

## A CONFLICT RESOLUTION MODEL

### SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

There is no guarantee that using the following model will necessarily lead to resolution of your conflict. This is especially true if you and the other person view each other as “enemies” and do not assume some good will in your relationship. Either you or the other person has the right to refuse to involve yourselves in a constructive and positive resolution process. As a result of this stance, you may end up behaving aggressively, passive-aggressively, or passively with one another. Whatever the two of you do, however, will provide more information about the overall health of the relationship and how you may need to take care of yourselves as individuals in the context of your relationship with each other. If either you or the other person is completely unwilling to engage in a constructive conflict resolution process, you may want to begin to ask yourself why you’re continuing to stay in the relationship.

In conflict, each person often has the goal of getting the other person to accept and agree with their point of view. We think that we are “right” and we want the other person to acknowledge this “fact.” In addition, we frequently have the unrealistic expectation that the other should do what we want them to do in order to remedy whatever is bothering us. This sets up a “win/lose” situation, essentially making the other person an adversary. When you think about it more realistically, who really wants to be a loser and who really wants to be in a relationship with a loser?

A critical part of conflict resolution is to change your goal in the interaction from **AGREEMENT** to **UNDERSTANDING**. In reality, you and the other person don’t actually need to agree on many issues and seeing things differently, sometimes over the course of the entire relationship, does not necessarily mean that your relationship will be unhealthy and contentious. Effective conflict resolution is really about being able to hear and know the other person’s position well enough so that you can express it back to them and they can do likewise. This would mean that you truly understand each other’s perspective and what you are trying to say about the issue. Probably the most important part of conflict resolution is having the opportunity to express your feelings and have them really be heard by the other person. Active listening is critical in addressing conflict. You need to work hard to keep the communication lines open.

Another important aspect of resolving conflicts effectively is to attempt to tune into any negative and unproductive self-talk and assumptions that you hold regarding conflict situations and to be aware of how those assumptions are affecting possible outcomes. Some examples of these sorts of assumptions are listed below:

- *“I have to be right.”*
- *“Whenever we argue, someone wins and someone loses.”*
- *“If someone disagrees with me, they don’t really respect me”*
- *“If my partner sees things differently, he/she doesn’t really care about me.”*
- *“If I talk about what’s bothering me, it will just create more problems and push us farther away from each other.”*
- *“No one has the right to challenge me.”*
- *“If I admit my part in the problem, they won’t be willing to look at their part.”*
- *“If someone criticizes me, they must think I’m a loser.”*

- *“If I listen to my partner, then they’ll think I agree with them.”*
- *“It’s my way or the highway.”*
- *“Conflict and arguing in a marriage means you don’t really love each other.”*
- *“I’m the man...I should always have the final say.”*

Work hard to consciously substitute more positive, realistic, and rational ideas for your original assumptions. Some examples of doing this are below:

- *“It’s okay for us to see things differently on this issue.”*
- *“They have a right to their perspective the same as I do.”*
- *“Having conflict is a normal and natural part of a relationship. It doesn’t mean that either of us is wrong or bad.”*
- *“There’s no way we should expect to agree on everything. We’re two completely different people.”*
- *“It’s really important that we learn to appreciate each other’s differences.”*
- *“I know we can get through this. We’ve gotten through tough arguments in the past.”*
- *“We can both come out of this feeling okay about this issue.”*
- *“When we work through this, we’ll end up feeling closer to each other and better about our relationship.”*
- *“Our relationship is much more important than this current issue is.”*

Stay aware of your bodily reactions to conflict. If you are becoming tense and upset, take a moment to relax your muscles and breathe deeply and regularly. This model will probably not be helpful if you are highly escalated. At times of high escalation, few people are able to problem-solve effectively or keep in mind how important their relationship is to them (which facilitates understanding the other person and their perspective). If you find yourself escalating and there is the potential to become disrespectful or punishing, take a time-out and return to the discussion at a later time after you have calmed yourself down.

Procedure-setting ahead of time can be very helpful in keeping your conflict resolution discussions constructive. Think about the following issues for yourself even before you try to address your concern and negotiate these with the other person prior to beginning your actual discussion with them:

- **What do I want to talk about?**  
...be sure to stick to only one issue at a time!
- **Whose issue is it?**  
...i.e. is it your issue or is it a relationship issue?  
...if it bothers you enough to bring it up, it is, at a minimum, a relationship issue (it is NOT just the other person’s problem)
- **Who is involved in this issue?**  
...you, your partner, your children, your extended family, your friends
- **Where and when will you and the other person talk?**  
...be proactive in picking a time and place where there is the potential for an effective discussion
- **How much energy is available for the discussion?**  
...in you and the other person
- **How long will the discussion last?**
- **How will you stop the discussion?**  
...if you are not making the desired progress or if either of you is running out of energy

It is also important to come up with another set of guidelines about how you want to actually treat one another when you are disagreeing. This means thinking about what you are personally willing to do to make conflict resolution more effective and what you would like from the other person. Then you need to sit down and talk about what both of you will commit to do for the relationship in terms of how you will behave when you are arguing. This commitment involves discussing the specific ways you want to be treated and being clear about how you will treat your partner during conflicts that you have. It will hopefully include things like the following:

***“When we are in conflict with one another...”***

- ...“We will not threaten to leave the relationship, to separate, or to divorce”*
- ...“We will not cuss, swear, use put-downs and name-calling, or be sarcastic with one another”*
- ...“We will not touch each other in a hurtful or disrespectful way”*
- ...“We will not block the other person if he or she needs to take a time-out”*
- ...“We will speak our ‘truth’ (our perspective) in an open, honest, and respectful way”*
- ...“We will work hard to really listen to what the other person is saying”*
- ...“We will look for the ‘purpose’ or ‘meaning’ in what the other person is saying to us”*

To effectively resolve conflict, it is absolutely crucial for both of you to have uninterrupted time to speak. Interrupting and continually trying to talk over one another will not work. Try to silence the “noise” in your own head that will interfere with truly hearing the other person. Practice and work hard on your active listening skills.

Try to maintain a spirit of nurturance, affirmation, and cooperation even in the midst of conflict and your efforts at resolving it. Make conflict resolution into an esteem-building and trust-enhancing process rather than a negative and destructive one.

- **Take the initiative to be the one to break out of the “power struggle mentality.”**
  - ...be willing “to make the first move” to address issues that are coming between the two of you*
  - ...don’t fall back on the notion “Why should I always have to be the one to ‘break the ice’ in this damn relationship?”*
- **Take responsibility for things you’ve said or done that you don’t feel good about and make amends and apologize whenever necessary.**
- **Work to negotiate with your partner. In general, getting some of what you want is much better than getting none of what you want. Think about, offer, and ask for alternative solutions to whatever the issue happens to be.**
- **Turn conflicts from “just another damn hassle I have to deal with” into “problem-solving adventures” where you can truly work together as a team to come up with solutions that can work for both of you.**

If your long-term goal is a caring, loving, and respectful relationship, you need to keep this in mind even if you are upset with your partner about a particular issue in the present. If you are truly open to your partner’s thoughts and feelings and how they actually perceive the situation, this might even result in your feelings changing and your being more willing to see their perspective or to compromise.

Using the following model can be a difficult process. You may not have immediate success in using it. However, this model can be helpful to you and your relationship if your real intentions are:

- to treat your partner in a more respectful and caring fashion during conflict,

- to reach solutions that are acceptable for both of you, and
- to develop more intimacy in your relationship.

**Remember that the “bottom line” in effective conflict resolution is deciding what you are willing to do or give to make the situation better.**

- **NOT what you can convince, pressure, force, or coerce the other person to do**

### **SOME SPECIFIC STEPS TO FOLLOW IN WORKING TO RESOLVE A CONFLICT:**

**Step 1)** First of all, approach the other person and ask respectfully whether they are willing to sit down with you and work on an issue that is bothering you. Make this a REQUEST, not an order or a command. How you actually start the process sets the tone for everything that follows.

- *“I’ve got something that’s really been bothering me that I’d like to talk about with you.”*
- *“Would you be willing to sit down and talk with me about this issue?”*

**Step 2)** Describe the specific behavior/situation that you do not like or the specific concern you are experiencing. Express your thoughts and feelings that go along with the behavior/situation/concern. Try not to focus on and blame the other person. Rather, using “I” language, take responsibility for your thoughts and feelings about the issues. Your feelings belong to you and that other person doesn’t actually have the power to “cause” you to think, feel, or act in a certain way.

- *“I don’t like it when...”*
- *“I get upset about...”*
- *“It bothers me when...”*
- *“I’m feeling really uncomfortable with...”*

**Step 3)** In order to insure that the other person understands your concern, check back with them and encourage them to ask questions, paraphrase, and “mirror back” what they have heard you say in an attempt to clarify your perspective on the issue. If the person has misinterpreted or misunderstood what you said, describe your original thoughts and feelings again, adding whatever you need to add to make it clearer. If they have clearly understood what you have said, let them know that and then go ahead with the process.

- *“What do you hear me saying about this situation?”*
- *“What’s your sense of how I’m viewing this issue?”*

**Step 4)** Next, allow uninterrupted time for the other person to express their thoughts, feelings, and perspective about the situation/behavior/concern you have brought up.

- *“What are you thinking/feeling about the situation?”*
- *“What’s your perspective on this issue?”*
- As they sharing with you, turn off the static in your head and work at really trying to put yourself “in the other person’s shoes.” Try hard not to become reactive and defensive and ask yourself:
  - *“What is my partner really trying to convey to me by what he/she is saying to me and what does she/he want me to hear and understand?”*

**Step 5)** In order to insure that you understand the other person’s messages to you, ask questions, paraphrase to them what you just heard them say, and work to clarify their perspective on the issue. Give the other person time to let you know if you have understood their message accurately.

- *“This is my understanding of what you’re telling me...Is that what you’re really trying to say?”*
- *“Is there any more you want to say to me? Am I missing anything that you wanted me to hear about this issue?”*

**NOTE:** REPEAT STEPS 2-5 AS MANY TIMES AS NECESSARY TO MAKE SURE THAT BOTH OF YOU HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF EACH OTHER'S POSITION AND CAN ACCURATELY REPEAT BACK THE OTHER'S FEELINGS AND PERSPECTIVE.

- Look hard for the **“meaning”** or **“purpose”** this conflict represents for each one of you (i.e. why this issue is important to you, which can relate directly to your past experiences or issues). This is critical information to help you develop empathy for the other person’s position, which can then allow you to move away from “right-wrong” thinking about the current conflict. Use this as a time to really look for “common ground” so that you can come up with a plan that has the potential to work for both of you.

**Step 6)** Brainstorm together a variety of alternative ways to deal with the situation/ behavior/concern. This is a time for being creative. Try not to get hooked into a “right-wrong” stance (e.g. *“My plan is much better than yours,” “What a stupid idea,” “How can you suggest something like that?,”* or *“That’s just crazy”*). You may even find that this brainstorming can actually become “fun” for the two of you.

- *“How can we resolve this for now and into the future?”*
- *“What could we each do to make this situation better?”*
- *“Let’s think about all our potential options related to this issue.”*

**Step 7)** Then, take some uninterrupted time, after considering all the alternatives, to discuss what you would be willing to do and give in this situation.

- *“I would be willing to...”*
- Next, ask the other person if they would, in fact, be willing to do something different when this issue comes up again. Also, ask them if they would like to see you do something in addition to what you have already told them you would do previously. Finally, take some time to say what you would like from the other person regarding the problem the two of you have been discussing. Let the other person know what you heard them saying and ask that they do the same thing for you.
  - *“Are you willing to do anything different that we’ve talked about if this issue comes up again? If so, what would you be willing to do?”*
  - *“Would you like to see me do something in addition to what I just talked about doing?”*
  - *“If you would be willing, I would also like you to...”*
  - *“What do you hear me saying about what I’d be willing to do in the future?”*
  - *“This is what I hear you telling me about what you’d be willing to do.”*

**Step 8)** This may lead to a compromise, where you each agree to do something different to make the situation better (the more “common ground” you found above, the more likely this is to happen). It might lead to “agreeing to disagree” about the issue and you may want to talk about bringing it up again at a later time. In any case, if you have gotten to this point, in the process, give yourself and the other person credit for listening and really hearing one another and for dealing respectfully with the conflict that has arisen.

- *“OK, I’ll do what I’ve agreed to do and you do what you’ve agreed to do the next time this issue comes up.”*

- *“It looks like we just disagree on this. How about talking with me about it again in a couple of weeks?”*
- *“Thanks for talking with me and working on this together. I really like the way we did it.”*

**Step 9)** If you are unable to accept or feel at all comfortable with what the two of you have discussed, let the other person know what you plan to do to take care of yourself if and when the issue comes up again. This leaves you with the **ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY** for dealing with the issue and your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about it. Try to make sure that your taking care of yourself is not just another strategy to punish or “get even” with the other person for not giving you exactly what you wanted or expected and for not being able to get them to agree with you.

- *“I just don’t feel very good about what we’ve discussed and decided. If this situation comes up again, what I want to do to take care of myself and our relationship is...”*

**Step 10)** If you do feel comfortable with what has been discussed, try it out for a period of time. However, be sure to set up an opportunity in the future to evaluate how you are feeling about what the two of you have decided. Use this time as a chance to re-negotiate the issue if the need arises and the situation/behavior/concern continues to be a problem for you. If you both feel good about how things have changed, take some time to celebrate your effective problem-solving efforts. This need to celebrate successful conflict resolution often gets forgotten in the busyness of everyday life. Successful conflict resolution is part of the “glue” that can strengthen your relationship as you move forward in your lives together (i.e. it can give you the clear sense that you are “teammates” and “partners” in addressing the issues that will undoubtedly arise in your life together).

- *“All right, let’s try this for a month and then get back together to talk about how it’s going for each of us.”*