

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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## Interpersonal Conflict and Effective Communication

**C**onflict between people is a fact of life – and it's not necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, a relationship with frequent conflict may be healthier than one with no observable conflict. Conflicts occur at all levels of interaction – at work, among friends, within families and between relationship partners. When conflict occurs, the relationship may be weakened or strengthened. Thus, conflict is a critical event in the course of a relationship. Conflict can cause resentment, hostility and perhaps the ending of the relationship. If it is handled well, however, conflict can be productive – leading to deeper understanding, mutual respect and closeness. Whether a relationship is healthy or unhealthy depends not so much on the number of conflicts between participants, but on how the conflicts are resolved.

**S**ometimes people shy away from conflict, and the reasons for this are numerous. They may, for example, feel that their underlying anger may go out of control if they open the door to conflict. Thus, they may see conflict as an all-or-nothing situation (either they avoid it altogether or they end up in an all-out combative mode, regardless of the real severity of the conflict). Or they may find it difficult to face conflict because they feel



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As a Marriage and Family Therapist, I specialize in treating people involved in interpersonal relationships. I work with individuals, couples and families to achieve more satisfying and productive marriages, families, social and work related adjustments.

I help clients work out solutions according to individual values and lifestyles.

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inadequate in general or in the particular relationship. They may have difficulty in positively asserting their views and feelings. Children who grow up surrounded by destructive conflict may, as adults, determine never to participate in discord. In this situation, the person may never have learned that there are effective, adaptive ways to communicate in the face of conflict.

People adopt a number of different styles in facing conflict. First, it is common to see a person *avoid* or *deny* the existence of conflict. Unfortunately, in this case, the conflict lingers in the background during interaction between the participants and creates the potential for further tension and even more conflict. A second response style is that of one person *getting mad* and *blaming* the other person. This occurs when a person mistakenly equates conflict with anger. This stance does nothing to resolve the conflict and in fact only serves to increase the degree of friction between the two participants by amplifying defensiveness. A third way which some people use to resolve conflict is by using *power* and *influence* to win at the other's expense. They welcome conflict because it allows their competitive impulses to emerge, but they fail to understand that the conflict is not really resolved since the "loser" will continue to harbor resentment. Similarly, some people appear to compromise in resolving the conflict, but they subtly *manipulate* the other person in the process, and this, again, perpetuates the conflict between the two parties and compromises the trust between them. There are better ways to handle interpersonal conflict.

## Healthy Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Conflicts run all the way from minor, unimportant differences to disputes which can threaten the existence of a relationship. Conflicts with a loved one or a long-term friend are, of course, different from negotiating with someone who does not care about your needs, like a stranger or a salesperson. However, there is an underlying principle that underscores all successful conflict resolution. That is, both parties must view their conflict as a problem to be solved *mutually* so that both parties have the feeling of winning – or at least finding a solution which is acceptable to both. Each person must

participate actively in the resolution and make an effort and commitment to find answers which are as fair as possible to both. This is an easy principle to understand, but it is often difficult to put into practice.

We may get so caught up with our own immediate interests that we damage our relationships. If we disregard or minimize the position of the other person, if fear and power are used to win, or if we always have to get our own way, the other person will feel hurt and the relationship may be wounded. Similarly, if we always surrender just to avoid conflict, we give the message to the other person that it is acceptable to act self-serving at our expense and to be insensitive to our needs. Our feeling of self-worth suffers, resentment festers, and we feel poisoned in the relationship. Instead, it is healthier if both parties can remain open, honest, assertive and respectful of the other position. Mutual trust and respect, as well as a positive, constructive attitude, are fundamental necessities in relationships that matter.

## Preventing Conflict

Most people have no interest in creating conflict with others. Most of us know enough about human behavior to distinguish between healthy communication and the words or actions that contribute to rocky relationships. It is in our interest to maintain relations which are smooth, flexible, and mutually enhancing. The problem occurs when we fail to use cooperative approaches consistently in our dealings with others. We seldom create conflict intentionally. We do it because we may not be aware of how our own behavior contributes to interpersonal problems. Sometimes we forget, or we are frustrated and annoyed, and sometimes we just have a bad day. At times we feel so exasperated that we focus on our own needs at the expense of others'. And then we find ourselves in conflict.

To prevent conflict from happening in the first place, it is important to identify the ways in which we contribute to the disagreement. One way of doing this is to identify a specific, recent conflicted situation,

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recall what you said, and then think specifically about how you could have used more effective language. Think about ways in which your communication could have set a more trustful tone or reduced defensiveness. Then, once you have identified your part in the conflict, such as blaming, practice working on that particular behavior for a day or a week. At the end of the time period, evaluate your progress. Did you succeed? In what situations did you not succeed? (While it may be the other person who created the conflict, you are the other half of the interaction and it is your own response that you have control over and can change.)

## Using Effective Communication Techniques to Reduce Conflict

Once you find yourself in a conflicted situation with someone else, it is important to reduce the emotional charge from the situation so that you and the other person can deal with your differences on a rational level in resolving the conflict.

**The Defusing Technique:** The other person might be angry and may come to the situation armed with a number of arguments describing how you are to blame for his or her unhappiness. Your goal is to address the other's anger – and *you do this by simply agreeing with the person*. When you find some truth in the other point of view, it is difficult for the other person to maintain anger. For example, "I know that I said I would call you last night. You are absolutely right. I wish I could be more responsible sometimes." The accusation might be completely unreasonable from your viewpoint, but there is always some truth in what the other person says. At the very least, we need to acknowledge that individuals have different ways of seeing things. This does not mean that we have to compromise our own basic principles. We simply validate the other's stance so that we can move on to a healthier resolution of the conflict. This may be hard to do in a volatile situation, but a sign of individual strength and integrity is the ability to postpone our immediate reac-

tions in order to achieve positive goals. Sometimes we have to "lose" in order, ultimately, to "win."

**Empathy:** Try to put yourself into the shoes of the other person. See the world through their eyes. Empathy is an important listening technique which gives the other feedback that he or she is being heard. There are two forms of empathy. **Thought Empathy** gives the message that you understand what the other is trying to say. You can do this in conversation by paraphrasing the words of the other person. For example, "I understand you to say that your trust in me has been broken." **Feeling Empathy** is your acknowledgment of how the other person *probably* feels. It is important never to attribute emotions which may not exist for the other person (such as, "You're confused with all your emotional upheaval right now"), but rather to indicate your perception of how the person must be feeling. For example, "I guess you probably feel pretty mad at me right now."

**Exploration:** Ask gentle, probing questions about what the other person is thinking and feeling. Encourage the other to talk fully about what is on his or her mind. For example, "Are there any other thoughts that you want to share with me?"

**Using "I" Statements:** Take responsibility for your own thoughts rather than attributing motives to the other person. This decreases the chance that the other person will become defensive. For example, "I feel pretty upset that this thing has come between us." This statement is much more effective than saying, "You have made me feel very upset."

**Stroking:** Find positive things to say about the other person, even if the other is angry with you. Show a respectful attitude. For example, "I genuinely respect you for having the courage to bring this problem to me. I admire your strength and your caring attitude."



# T H E B A C K P A G E

## A Rational Way of Resolving Conflicts

Here is a model that may help in resolving interpersonal conflicts.

**Identify the Problem.** Have a discussion to understand both sides of the problem. The goal at this initial stage is to identify what you want and to listen to what the other person wants. Define the things that you both agree on, as well as the ideas that have caused the disagreement. It is important to listen actively to what the other is saying, use “I” statements and avoid blame.

**Come Up With Several Possible Solutions.** This is the brainstorming phase. Drawing on the points that you both agree on and your shared goals, generate a list of as many ideas as you can for solving the problem, regardless of how feasible they might be. Aim toward quantity of ideas rather than quality during this phase, and let creativity be your guide.

**Evaluate These Alternative Solutions.** Now go through the list of alternative solutions to the problem, one by one. Consider the pros and cons of the remaining solutions until the list is narrowed

down to one or two of the best ways of handling the problem. It is important for each person to be honest in this phase. The solutions might not be ideal for either person and may involve compromise.

**Decide on the Best Solution.** Select the solution that seems mutually acceptable, even if it is not perfect for either party. As long as it seems fair and there is a mutual commitment to work with the decision, the conflict has a chance for resolution.

**Implement the Solution.** It is important to agree on the details of what each party must do, who is responsible for implementing various parts of the agreement, and what to do in case the agreement starts to break down.

**Continue to Evaluate the Solution.** Conflict resolutions should be seen as works in progress. Make it a point to ask the other person from time to time how things are going. Something unexpected might have come up or some aspect of the problem may have been overlooked. Your decisions should be seen as open to revision, as long as the revisions are agreed upon mutually.