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MENTAL HEALTH CENTER
DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS



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Fighting Fair to Resolve Conflict

What Kind of "Fighter" Are You?

Do You...?

- Avoid conflict at all costs?
- Feel that any criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Hit "below the belt" and regret it later?
- Feel out of control when conflict arises?
- Withdraw and become silent when you're angry?
- Store up complaints from the distant past?

At one time or another, most of us have done one or more of these things. That's because in most relationships, conflict inevitably arises, and for many of us it creates significant discomfort. If handled appropriately though, conflict can actually strengthen relationships and improve our understanding of each other.

What Causes Conflict?

Conflict can arise whenever people - whether close friends, family members, co-workers, or romantic partners - disagree about their perceptions, desires, ideas, or values. These differences can range from trivial to more significant disagreements, but regardless of the content of the disagreement, conflict often stirs up strong feelings.

Anger and Conflict

Disagreements can lead people to feel angry and hurt. Feeling angry isn't necessarily a problem if that anger is handled constructively; however, anger is often worsened by common beliefs that are not necessarily true. For example, many people learned as children that being angry means being out of control, acting childishly, or being aggressive. The truth is that anger is a normal human emotion,

Fighting Fair to Resolve Conflict Quick Jump

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just as normal and healthy as joy, happiness, and sadness.

Fighting Fair to the Rescue!

Fair fighting is a way to manage conflict and the feelings that come with it effectively. To fight fairly, you just need to follow some basic guidelines to help keep your disagreements from becoming entrenched or destructive. This may be difficult when you think another's point of view is irrational or just plain unfair. But remember, he or she may think the same thing about your ideas.



MindBody Lab

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Visit the MindBody Lab



CMHC Crisis Line (512) 471-2255

Talk to a trained counselor
24/7/365

Learn more



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management site!

Visit StressRecess

Common Student Concerns

Stress
Healthy Relationships
Depression
Insomnia
Grief and Loss
Suicide
more...

Fair Fighting: Ground rules

Remain calm. Try not to overreact to difficult situations. By remaining calm it is more likely that others will consider your viewpoint.

Express feelings in words, not actions. If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a "time out" and do something to help yourself feel calm: take a walk, do some deep breathing, play with the dog, write in your journal- whatever works for you.

Be specific about what is bothering you. Vague complaints are hard to work on.

Deal with only one issue at a time. Don't introduce other topics until each is fully discussed. This avoids the "kitchen sink" effect where people throw in all their complaints while not allowing anything to be resolved.

No hitting below the belt. Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger, and vulnerability.

Avoid accusations. Accusations will lead others to focus on defending themselves rather than on understanding you. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.

Try not to generalize. Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and will heighten tensions.

Avoid make believe. Exaggerating or inventing a complaint - or your feelings about it - will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with the facts and your honest feelings.

Don't stockpile. Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time is counterproductive. It's almost impossible to deal with numerous old problems for which recollections may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.

Avoid clamming up. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication. When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. However, if you feel yourself getting overwhelmed or shutting down, you may need to take a break from the discussion. Just let your partner know you will return to the conversation as soon as you are able and then don't forget to follow-up.

Establish common ground rules. You may even want to ask your partner-in-conflict to read and discuss this information with you. When both people accept positive common ground rules for managing a conflict, resolution becomes much more likely.

Fair Fighting: Step by Step...

1. Before you begin, ask yourself, "What exactly is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue?"
2. Know what your goals are before you begin. What are the possible outcomes that could be acceptable to you?
3. Remember that the idea is not to win but to come to a mutually satisfying solution to the problem.

4. Set a time for a discussion with your partner-in-conflict. It should be as soon as possible but agreeable to both persons. Springing a conversation on someone when they are unprepared may leave them feeling like they have to fend off an attack. If you encounter resistance to setting a time, try to help the other person see that the problem is important to you.
5. State the problem clearly. At first, try to stick to the facts; then, once you've stated the facts, state your feelings. Use "I" messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt, or disappointment. Avoid "you" messages such as, "you make me angry...."; instead, try something like, "I feel angry when you...."
6. Invite the other person to share his or her point of view. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear his or her concerns and feelings. Try to restate what you heard in a way that lets your partner know you fully understood, and ask your partner to do the same for you.
7. Try to take the other's perspective; that is, try to see the problem through his or her eyes. The opposing viewpoint can make sense to you, even if you don't agree with it.
8. Propose specific solutions, and invite the other person to propose solutions, too.
9. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.
10. Be willing to compromise. Allowing the other person only one option will make it difficult to resolve the concern. When you reach an agreement on a way forward, celebrate! Decide together on a time to check-in, discuss how things are working, and make changes to your agreement if necessary. If no solution has been reached regarding the original problem, schedule a time to revisit the issue and continue the discussion.

When Nothing Seems to Work

Sometimes, despite our best fair-fighting efforts, a disagreement or conflict seems insurmountable. When this occurs, talking with a trained professional can help. A trained mediator can help you communicate more effectively and eventually work your way through to a solution. Mediation services are offered through the UT Ombudsperson's Office, (512) 471-3825. Alternatively, the UT's CMHC provides short-term counseling for individuals and couples who have difficulty managing conflicts, as well as counseling for other concerns you might have. There is also CMHC Crisis Line available 24 hours/day, 7 days/week at (512) 471-2255.

Recommended Reading

The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships by Harriet Lerner. HarperCollins, 1997.

Messages: The Communication Book by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. New Harbinger Publications, 1995.

Love is Never Enough: How Couples Can Overcome Misunderstandings, Resolve Conflicts, and Solve Relational Problems Through Cognitive Therapy by Aaron T. Beck. Harper Perennial, 1989.

Fighting the Good Fight: Learning to Deal with Conflict Constructively in Permanent Partners: Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships that Last (pgs. 169-200) by Betty Berzon. Plume, 2004.

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