

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is normal in relationships.

Because each person is unique, whenever two or more persons live together, differences of perception, interpretation of events and opinions will be inevitable.

There are four main ways to deal with conflict:

1. **Flight:** Running away from any sign of disagreement; refusing to acknowledge or talk about differences. This is appropriate when the time and/or place is not right for dealing with a particular problem. It is particularly appropriate when safety is at stake.

It is not appropriate as a general style of dealing with conflict because it prevents settling of difficulties and results in a build-up of bad feelings, as disagreement piles on top of disagreement.

2. **Diversion:** Delaying discussion by deflecting attention away from the problem by changing the subject, criticizing, keeping issues unclear or unacknowledged.

This too, is appropriate if safety is at stake. It is also appropriate if one needs time to think or the time and/or place is not right for dealing with the problem.

It is not appropriate if used all the time to avoid dealing with problems.

3. **Fighting:** Imposing one's will on another person in whatever way it takes to do that; usually by using verbal abuse or physical violence.

Fighting is usually a reaction to feeling threatened. It is never an appropriate way to resolve a conflict. People get hurt. Victories are hollow and unless the opponent has no will at all; short-lived. The conflicts do not get settled. They just go underground and smolder.

4. **Constructive conflict resolution:** Resolving conflicts with actions that are mutually satisfying.

Constructive conflict resolution allows problems to be dealt with directly and positively instead of being avoided or covered up. It requires the ability and willingness to figure out the real source of the conflict; initiate constructive action and communicate in positive ways until the problem is solved.

Constructive Conflict Resolution

Constructive conflict resolution will only work if both persons genuinely want to resolve the conflict. If one or both persons are only interested in winning or maintaining control, then it will not work.

Step 1: Figure out the real source of the conflict

Is the disagreement about fact, perception or opinion? If it is about fact, check it out with some reliable source. If it is about different perceptions, be aware that everyone has a unique way of perceiving the world. If it is a difference of opinion, know that people's opinions are based on their values and the real source of conflict may be grounded in a difference in values.

Step 2: Decide whether this is the right time to deal with the conflict

If one or both persons is too upset or if it is not the right place or there is not enough time to work through to a solution, postpone dealing with it. But do not postpone indefinitely. Agree on a time to deal with the problem and deal with it then.

Step 3: Search for agreement together

- a) Listen to each other. When the other person is speaking, give your whole attention to what he/she is saying, both the actual words and the feelings behind the words. Do not think about your own feelings or what you are going to say next, while the other person is speaking. If this is difficult to do, make a rule that each person must say what he/she believes the other person is saying and feeling and have it checked out for accuracy before expressing his/her own self.
- b) Check what you think you heard. There is a saying that describes how complicated communication is: **"I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."** Always be sure you understand the other person. Do not assume you do. It is best to check out your assumptions before proceeding. Many disagreements are based on wrong assumptions.
- c) Stay on the issue. Avoid the pitfalls of bringing up past issues, mind reading and name calling.
- d) Consider many alternative solutions and choose one together to try. If it does not work, choose and try another until both of you are satisfied.

REMEMBER: A good relationship is not one without conflict. It is one in which the participants can resolve conflicts so that no one is hurt or oppressed; so that everybody wins.