

7 Benefits of Conflict

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Introduction

It may be hard to believe conflict could be beneficial, but it's true! In the same way getting a shot can be painful but necessary for future health, conflict can be uncomfortable, but lead to better relationships, personal growth, and reduced stress. Of course, addressing conflict in healthy ways is a key factor, but also defining conflict properly matters. Many people mistakenly believe conflict equals arguing or fighting, which it does not. Nor does confrontation mean attacking the other person.

Since conflict is inevitable, helping clients understand how to appreciate it versus avoid it is one of the best skills you can teach. Doing so means helping clients choose what to focus on. During conflict, it's easier to focus on the perceived deficits of the other person. Yet, this will only serve to increase frustration and delay emotional healing. Instead, this text is designed to help you highlight the positive side of conflict for your clients so they can navigate rough relationship waters easier and quicker with far less damage.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Define the true meaning of conflict and confrontation.
2. Recognize how conflict can improve relationships.
3. Encourage clients to address, rather than avoid conflict.

Let's Get Started!

Defining Conflict

When you consider the word, "conflict" what immediately comes to mind? Many people associate conflict with fighting, arguing, yelling, or someone getting mad. If any of these definitions sound familiar, there's a good chance you don't feel comfortable addressing it! But, conflict doesn't have to mean any of these things. In fact, people experience far less conflict than they imagine. What occurs more frequently are misunderstandings and differences of opinions. When these situations aren't handled appropriately, they can turn into conflicts. Knowing the difference between the three will determine how you approach each situation.

If you have a misunderstanding with someone, it means there was a lack of clear communication. There may be some hurt feelings involved, but generally, issues can be resolved quickly as soon as each party gains an understanding of what really happened. Each side is seeking to be understood, not an outcome that is in opposition to one another. However, if hurt feelings and misperceptions are allowed to fester, this situation can easily escalate into a conflict.

A difference of opinion is when two people agree to disagree. If one person calls a color orange and the other sees it as red, it doesn't really matter who's right. Each can hold on to his opinion without affecting the other. It's possible for differences of opinion to grow into conflicts if you insist that everyone agree with your opinion in order to be right.

A true conflict is based on the assumption that if you get what you want, the other person can't get what he wants. (This isn't necessarily true, but it's what each side initially believes.) Many people handle conflict like a game of tug-of-war played with a winner-take-all attitude. When this happens, emotions flare and relationships are damaged. Instead, resolving conflict requires exploring each side's underlying needs and working together to best meet them. That means refusing to play tug-of-war, no matter how often the rope is dangled in front of your face. Instead, you let go of the rope and join the "opposition" to stand side-by-side. The process takes more work, but when handled well, relationships are preserved and better solutions are reached.

Defining Confrontation

Confrontation is the process by which conflict is resolved. The goal of confrontation is to ease frustration, increase communication, and diffuse conflicts. But, for many people confrontation is synonymous with "attack." They mistakenly assume they have to aggressively argue their point in order to win a fight, which only escalates the conflict. That's why those who describe themselves as "nice" avoid confrontation because they don't want to act "mean." They would rather endure unresolved conflict than make it worse.

The truth is, confrontation is not about attacking people, but addressing the issue or behavior that is causing the conflict. When you make people the problem, you automatically go into attack-mode. It's impossible to have a healthy, positive discussion when the goal is to get the other person to agree he's the problem, admit he's wrong, and change according to your wishes. What's more likely is that he will become defensive and the conversation turns into a fight. But, by separating people from the issue or behavior you want changed, you can focus your discussion on the right things.

The model for healthy confrontation looks like a triangle. You and the other person are at the base while the issue is at the top. In this model, both parties share equal power and are mutually focused on resolving the issue. This is very different from picturing confrontation as a line in the sand with two people opposing one another, fists raised and ready to duke it out. Even if you're the one being attacked because the other person is convinced you're the problem, it's possible to separate yourself from the issue.

Confronting the right things means eliminating all personal attacks such as accusing someone of having an attitude, being stubborn, or acting mean. Instead, it forces you to concentrate on what the person is actually doing or saying (his or her behavior) and what changes you're requesting. For example, what behaviors make you conclude someone has an attitude? Is it their tone of voice? Specific words? Facial expressions? Focusing on these specifics will help you confront the true issues versus start a fight. Bottom line: you will never have to confront another person again! The only thing you will be confronting is unwanted behaviors or issues.

Benefit #1: Learning to Face Fears

What's your greatest fear regarding conflict or confrontation? Common answers include: making the other person mad, being yelled at, relationships ending, receiving the silent treatment, getting tongue-tied, making it worse, others taking sides against you, and in work settings - getting fired. Often, the biggest conflict you face isn't with another person, but the internal struggle you

experience over what to do because of your fears. It's enough is to convince some that no action is the best path.

Ironically, the way many people try to decrease fear is the very thing that increases it! Avoiding conflict may offer momentary relief, but since issues never get resolved, they return more frequently at unexpected times. Anxiety builds in anticipation of the next blow up. While it sounds uncomfortable, the only way to reduce fear is to experience it. Mastering skills takes practice and the more you work at addressing conflict, the more confident you'll become.

Anxiety also increases when you focus on uncontrollable factors. How other people react or choose to feel is out of your control. If you really had the power to control their feelings, wouldn't you make them happy all the time? Obviously, you can't if you're running into conflicts. The only thing you control is how *you* think, feel, behave, and react. Certainly, you can influence a person's response by using a positive, skilled approach to conflict resolution, but you're not responsible for his choices. If a person decides to get mad or refuses to speak to you, it's out of your control.

Feelings are the product of our thoughts, so if you're thinking anxious thoughts, you'll feel nervous. In order to change your emotions, you must change your thoughts and challenge irrational self-talk. For example, if one of your fears is that the other person will respond by yelling, talk yourself through how you would respond. Rather than stay stuck on the fearful thought, challenge every scenario until you reach a reasonable conclusion. Your internal dialogue might sound like this:

"He's going to yell at me."
Assume he does yell, and then what?
"I'll feel nervous and my face will get red."
And then what?
"I might forget what to say."
And then what?
"I'll just stand there looking stupid."
And then what?
"Eventually, I'll probably speak."
And then what?
"I might not say the right thing."
And then what?
"He'll yell again."
And then what?
"I'll say it again, but more clearly."

This example of internal dialogue is more than positive self-talk, it's realistic. Exploring and answering your fears allows you to arrive at a new ending that takes you forward versus staying paralyzed in fear. It may be uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

Benefit #2: Lower Stress with Reasonable Expectations

One reason some people find conflict to be intimidating is because they have unrealistic expectations about how often it should occur. Assuming that you will never have disagreements with others leaves you unprepared and caught off guard when it happens. Even the healthiest relationships have conflict. It's absolutely normal and should be *expected*.

Remember, conflict doesn't mean constant arguing, yelling, and fighting which are signs of unhealthy relationships. In this case, conflict is a perception that people's goals are at odds. Since every person is different, needs and perceptions are bound to be different, resulting in conflict. Accepting that conflict is part of the natural ebb and flow of relationships is far different from assuming it will never happen. When there's a gap between what you expected and reality, it can be stressful. Closing the gap doesn't mean lowering all your standards, but simply adjusting your expectations to be more realistic.

When dealing with other people, it's reasonable to expect respectful communication, occasional conflict, and the fact that both sides will need to compromise at some point. If this is your mindset, you'll be able to navigate most interactions without too much stress. It's unreasonable to expect that everyone will like or agree with you, or that you'll be able to avoid all conflict if you're nice enough. If you think this way, you'll spend a lot of time feeling disappointed and hurt.

So, experiencing conflict doesn't mean you failed at anything. As long as it's expressed and resolved respectfully, conflict is healthy. The other benefit to realizing that conflict is inevitable is that you can address it sooner, rather than let it build to the point of a major blow up. Putting the reality of conflict in the proper perspective means that it will be just a bump in the road rather than a major pothole.

Benefit #3: Sign of Growth

Conflict is usually associated with negatives, but actually, there are many positives such as, personal growth. Think of a major decision you've made in your life that propelled you forward in a new direction. Perhaps it was about furthering your education, where to live, starting or ending a relationship, choosing a career path, healthcare decisions, or making a significant purchase. Most likely, you experienced some inner turmoil before making such a big decision. Conflict, whether it's personal or between you and another person, is always an indication of a growth opportunity.

Sometimes you determine it's time to grow and other times, circumstances require it. The only constant is change. By shifting your goal to getting comfortable with growing versus maintaining the status quo, conflict will be a welcomed sign that you've hit a plateau and must be ready to move forward. If you notice that you're experiencing a recurring conflict, you're probably resisting the lesson and refusing to grow. Be prepared for the same struggle to keep happening until you've mastered it.

Questions to Encourage Growth

The next time a conflict occurs, ask yourself these questions to encourage growth:

- What lesson can I learn?

- How can I benefit from this situation?
- What skill do I need to improve so this doesn't happen again?
- How am I contributing to this conflict?
- How can I respond differently this time?
- Who can I consult to teach me how to handle this better?
- How can I apply what I've learned to other areas of my life?

When you focus on what you can gain from conflict, you're no longer a victim. Another bonus of this approach is that the faster you learn the fewer conflicts you'll have!

Benefit #4: Source of New Ideas

Have you ever come across a clever product and wished you'd thought of it? The best ideas solve old problems in new ways. But, in order to benefit from the new idea, there first had to be a problem. In the same way, conflict can be beneficial when it forces you to think differently, many times generating a better solution than you originally sought. Yes, it's more work, but worth it in the end.

Every organization that's a leader in product and idea development embraces conflict. They seek feedback, especially about what they could be doing better because it's the source of flourishing ideas. They're willing to admit what's broken and figure out how to fix it. Companies that try to squelch conflict lack innovation. People who are willing to acknowledge opposing viewpoints and work through disagreements have healthier long-term relationships. If not, the relationship gets stuck in the same rut. So, by using conflict to consider fresh ideas, you're teaching yourself to be more flexible and resilient.

Five Ways to Generate New Ideas

Here are five ways to come up with new solutions to old conflicts:

- *Substitute*: Exchange one thing for another such as using different words to explain your goals, talking in place of silence, or changing examples.
- *Eliminate*: Take away one element like bringing up the past, complaining, or reducing time spent on certain topics.
- *Add*: Seek additional information, resources, or add a new person to facilitate.
- *Copy*: Find someone who has successfully solved a similar issue and do exactly what he did.
- *Repeat*: Use a past personal experience of successfully resolving an issue and repeat the same steps.

Realizing that a certain level of conflict precedes new ideas is encouraging because every time you notice an innovative product or solution it's positive proof that good things can come from what seemed at first to be a bad situation.

Benefit #5: Expose Strengths and Weaknesses

It's tempting to view someone with whom you have a conflict as your enemy. But, actually difficult people are your teachers and the lesson they're teaching is all about *you*. All relationships, personal

or professional, serve as a reminder of your strengths and weaknesses. In fact, it's impossible to learn certain things about yourself outside of a relationship. Lessons about patience, tolerance, flexibility, boundaries, humility, compassion, control, forgiveness, and assertiveness all come through your relationships with other people. And, the more difficult the person, the bigger the lesson!

It may be that you never had a problem dealing with conflict before meeting a certain individual. Because he's so challenging, he's exposing a weakness you never knew existed. As you learn the best way to respond, he's validating your strengths that previously you may have taken for granted. Every conflict you have is like a giant mirror reflecting back the skills you've mastered and the ones you lack. (If you really want to unnerve a difficult person, thank him for all the lessons he's teaching you!)

Take Inventory

Build awareness of your communication strengths and weaknesses by rating yourself on a scale of 1-10 on these skills:

- Tolerating different viewpoints
- Seeking to understand first before responding
- Speaking up when someone tries taking advantage of you
- Remaining calm even when others are upset
- Sharing feelings in person versus online or texting
- Refusing to hold a grudge
- Apologizing (without over-apologizing)

These are just a few of the important communication skills necessary to handle conflict well. Chances are that each one reminded you of a person or situation that highlighted your strengths or exposed your weaknesses. Be careful about getting so angry with someone who reflects a weakness that you miss the opportunity to grow. Remember, this is a lesson you needed him to help you learn. In turn, your relationship is offering back insights for him too.

Benefit #6: Patterns Revealed

When weather forecasters talk about the current weather, it's in the context of a larger system. Their map pictures zoom in and out to show how the storm coming your way is based on the one happening in another region. The big picture explains the smaller one. Just as the weather outside your window isn't an isolated event, the way you handle conflict in your life is part of a larger pattern.

In behavioral terms, a pattern is when something has occurred three times or more. Patterns develop not only in the way you personally respond to conflict, but also within relationships. If two people get into arguments frequently, you could probably chart a predictable pattern of how they fight. Rather than focusing on settling each individual argument, it would be more helpful to look at the big picture and change their communication pattern. What are your behavior patterns? Even if the people change, your response patterns remain the same. It's important to build your awareness because the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

Interrupt Patterns

Typical communication patterns include tone of voice, word choice, rate of speech, volume, location of arguments, topics, time of day, facial expressions, and body language. Once you know your conflict pattern, start by changing one thing. Here are some examples:

- If you always yell, stay silent.
- If you always suggest solutions first, wait.
- If you always fight in the car, talk in a coffee shop.
- If you always leave the room, stay.
- If you always look away, make eye contact.
- If you always argue at the same time of day, change times to meet.
- If you always talk fast when upset, slow down.

The list is endless. Small changes can significantly alter your pattern and therefore, your outcome. Once you've created a pattern of success, pay close attention so that you can repeat it.

Benefit #7: Strengthen Relationships

Conflict has the power to destroy or strengthen relationships. Similar to how weight lifting helps build muscle by causing microscopic tears in the muscle fiber that heal to become stronger, conflict can breakdown, mend, and improve relationships. There's some pain involved, but it shouldn't be so great that you're unable to function the next day. The muscle healing occurs after the workout, on your day of rest. Building emotional muscle also requires some rest in between difficult conversations – but not so much time that you lose all the progress you made.

If you've never lifted weights before, you wouldn't start with the heaviest set, right? If you did, you'd hurt yourself or somebody else. That approach might cause so much pain you'd swear you'd never lift weights again! The same result occurs when waiting too long to address conflict and then starting with the biggest, most difficult problem. People become convinced that talking only makes things worse because it hurts too much. But, the real problem is their haphazard, untrained method. This is when conflict destroys relationships.

Working through conflict can bond people on a deeper level because each feels understood and validated. The process creates a unique dynamic that only those involved understand, so it's special. People who have experienced a natural disaster, war, or other trauma together describe the same type of bond. It creates a triumphant feeling of, "If we can get through that, we can do anything!" In the end you get a new, improved relationship that operates differently than the old one. It doesn't mean there will never be another conflict, but since the relationship has been strengthened, it can bear more weight.

In Conclusion

No one is perfect at handling conflict or knows exactly the right thing to say in every situation. The only way to get better is to practice. Guess what you need to practice conflict resolution? Conflict! Every difficult situation you encounter is an opportunity to refine your skills. But, since you're dealing with other people whom you can't control, there will always be an unpredictable

element that makes each interaction unique. Therefore, there's no finish line when it comes to improving interpersonal relationships. It's a constant growth pattern.

It takes at least two people to create conflict and two people to work it out. A common mistake in preparing to have a conversation is writing an entire script in your mind of exactly what will be said. Of course, since the other person wasn't consulted, it never quite plays out the way you imagined! This can leave you tongue-tied because the other person isn't playing his part. A good conversation is a dialogue between two people, not a monologue by one. All you need to practice ahead of time is your opening line and the change you're seeking. The rest of the conversation depends on how the other person responds. If you try to plan every word in advance, it means you're not bothering to listen to what the other person has to say in the moment. Some level of preparation is good, but too much time spent preparing means you're not actually practicing.

If you're putting off addressing conflict until you can flawlessly express yourself, that day will never come. There may be other people who seem to have a smoother delivery than you do, but it's only because they've had more practice. Accept that you'll make mistakes and it's okay because it's part of the learning process. With all the *benefits* of conflict, it's worth it!

TEST

7 Benefits of Conflict

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. A healthy definition of conflict is:
 - a) Tug-of-war
 - b) Arguing
 - c) A perception that if one side's needs are met, the other side won't get anything.

2. A healthy definition of confrontation is:
 - a) Addressing unwanted behavior or circumstances.
 - b) Attacking the other person.
 - c) Yelling.

3. One benefit of conflict is:
 - a) Getting others to agree that you're right all the time.
 - b) Personal growth.
 - c) Blaming everyone else for your problems.

4. Examples of communication strengths and weaknesses that conflict exposes are:
 - a) Ability to hold your breath while giving the silent treatment.
 - b) Ability to attack others through social media.
 - c) Ability to tolerate different viewpoints, forgive, listen, and be assertive.

5. The best way to receive the benefits of conflict is to avoid it:
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

Signature _____ Date _____

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