

# 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. The key is not to avoid conflict but to learn how to resolve it in a healthy way. 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. Whatever the cause of disagreements and disputes, by learning these skills for conflict resolution, you can keep your personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

## What causes conflict?

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 unmet needs can range from feeling safe and secure, respected and valued, or lacking greater closeness and intimacy.

## Conflicts arise from differing needs

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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 respond to conflict?

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

If you're afraid of conflict, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you enter a conflict situation already feeling threatened, it's tough to deal with the problem at hand in a healthy way. Instead, you're more likely to either shut down or blow up in anger.

Healthy and unhealthy ways of managing and resolving conflict

Unhealthy responses to conflict:

Healthy responses to conflict:

Healthy and unhealthy ways of managing and resolving conflict

An inability to recognize and respond to the things that matter to the other person	The capacity to empathize with the other person's viewpoint
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Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions	Calm, non-defensive, and respectful reactions
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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
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An inability to compromise or see the other person's side	The ability to seek compromise and avoid punishing
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Feeling fearful or avoiding conflict; expecting a bad outcome	A belief that facing conflict head on is the best thing for both sides
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## 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 your understanding of the other person, builds trust, and strengthens your relationships.

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. This will make it hard to communicate with others and establish 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, intimidating, or punishing others.
- **Pay attention to the *feelings* being expressed** as well as the spoken words of others.
- **Be aware of and respect differences.** By avoiding disrespectful words and actions, you can almost always resolve a problem faster.

To successfully resolve a conflict, you need to learn and practice two core skills:

1. **Quick stress relief:** the ability to quickly relieve stress in the moment.
2. **Emotional awareness:** the ability to remain comfortable enough with your emotions to react in constructive ways, even in the midst of a perceived attack.

## Quick stress relief

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:**

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- 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 for you?**

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You may be so used to feeling stressed that you're not even aware you *are* stressed. Stress may pose 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

# Emotional awareness

Emotional awareness is the key to understanding yourself and others. If you don't know how or why you feel a certain 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 limited.

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

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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 to:

- 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
- Interest and influence others

## Assessing your level of emotional awareness

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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 you have with your 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 distinct feelings and emotions**, such as anger, sadness, fear, and joy, which are evident in different facial expressions?

- **Can you experience intense feelings** that are strong enough to capture both your own 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 off. In either case, you may need help developing your emotional awareness. You can do this by using

[Helpguide’s free emotional intelligence toolkit.](#)

## Nonverbal communication and conflict resolution

When people are in the middle of a conflict, the words they use rarely convey the issues at the heart of the problem. But by paying close attention to the other person’s nonverbal signals or “body language,” such as facial expressions, posture, gestures, and tone of voice, you can better understand what the person is really saying. This will allow you to respond in a way that builds trust, and gets to the root of the problem.

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. Think about what you are transmitting to others during conflict, and if what you say matches your body language. If you say “I’m fine,” but you clench your teeth and look away, then your body is clearly signaling you are anything but “fine.” A calm tone of voice, a reassuring touch, or an interested facial expression can go a long way toward relaxing a tense exchange.

## Tips for managing and resolving conflict

You can ensure that the process of managing and resolving conflict is as positive as possible by sticking to the following guidelines:

**Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When you really listen, you connect more deeply to your own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens, informs, and makes it easier for others to hear you when it’s your 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 their viewpoint.

**Focus on the present.** If you’re holding on to grudges based on past conflicts, 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 worth 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 others. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can serve only to deplete and drain your life.

**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.

### Using humor in conflict resolution

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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.

## Recommended reading

[CR Kit](#) - Covers causes of conflict, different conflict styles, and fair fighting guidelines to help you positively resolve disagreements. (Conflict Resolution Network)

[12 Skills Summary](#) - A 12-step conflict resolution training kit. (Conflict Resolution Network)

[Effective Communication](#) - The art of listening in conflict resolution. (University of Maryland)

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