



# Conflict Resolution Skills

## Managing and Resolving Conflict in a Positive Way

Conflict is a normal, and even healthy, part of relationships. After all, two people can't be expected to agree on everything at all times. Since relationship conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them in a healthy way is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can harm the relationship. But when handled in a respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between two people. By learning the skills you need for successful conflict resolution, you can keep your personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

## The fundamentals of conflict resolution

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

## Recognizing and resolving conflicting needs

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. If you don't understand your deep-seated needs, you will have a hard time communicating with others and staying in touch with what is really troubling you. For example, couples often argue about petty differences—the way she hangs the towels, the way he parts his hair—rather than what is really bothering them.

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. 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. When you resolve conflict and disagreement quickly and painlessly, mutual trust will flourish.

## Successful conflict resolution depends on your ability to:

- **Manage stress 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 resolve the problem faster.

## Healthy and unhealthy ways of managing and resolving conflict

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.

### Unhealthy responses to conflict are characterized by:

- An inability to recognize and respond to matters of great importance to the other person
- Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions
- The withdrawal of love, resulting in rejection, isolation, shaming, and fear of abandonment
- The expectation of bad outcomes
- The fear and avoidance of conflict

### Healthy responses to conflict are characterized by:

- The capacity to recognize and respond to important matters
- A readiness to forgive and forget
- The ability to seek compromise and avoid punishing
- A belief that resolution can support the interests and needs of both parties

## Four key conflict resolution skills

The ability to successfully manage and resolve conflict depends on four key skills. Together, these four skills form a fifth skill that is greater than the sum of its parts: the ability to take conflict in stride and resolve differences in ways that build trust and confidence.

### Conflict resolution skill 1: Quickly relieve stress

The capacity to remain relaxed and focused in tense situations is a vital aspect of conflict resolution. If you don't know how to stay centered and in control of yourself, you may become emotionally overwhelmed in challenging situations. The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress 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.

### Conflict resolution skill 2: Recognize and manage your emotions.

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 smooth over disagreements. Although knowing your own feelings may seem simple, many people ignore or try to sedate strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. But your ability to handle conflict 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.

### Conflict resolution skill 3: Improve your nonverbal communication skills

The most important information exchanged during conflicts and arguments is often communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal communication includes eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture, touch, and gestures. 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, respond in a way that builds trust, and get to the root of the problem. Simply nonverbal signals such as a calm tone of voice, a reassuring touch, or a concerned facial expression can go a long way toward defusing a heated exchange.

### Conflict resolution skill 4: Use humor and play to deal with challenges

You can avoid many confrontations and resolve arguments and disagreements by communicating in a playful or humorous way. Humor can help you say things that might otherwise be difficult to express without creating a flap. 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 emotional maturity, self-control, and empathy. It can be tricky, frustrating, and even frightening. You can ensure that the process is as positive as possible by sticking to the following conflict resolution guidelines:

- **Make the relationship your priority.** 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 old hurts and 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 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.

### Fair fighting: Ground rules

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

**Express feelings in words, not actions.** Telling someone directly and honestly how you feel

can be a very powerful form of communication. 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 steadier.

**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 cause others to defend themselves. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel

**Don't 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 interpretations may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.

**Avoid clamming up.** When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication.

*Source: The Counseling & Mental Health Center at The University of Texas at Austin*

## Managing and resolving conflict by learning how to listen

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 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.

### Tips for being a better listener:

- Listen to the reasons the other person gives for being upset.
- Make sure you understand what the other person is telling you—from his or her point of view.
- Repeat the other person's words, and ask if you have understood correctly.
- Ask if anything remains unspoken, giving the person time to think before answering.
- Resist the temptation to interject your own point of view until the other person has said everything he or she wants to say and feels that you have listened to and understood his or her message.

### When listening to the other person's point of view, the following responses are often helpful:

**Encourage** the other person to share his or her issues as fully as possible.

- "I want to understand what has upset you."
- "I want to know what you are really hoping for."



**Clarify** the real issues, rather than making assumptions. Ask questions that allow you to gain this information, and which let the other person know you are trying to understand.

- "Can you say more about that?"
- "Is that the way it usually happens?"

**Restate** what you have heard, so you are both able to see what has been understood so far - it may be that the other person will then realize that additional information is needed.

- "It sounds like you weren't expecting that to happen."

**Reflect feelings** - be as clear as possible.

- "I can imagine how upsetting that must have been."

**Validate** the concerns of the other person, even if a solution is elusive at this time. Expressing appreciation can be a very powerful message if it is conveyed with integrity and respect.

- "I really appreciate that we are talking about this issue."
- "I am glad we are trying to figure this out."

**Source:** University of Wisconsin, Madison

## **Conflict resolution is one of the five key skills of emotional intelligence**

### **The Five Skills of Emotional Intelligence**

Skill 1: Quick Stress Relief

Skill 2: Emotional Awareness

Skill 3: Nonverbal Communication

Skill 4: Playful Communication

Skill 5: Conflict Resolution

The ability to resolve conflicts positively and with confidence is the fifth of five essential emotional intelligence skills. Together, the five skills of emotional intelligence help you build strong relationships, overcome challenges, and succeed at work and in life.

### **Raising emotional intelligence: A free, online training course**

To start practicing the five skills of emotional intelligence, visit [EQ Central](#), a website from the creators of Helpguide. EQ Central offers a step-by-step, self-paced emotional intelligence training course filled with real-world examples and hands-on exercises.

## **Related links for conflict resolution skills**

### **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)

[Conflict Resolution: Resolving Conflict Rationally and Effectively](#) – Guide to conflict in the workplace and different conflict styles. Includes a 5-step process for successful conflict resolution. (MindTools)

### **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)

[Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#), Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., contributed to this article. Last modified: September 2009.

Reprinted with permission for personal or non-profit use. Visit [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org) to see the article with links to related articles. © Helpguide.org. All rights reserved.

**This material is for information and support; not a substitute for professional advice.**