Some of these are healthy outlets. Some are patterns worth examining.

<b>Debate for sport</b>	Taking a contrarian position not out of genuine belief, but for the pleasure of the exchange.
<b>Games &amp; competition</b>	Board games, trivia, sports — the most socially accepted containers for the drive to win.
<b>Correction &amp; one-upping</b>	Jumping on small errors, finishing someone's story better, subtly redirecting credit.
<b>Teasing &amp; ribbing</b>	Affectionate but competitive — with a thin line between the two, especially in family dynamics.

<b>Ranking &amp; opinion-asserting</b>	"That movie isn't good." Stated with more certainty than the topic warrants. The point is the position.
<b>Negotiating for sport</b>	Haggling or pushing back even when the stakes don't justify it. The win matters more than what's won.
<b>Social media engagement</b>	Low personal risk, high competitive payoff — without the relational consequence of a face-to-face loss.

### PART THREE

## Know Your Own Conflict Style

Before you can accurately read conflict in someone else, you need a clear picture of how you move through it. Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five conflict styles — each a combination of how assertive and how cooperative you tend to be when disagreement arises.

Most people have a default style they move toward — and a secondary one they move away from. Neither is fixed. Context shapes which style shows up: what's at stake, who you're with, how safe you feel, and how tired you are. The goal isn't to land on one style and stay there. It's to know your defaults well enough to choose.

### Competing

High assertiveness, low cooperation. You pursue your position firmly and aren't focused on the other person's needs in the moment. This style wins arguments.

***When it serves you:** When the stakes are genuinely high, when a decision needs to be made quickly, or when you know you're right and the cost of backing down is real. It becomes a liability when it's the default response to everything — including things that don't require a winner.*

### Collaborating

High assertiveness, high cooperation. You work toward a solution that fully addresses both people's needs. This takes the most time and the most trust.

***When it serves you:** When the relationship matters, when both perspectives have real value, and when there's time to work it through. It breaks down when one person is collaborating and the other is competing — or when it's used to avoid making a decision.*

## Compromising

Moderate assertiveness, moderate cooperation. Both people give something up to reach an agreement. Nobody gets everything, but everybody gets something.

**When it serves you:** *When a workable solution matters more than an ideal one, and when time or energy is limited. It can become a pattern of chronic half-solutions if it's used to avoid real disagreement.*

## Avoiding

Low assertiveness, low cooperation. You sidestep the conflict entirely — either by withdrawing, postponing, or simply not engaging.

**When it serves you:** *When the issue is genuinely minor, when emotions are too high to talk productively, or when you need more time. It becomes costly when important things go unaddressed because bringing them up feels too risky.*

## Accommodating

Low assertiveness, high cooperation. You prioritize the other person's needs over your own, often at your own expense.

**When it serves you:** *When preserving the relationship matters more than the outcome, or when you recognize you're wrong. It becomes a problem when it's driven by fear rather than generosity — and when the pattern trains others to expect your compliance.*

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### REFLECT

*Which style do you recognize most in yourself under pressure?*

*Is that the same style you use when you feel safe?*

*Which style do you find hardest to access — and what does that cost you?*

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## PART FOUR

### The Four Danger Signs

Identified through decades of couples research by Drs. Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Natalie Rhodes (PREP®), these four patterns are the clearest predictors of communication breakdown — in any relationship.

## 01 Escalation

The conversation keeps climbing. One person raises their intensity, the other matches or exceeds it — and suddenly you're not talking about the original issue anymore.

**What it looks like:** Tone sharpens. Volume increases. Statements replace questions. The argument takes on a life of its own.

***Watch for in yourself:** Notice if you feel a pull to go bigger — louder, harsher, more absolute — when the other person isn't backing down.*

## 02 Withdrawal

One person shuts down, goes silent, or leaves the conversation emotionally or physically. Often looks like calm. Rarely is.

**What it looks like:** Short answers. Sudden subject changes. Leaving the room. Agreeing just to end it. Stonewalling.

***Watch for in yourself:** Notice if you disappear when things get hard — and whether that disappearance is protecting you or punishing them.*

## 03 Negative Interpretation

Assuming the worst about the other person's motives before they've finished speaking — or regardless of what they say.

**What it looks like:** "You're only saying that to win." "You don't actually care." Reading hostility into neutral tone or timing.

***Watch for in yourself:** Notice if you've already decided what someone means before they've said it — and whether that's pattern recognition or protection.*

## 04 Invalidation

Dismissing, minimizing, or attacking the other person's feelings, perspective, or experience — subtly or directly.

**What it looks like:** "You're being too sensitive." "That's not a big deal." Eye rolls. Sarcasm. Talking over someone. Rewriting their experience.

***Watch for in yourself:** Notice if your first move in conflict is to explain why the other person's reaction doesn't make sense.*

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## PART FIVE

### When Conflict Becomes High Conflict

Low-stakes conflict stays within the relationship. High conflict starts to consume it. Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., co-founder of the High Conflict Institute, identifies high conflict not as a situation but as a pattern — one driven by a particular way of thinking, feeling, and responding that keeps the conflict going regardless of what the other person does.

#### Key markers of high conflict behavior:

##### All-or-nothing thinking

Nuance collapses. People or situations are entirely good or entirely bad, and that can shift without warning.

##### Unmanaged emotions

Emotional responses are intense and disproportionate to the situation — and don't de-escalate when the situation resolves.

##### Extreme behavior

Actions others would consider off-limits — threats, public accusations, relentless contact, legal action used as a weapon.

##### A preoccupying target of blame

One person is held responsible for everything. The narrative doesn't update when new information arrives.

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*Important distinction: high conflict is a pattern of behavior, not a diagnosis. Identifying it is about protecting your own clarity and communication — not labeling someone.*

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## PART SIX

### De-Escalation Tools: EAR and BIFF

Bill Eddy developed two practical frameworks for responding to high conflict communication without fueling it. Both are designed to reduce defensiveness, lower emotional temperature, and keep you out of patterns that make things worse.

## EAR — For In-Person or Verbal Situations

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|----------|------------------|---|
| <b>E</b> | <b>Empathy</b>   | Acknowledge what the other person is feeling without agreeing with their position. You don't have to validate the behavior to validate the emotion. "I can see this has been really frustrating for you." |
| <b>A</b> | <b>Attention</b> | Give them your full, genuine attention. Put the phone down. Make eye contact. Let them finish. In high conflict, feeling unheard is often the accelerant.   |
| <b>R</b> | <b>Respect</b>   | Maintain a respectful tone even when they haven't. This is not about being passive — it's about refusing to match their energy in a way that escalates things further.                                    |

## BIFF — For Written Communication

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| <b>B</b> | <b>Brief</b>       | Keep it short. Long responses give high conflict personalities more material to react to, misinterpret, or use against you. Say what needs to be said and stop.       |
| <b>I</b> | <b>Informative</b> | Stick to facts and necessary information. Avoid defending yourself, explaining your feelings, or rehashing history. None of that reduces conflict here — it feeds it. |
| <b>F</b> | <b>Friendly</b>    | A neutral, warm tone removes the invitation to escalate. Not cheerful, not cold. Friendly means: I'm not your enemy, and I'm not afraid of you.                       |
| <b>F</b> | <b>Firm</b>        | Be clear about what you will and won't do. You're not negotiating your position in the message. State it once, plainly, and don't reopen it.                          |

Neither EAR nor BIFF is about winning or losing. They're about staying regulated enough to communicate — and refusing to become part of the pattern.

## PART SEVEN

### Why Date Night Trivia Actually Matters

Early in a relationship, before real stakes exist, games and friendly competition offer something most people don't think to use intentionally: a window into how someone handles losing.

It's entirely okay — even healthy — to want to win. Competitiveness in low-stakes play isn't a red flag. What's worth paying attention to is what happens around the edges of the game, and after it ends.

**Watch for:**

<b>Does losing linger?</b>	The game ends but the mood doesn't. A quiet withdrawal, a shift in warmth, or a subtle edge that carries into the rest of the evening.
<b>Are they a sore loser?</b>	Dismissing the result, questioning the rules, blaming luck, or finding a reason the win doesn't really count.
<b>Do they need to be right even after it's over?</b>	Returning to a disputed answer, replaying a moment, or making sure you know they disagree — not to process it, but to correct the record.
<b>How do they handle you winning?</b>	Genuine warmth here is a good sign. Tight smiles, deflection, or a sudden loss of interest in the game are worth noticing.
<b>Do they turn play into point-scoring?</b>	Using wins to establish something — superiority, leverage, a dynamic. When the game stops being about fun and starts being about status.

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#### REFLECT

*None of these observations are conclusions. They're invitations to pay attention.*

*How someone moves through low-stakes conflict tells you something real about how they'll move through the high-stakes kind — before you're already in it.*

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## PART EIGHT

### Make It Safe to Connect

Recognizing these patterns is only half the work. The other half is building the conditions where people don't need to compete, withdraw, or defend. Drs. Markman, Stanley, and Rhodes identify three types of safety that make genuine connection possible.

#### Physical Safety

Both people need to feel free from threat, intimidation, or the fear that conflict will become physical. Without this, no communication skill matters. If physical safety is absent, the relationship requires immediate outside support.

#### Emotional Safety

The confidence that you can express what you actually think and feel without being ridiculed, dismissed, or used against you later. Emotional safety is what makes honesty possible. When it's missing, people say what's safe rather than what's true.

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## Commitment Safety

The shared understanding that the relationship itself is not on the table during conflict. When people fear abandonment or rejection every time things get hard, they can't fight fairly — they're fighting for survival. Commitment safety lets both people stay in the room.

***"The conversation you're avoiding is probably the one you need."***

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