



## Conflict Resolution Skills

Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities



Conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship. After all, two people can't be expected to agree on everything, all the time. Learning how to deal with conflict—rather than avoiding it—is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a relationship, but when handled in a respectful, positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people. By learning these skills for conflict resolution, you can keep your personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

### Understanding conflict in relationships

Conflict arises from differences, both large and small. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences appear trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal need is often at the core of the problem. These needs can be a need to feel safe and secure, a need to feel respected and valued, or a need for greater closeness and intimacy.

#### Conflicts arise from differing needs

Everyone needs to feel understood, nurtured, and supported, but the ways in which these needs are met vary widely. Differing needs for feeling comfortable and safe create some of the most severe challenges in our personal and professional relationships.

Think about the conflicting need for safety and continuity versus the need to explore and take risks. You frequently see this conflict between toddlers and their parents. The child's need is to explore, so the street or the cliff meets a need. But the parents' need is to protect the child's safety, so limiting exploration becomes a bone of contention between them.

The needs of both parties play important roles in the long-term success of most relationships, and each deserves respect and consideration. In personal relationships, a lack of understanding about differing needs can result in distance, arguments, and break-ups. In workplace conflicts, differing needs are often at the heart of bitter disputes, sometimes resulting in broken deals, fewer profits and lost jobs. When you can recognize the legitimacy of conflicting needs and become willing to examine them in an environment of compassionate understanding, it opens pathways to creative problem solving, team building, and improved relationships.

#### Conflict 101

- **A conflict is more than just a disagreement.** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).
- **Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.** Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- **We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions** of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.
- **Conflicts trigger strong emotions.** If you aren't comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won't be able to resolve conflict successfully.
- **Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.** When you're able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements.

### How do you perceive conflict?

Do you fear conflict or avoid it at all costs? If your perception of conflict comes from frightening or painful memories from previous unhealthy relationships or early childhood, you may expect all present-day disagreements to end badly. You may view conflict in relationships as demoralizing, humiliating, dangerous, and something to fear. If your early life experiences also left you feeling out of control and powerless, conflict may even be traumatizing for you.

If you view conflict as dangerous, it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you go into a conflict situation already feeling extremely threatened, it's tough to deal with the problem at hand in a healthy way. Instead, you are more likely to shut down or blow up in anger.

Unhealthy responses to conflict:	Healthy responses to conflict
An inability to recognize and respond to the things that matter to	The capacity to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other

the other person	person
Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions	Calm, non-defensive, and respectful reactions
The withdrawal of love, resulting in rejection, isolation, shaming, and fear of abandonment	A readiness to forgive and forget, and to move past the conflict without holding resentments or anger
An inability to compromise or see the other person's side	The ability to seek compromise and avoid punishing
The fear and avoidance of conflict; the expectation of bad outcomes	A belief that facing conflict head on is the best thing for both sides

## Conflict resolution, stress, and emotions

Conflict triggers strong emotions and can lead to hurt feelings, disappointment, and discomfort. When handled in an unhealthy manner, it can cause irreparable rifts, resentments, and break-ups. But when conflict is resolved in a healthy way, it increases our understanding of one another, builds trust, and strengthens our relationship bonds.

If you are out of touch with your feelings or so stressed that you can only pay attention to a limited number of emotions, you won't be able to understand your own needs. And, if you don't understand your own needs, you will have a hard time communicating with others and staying in touch with what's really troubling you. For example, couples often argue about petty differences—the way she hangs the towels, the way he slurps his soup—rather than what is really bothering them.

### The ability to successfully resolve conflict depends on your ability to:

- **Manage stress quickly while remaining alert and calm.** By staying calm, you can accurately read and interpret verbal and nonverbal communication.
- **Control your emotions and behavior.** When you're in control of your emotions, you can communicate your needs without threatening, frightening, or punishing others.
- **Pay attention to the feelings being expressed** as well as the spoken words of others.
- **Be aware of and respectful of differences.** By avoiding disrespectful words and actions, you can almost always resolve a problem faster.

To successfully resolve a conflict, you will need to learn and practice two core skills: the ability to quickly reduce stress in the moment and the ability to remain comfortable enough with your emotions to react in constructive ways even in the midst of an argument or a perceived attack.

## Quick stress relief: The first core conflict resolution skill

Being able to manage and relieve stress in the moment is the key to staying balanced, focused, and in control, no matter what challenges you face. If you don't know how to stay centered and in control of yourself, you will become overwhelmed in conflict situations and unable to respond in healthy ways.

Psychologist Connie Lillas uses a driving analogy to describe the three most common ways people respond when they're overwhelmed by stress:

- **Foot on the gas.** An angry or agitated stress response. You're heated, keyed up, overly emotional, and unable to sit still.
- **Foot on the brake.** A withdrawn or depressed stress response. You shut down, space out, and show very little energy or emotion.
- **Foot on both gas and brake.** A tense and frozen stress response. You "freeze" under pressure and can't do anything. You look paralyzed, but under the surface you're extremely agitated.

### Stress interferes with the ability to resolve conflict by limiting your ability to:

- Accurately read another person's nonverbal communication
- Hear what someone is really saying
- Be aware of your own feelings
- Be in touch with your deep-rooted needs
- Communicate your needs clearly

### Is stress a problem or you?

You may be so used to being stressed that you're not even aware you *are* stressed. Stress may be a problem in your life if you identify with the following:

- You often feel tense or tight somewhere in your body
- You're not aware of movement in your chest or stomach when you breathe
- Conflict absorbs your time and attention

### Learn how to beat stress in the moment

The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress (if you don't have someone close at hand to talk to) is through the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. But each person responds differently to sensory input, so you need to find things that are soothing to you.

## Emotional awareness: The second core conflict resolution skill

Emotional awareness is the key to understanding yourself and others. If you don't know how you feel or why you feel that way, you won't be able to communicate effectively or resolve disagreements.

Although knowing your own feelings may sound simple, many people ignore or try to sedate strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. Your ability to handle conflict, however, depends on being connected to these feelings. If you're afraid of strong emotions or if you insist on finding solutions that are strictly rational, your ability to face and resolve differences will be impaired.

### Why emotional awareness is a key factor in resolving conflict

Emotional awareness—the consciousness of your *moment-to-moment* emotional experience—and the ability to manage all of your feelings appropriately is the basis of a communication process that can resolve conflict.

Emotional awareness helps you:

- Understand what is really troubling other people
- Understand yourself, including what is really troubling you
- Stay motivated until the conflict is resolved
- Communicate clearly and effectively
- Attract and influence others

### Assessing your ability to recognize and manage emotions

The following quiz helps you assess your level of emotional awareness. Answer the following questions with: *almost never, occasionally, often, very frequently, or almost always*. There are no right or wrong responses, only the opportunity to become better acquainted with your emotional responses.

#### What kind of relationship do I have with my emotions?

- **Do you experience feelings that flow**, encountering one emotion after another as your experiences change from moment to moment?
- **Are your emotions accompanied by physical sensations that you experience** in places like your stomach or chest?
- **Do you experience discrete feelings and emotions**, such as anger, sadness, fear, joy, each of which is evident in subtle facial expressions?
- **Can you experience intense feelings** that are strong enough to capture both your attention and that of others?
- **Do you pay attention to your emotions?** Do they factor into your decision-making?

If any of these experiences are unfamiliar, your emotions may be turned down or even turned off. In either case, you may need help developing your emotional awareness. You can do this by using Helpline's free emotional intelligence toolkit.

### Nonverbal communication and conflict resolution

The most important information exchanged during conflicts and arguments is often communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal communication is conveyed by emotionally driven facial expressions, posture, gesture, pace, tone and intensity of voice.

#### The most important communication is wordless

When people are upset, the words they use rarely convey the issues and needs at the heart of the problem. When we listen for what is felt—as well as what is said—we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening in this way also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us.

When you're in the middle of a conflict, paying close attention to the other person's nonverbal signals may help you figure out what the other person is really saying. This will allow you to respond in a way that builds trust, and gets to the root of the problem. A calm tone of voice, a reassuring touch, or an interested or concerned facial expression can go a long way toward relaxing a tense exchange.

Your ability to accurately read another person depends on your own emotional awareness. The more aware you are of your own emotions, the easier it will be for you to pick up on the wordless clues that reveal what others are feeling.

### Using humor in conflict resolution

Once stress and emotion are brought into balance your capacity for joy, pleasure and playfulness is unleashed. Joy is a deceptively powerful resource. Studies show that you can surmount adversity, as long as you continue to have moments of joy. Humor plays a similar role when facing conflict.

You can avoid many confrontations and resolve arguments and disagreements by communicating in a humorous way. Humor can help you say things that might otherwise be difficult to express without offending someone. However, it's important that you laugh *with* the other person, not *at* them. When humor and play are used to reduce tension and anger, reframe problems, and put the situation into perspective, the conflict can actually become an opportunity for greater connection and intimacy.

### Tips for managing and resolving conflict

Managing and resolving conflict requires the ability to quickly reduce stress and bring your emotions into balance. You can ensure that the process is as positive as possible by sticking to the following guidelines:

- **Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When we listen we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us when it's our turn to speak.
- **Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or "being right."** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.
- **Focus on the present.** If you're holding on to grudges based on past resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.
- **Pick your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy. Maybe you don't want to surrender a parking space if you've been circling for 15 minutes, but if there are dozens of empty spots, arguing over a single space

isn't worth it.

- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

## More help for conflict resolution

---

Stress Relief in the Moment: Using Your Senses to Quickly Change Your Response to Stress

Anger Management: Tips and Techniques for Getting Anger Under Control

### Improving communication

Effective Communication: Improving Communication Skills in Business and Relationships

Fixing Relationship Problems with Humor: Using Laughter and Play to Build and Maintain Successful Relationships

Nonverbal Communication: Improving Your Nonverbal Skills and Reading Body Language

## Resources and references

---

### General information about conflict resolution

Fighting Fair To Resolve Conflict – Covers the causes of conflict, different conflict styles, and fair fighting guidelines to help you positively resolve disagreements. (University of Texas at Austin)

Conflict Resolution – Comprehensive resource on how to manage and resolve conflict. Includes About Conflict and 8 Steps for Conflict Resolution. (University of Wisconsin, Madison)

CR Kit – 12-step conflict resolution training kit. Learn how to pursue a win-win approach, manage emotions, be appropriately assertive, map the conflict, and develop options. (The Conflict Resolution Network)

### Tips for managing and resolving conflict

Resolving Conflict Constructively and Respectfully – Tips on how to manage and resolve conflict in a positive, respectful, and mutually-beneficial way. (Ohio State University Extension)

How to Resolve Conflict – Advice on resolving differences and managing conflict between individuals, small groups, and organizations. (Roger Darlington)

Effective Communication – Article on the art of listening in conflict resolution. Includes tips on how to make your point effectively and negotiate conflict in principled, positive way. (University of Maryland)

*Authors: Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Melinda Smith, M.A. Last updated: December 2014.*

©Helpguide.org. All rights reserved. This reprint is for information only and NOT a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment. Helpguide.org is an ad-free non-profit resource for supporting better mental health and lifestyle choices for adults and children.