

4. Communication was highly valued by this sample and supported many aspects of their lives together including conflict management.

The participants in this study placed a high value on articulating their feelings and addressing problems as they arose. Communication was the most cited element of their relationships that participants in Phase III interviews required for the continued viability of their relationships which is supported by Phase II online questionnaire findings that *100 participants (82% of the sample) had limited conflict over communication.* It is noteworthy that management of finances and home followed communication as areas of the most frequent conflict, however, with the very low frequencies of 19 participants (15.6% of the sample) for management of finances and 17 participants (13.9% of the sample). With home and management of finances falling in the top five areas that gave the greatest number of participants the most satisfaction in their relationships, it could be conjectured that home and finances were oftentimes the most immediate and, therefore the most discussed (and/or argued about) aspects of participant relationships. The finding in the Phase III interviews that participants often acknowledged different approaches to conflict, may contribute to the ongoing interaction over communication.

Effective communication by the participants in this study has two pieces to it, the conscious skill-based aspect and the unconscious aspect of readiness and receptiveness that can be associated with a psychological stance. *The ability of participants to communicate their feelings to one another may be related to the finding that almost 25% of this sample had attended couples counseling and almost 66% had accessed professional counseling or therapy to address their individual personal issues.* These statistics may speak to both the development of skills associated with good communication, for example, being able to listen carefully, to respond thoughtfully, to abstain from sarcasm and avoidance tactics, and to the benefits of being in an environment—albeit a therapeutic environment—wherein one is able to be vulnerable, yet able to express feelings and feel understood. That experience is one that many would want to replicate both consciously and unconsciously. *Being able to articulate the positive and negative aspects of their relationships illustrates, especially regarding the negative aspects, an ability to trust in the strength of the relationship to weather any storms.* The ongoing task of managing life and its associated problems are the stage on which the partner players are constantly interacting on the superficial manifest level and also on the unconscious level.

That participants were able to articulate the negative and/or positive aspects of the relationships between their parents does not necessarily mean that the parental relationship, whether positive or negative, was internalized. Nonetheless, it is significant that numerous participants in long-lasting relationships articulated stories about their caregivers that the participants believe impacted their ability to use early experiences (or characterizations of those early experiences) to support the longevity and harmony of their own relationships.

In the Phase III interview narratives, *participants described a variety of skills that they utilized in negotiating conflict, including allowing anger to dissipate before re-engaging in addressing the problem; being patient with partners who had different ways of managing conflict (e.g., partners who preferred to avoid conflict); not harping*

on the issue once it was resolved; compromising where appropriate; picking battles and letting the unimportant things go; and apologizing and seeking out and trying to understand the other's point of view. Buttrressing the Phase III interview findings discussed above, the Phase II questionnaire showed that during conflict, virtually all participants opposed losing control and conveying something that could potentially cause serious injury. Phase II questionnaire responses also showed that *the greatest number of participants (103, 84.4% of 122) described their partners as being extremely compassionate, another characteristic that would support communication and benefit conflict management.* Participant behaviors elicited from the Phase II questionnaire and the Phase III interviews that relate to conflict management—receptivity, minimal defensiveness and the ability to forgive and seek forgiveness—support the preservation of the relationship. *Almost equal numbers of participants indicated in the Phase II online questionnaire that the longevity of their relationships was neither threatened by conflict nor supported by the avoidance of arguments or other open disagreements. These findings suggest that participants accepted the inevitability of conflict and trusted that their relationships could withstand conflict and continue undamaged.* The resolution of conflict is yet another reminder of the importance of the constancy and preservation of the love object and the associated relationship. In short, these participants expressed deep connection to their partners, valued their relationships and had the internal capacity to act in ways that would support the ongoing relationship and promote closeness and continued trust rather than conflict.