

Resolving Conflicts and Arguments

What would you do if...

- A fellow student made a comment that offended you.
- Your roommate used up your laundry detergent without telling you.
- You just got a test back from your professor and you believe she graded it unfairly.
- A friend saw the person you are dating with someone else and suggested he/she might be cheating on you.

To React or Not to React

Fear or anger tends to be the first emotion that people experience when they sense there is a conflict. This is part of the “fight-or-flight” response—to either want to fight or to run away from the situation. Although common, these responses are not always the most helpful for addressing a conflict.

Instead of using your fight-or-flight instincts, conflict may best resolved by using your intellect. This calls for having a plan for when conflict does arise. Reactions to conflict should involve the following:

- **Cool off:** If a situation gets emotional, find a way to disengage. You might say something like, “I feel myself getting upset about this; I need time alone to think.” It is much better to explain that you need time to think than to just walk away.
- **Confront the problem:** Make time to discuss the conflict. It is often tempting to walk away from a conflict and hope the other person won’t bring it up again. A better plan is to set up an appointed time and place to discuss the conflict, so that both of you can think in advance about what needs to be said.
- **Clarify the conflict for yourself:** Before discussing the conflict with the other person, make sure you are clear about what you are feeling and why you are feeling that way. Understanding the root cause of your feelings is very important because it may provide clues to a win-win solution.

As you prepare, think about how you will explain your feelings to the other person. Be sure to use “I” messages rather than “you” messages. Have you ever said something like, “You make me _____”? Change this to, “I feel [insert your feeling] when you [describe a behavior]”.

- **Treat the other person with respect:** Your feelings about the conflict are important and deserve respect, as do the feelings of the other person. Resolve to listen to the feelings of the other person and to act respectfully. You may be surprised when you find out what was going on for the other person during the incident. Often, when we get upset, our own feelings get in the way of noticing what the other person is feeling. For tips on how to be a better listener, read “Improving My Listening Skills.”

- **Agree on a solution:** It is possible that each of you will have chosen a solution from your own perspective. What seems completely acceptable to you may not be acceptable to the other person. As you examine each solution, describe how it would impact you, and listen carefully to how it would impact the other person. Select a solution with which both of you can live.
- **Affirm, forgive, thank:** Conclude by affirming your commitment to the relationship and your resolve to follow through. If hostile words have been spoken, ask for forgiveness or express forgiveness to the other person. Thank the person for listening to your side of the conflict and for choosing a solution that works for both of you.

Conflict Management Styles

Although people tend to deal with conflict differently, there are five primary ways in which most people respond to conflict:

1. **Avoidance:** People who hate confrontations that might result in the other persons' anger, sarcasm, rejection, and so on, withdraw from the situation rather than face it. They are usually sensitive to their own and others feelings, and don't want to feel hurt or hurt others.
2. **Accommodating:** These people suppress their own needs, opinions, and feelings, sacrificing their own interests and needs in order to solve the conflict. Their attitude is "anything for a quiet life" or "peace at any price."
3. **Win/Lose:** At the other end of the spectrum are those who see conflict as a competition in which there has to be a winner and a loser. Their attitude is "win at any cost." They force their interests and ideas onto the other person, often through violence, bribery or punishment. The outcome is usually a battle in which relationships suffer.
4. **Compromising:** Both sides meet halfway in order to reach an agreement. In some cases, it is the best solution possible. However, with both sides giving up something in order to reach an agreement, the best solution may not be achieved. Often, both parties feel cheated and dissatisfied with the outcome.
5. **Problem Solving:** If it can be achieved, the ideal solution is one where both parties emerge as "winners." By defining each party's needs, then trying to equitably meet those needs while supporting and respecting each party's values, a win/win solution often can be achieved.

Which conflict-management style do you tend to use? Has it been effective in resolving conflicts? If you answered no, try the problem-solving approach.

The Problem-Solving Approach

When you are in conflict with another person, the problem-solving approach tends to be the best way to resolve the issue. Follow these guidelines and practice them with another person to become comfortable with resolving conflict:

- 1. Acknowledge the problem:** Decide to discuss the problem or conflict. Determine your own conflict resolution style. Schedule a meeting.
- 2. Discuss the problem:** Decide what questions to ask. Be prepared to listen. Do you know what your point of view is? Do you understand the other person's point of view?
- 3. Agree on a solution:** Come up with as many ideas as possible and discuss each alternative. Review the ideas together with both people's interests and needs in mind. Decide on a mutually acceptable solution. Decide how to implement the solution.
- 4. Monitor results:** Decide how you will verify that the solution is implemented. Ensure the conflict has been resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Determine if anything else needs to be done.

If you require additional assistance, consult with someone with training in conflict resolution, such as a counselor or resident advisor.