

Resolving Conflict

"THE ONLY WAY TO AVOID CONFLICT IS TO SAY NOTHING, DO NOTHING, BE NOTHING." Conflicts are an inescapable fact of life. They occur when the needs of one person interfere with the needs of another, and the parties disagree on how to meet their needs.

The Chinese symbol for the word "conflict" is comprised of the characters for danger and opportunity. This is a reflection of the fact that conflict can be unpleasant and hurt relationships. However, if handled effectively, it also provides the opportunity to enrich and deepen relationships and help us learn more about ourselves.



TYPES OF CONFLICT

People can have conflicts over "goals" or "means". A conflict of goals involves two people disagreeing on what the goal should be.

Examples:

- I want to save money to take a vacation; she wants to save money to buy a car.
- I want to spend time with my friends; he wants us to spend time only with each other.
- You work full-time so I can go to school full-time.

These can be difficult conflicts to resolve, as they usually involve values, which are not easily changed or re-negotiated.

A conflict of means involves disagreeing over how to achieve a goal on which you both agree.

Examples:

- You both agree to save money for vacation, but you don't agree about how much to save each payday.
- You both agree you want kids, but you don't agree on how soon to have them.
- You both agree you want to spend time together, but you disagree on what activities you want to do with each other.

It is much easier to resolve a conflict of means; it doesn't involve changing or compromising values or beliefs. It does require creative brainstorming for solutions that are mutually satisfactory.

WHAT ARE WE REALLY FIGHTING ABOUT?

Many times, we don't really know what it is that we are in conflict about. Often, we focus on "content" without acknowledging the "relational" issues that are involved.

Example:

Your friends are obnoxious. I'm tired of them always coming over and making noise and messes! (**Content**)

You don't like me as much as your friends. I feel left out. I'm not likable. (**Relational**)

If you focus only on the "content" without acknowledging the "relational" issues, you can find all kinds of evidence to dispute someone's arguments and never resolve the conflict. In fact, focusing on only the content can actually escalate the conflict.

Example:

- A. You never clean the house. I'm tired of doing all the work.
- B. I do too help. I just did the dishes 2 days ago.
- C. Big deal! You did the dishes once in 2 weeks. What about all the clothes you leave on the floor.
- D. What?! Look at the mess you leave in the bathroom every night!

HOW TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

Resolving conflict requires effective communication skills, tolerance, and the desire to find creative solutions. Here is a five-step process that you can follow to resolve conflict and improve your relationships.

1. **LISTEN for facts and feelings.** Make sure you understand what the other person really wants and needs. To do this, you must listen for more than facts. Set aside your assumptions of what you think is going on. Hear the person out **before** you step in with questions or defending yourself. Try to determine what the other person is feeling by paying attention to his/her non-verbal messages. Check it out with the other person: "What is really going on here?" "You sound angry. Is it because of something I said?" Repeat back to the person what you think he/she said. This will prevent misunderstandings and will ensure that you are both clear about the issues.
2. **COMMUNICATE assertively.** This means stating your wants and needs in a respectful and honest manner, while recognizing that the other person also has legitimate wants and needs. It requires you to use "I" messages, assuming responsibility for how you feel, versus blaming or accusing. It also requires that you discuss specific behavior that is creating problems and not focus on personality characteristics. **Assertive:** "I feel really angry when you bring your friends over in the evening, even after we agreed not to so that we could have quiet study time. We need to talk about this so we can work out another solution." **Blaming:** "You are so thoughtless. You don't care about anyone but yourself. Don't bring your friends over here again."
3. **TOLERANCE and respect.** Try to "walk a mile" in the other person's shoes. Consider his/her viewpoint. Ask yourself: "What does she want?" "What might he be afraid of?" Adopt the position that people aren't purposefully trying to be mean, hurtful, difficult, etc. Their behavior reflects their way of protecting themselves from getting hurt, feeling anxious, etc. They may not know how to communicate effectively to resolve conflict.
4. **FOCUS on the issue.** This relates to the "content vs. relational" concept discussed earlier. Ask yourself "What is really happening here?" You can do this with effective listening. Don't allow yourself or your partner to bring in unrelated "evidence" that will just escalate the conflict. If you find the conflict is getting worse, literally call "Time out" and agree to come back and discuss the problem at a later time - when you both have had a chance to calm down and get focused.
5. **EXPECT the positive.** An attitude of "He's so unreasonable. We won't be able to settle anything." is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thinking in this way will almost guarantee that you act and communicate in a way that the conflict won't be resolved satisfactorily. Instead, tell yourself "We can work this out. We are both rational, mature people." "She's not trying to make my life difficult. We can work this out if we really listen to each other."

"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape."