

Relationships

CONFLICT

MANAGEMENT



The bad news: conflict is inevitable.

You will always
have different
personalities, needs,
views and wishes.

The good news:
It can be done
constructively
(believe it or not).



Assertion:

Free to choose your response

Charlie comes home from work angry after a bad day. Pam is watching TV while she does some ironing and he blurts out, "It must be nice to sit and watch TV all day!" Pam is left with three choices:

1. Aggression (*I win, you lose*)

"Pity your mother didn't teach you manners. Go yell at her. You've finished work, but I'll still be here at 10 pm. Does your majesty want dinner?" She feels justified saying this, but the result will be war.

Aggression can be:

- Verbal. "You should", "You never", "You make me", plus criticism, sarcasm, threats, put-downs
- Non-verbal. The silent treatment, cold or mocking expressions, physical violence
- Passive. Little paybacks that seem innocent, but are actually getting back at the other; passive aggression is a sneaky attempt to get power
- Displaced. Aimed at the wrong person or time; for example, your boss annoys you so you yell at your wife

Aggression is the attempt to be superior and demand more rights. Though you think it will make you win and them lose, in fact you usually both lose. It shows little respect for the other person—unless they respond appropriately they may turn into a doormat or a warrior. And surprisingly, it reveals that you have little respect for yourself, because you obviously are not confident of your ability to get what you need without fighting dirty. But you are a much-loved child of God. And so is the other person.

2. Submission (*I lose, you win*)

Pam could keep quiet, roll her eyes and play victim. "OK, I'm sorry." (While thinking, *You rat!*)

Submission is acting like they are superior and have more rights than you. This can seem very peace-loving and saintly, but in fact it allows the person to keep offending and turns you into a rumbling volcano of resentment and fear that will eventually blow. It can cause stress symptoms (headaches, loss of sexual desire, depression, drinking or drugging). Submission may look friendly, but the friendship is superficial because people do not see what you feel or who you are. People submit because of low self-esteem. ("I'm not as good/educated/rich/extroverted/old/good-looking as you", "The real me is not worth liking.") Remember God made you and values you.

3. Assertion (*I win, you win*)

Assertion is acting as an equal, as though both of you deserve respect and rights. In an angry situation, Pam might first choose a soft answer. "Hi honey, sounds like you've had a rough day." She is acknowledging his emotion, but refusing to take it onto herself—understanding his problem but refusing to make it hers. Charlie is likely to feel understood and appreciated, and her kindness may make him want to give the same in return. He may not instantly smile and shed his anger, but at least she has not made things worse.

If he does not apologise or change his attitude, she may need to speak to him assertively—choosing her moment. "Honey, when you are sarcastic at me, I feel hurt and angry. I'd like you please to ask questions before you shoot." Notice she is not attacking him or talking about his problem. She is saying she has a problem of feeling hurt and angry, and asking for his help to deal with it.

There is:

- responsibility for her own feelings. (Not “You make me angry”.)
She speaks for herself
- no blaming (“Can’t you grow up and take responsibility for your own emotions?”)
- no name-calling (“You big grump.”)
- no demanding
- a clear statement of her needs and feelings, because they matter
- no cowering or false self-blame
- respect for his feelings
- no hard face, no harsh voice and body language that matches
- a chance for him to reply and be listened to

Assertiveness builds the self-esteem and respect of both parties. It makes for honest, open relationships without fear and a loving goodwill that tries to meet everyone’s needs. Of course it is not easy to learn or practise. It requires self-understanding and self-discipline not to just follow your hurt, angry feelings. But the old proverb says, “Whoever rules his own spirit is stronger than the mighty.”¹

What if you don’t sort out conflict?

Any marriage counsellor will tell you about the clients who come in totally surprised that the marriage blew apart after half a dozen years. “Everything seemed fine,” they say. Often that is related to bottling up conflict, which is unhealthy in the long-term.

Here are some possible results:

- **Distance:** If you pull away for a breather, fine. But years of hiding your feelings can put you on another planet emotionally. One partner blunders on, never knowing what is wrong.
- **Numb feelings:** You want to keep the peace, but if you keep giving in and repressing your hurt and angry emotions, you will be festering underneath. Eventually you may become practised at ignoring your emotions.

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“ASSERTIVENESS BUILDS
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- **Someone else:** Having an affair, complaining to your sympathetic parents or unburdening to the children until they take your side—all of these are ways of letting someone in closer than your partner. These can be ways of taking revenge and comforting yourself, but they are short-term, cop-out “solutions” that only worsen your problem. They also damage someone else—potentially putting hurt, confusion and guilt on your lover, stressing your parents and darkening your children’s view of love.
- **The suffering saint:** When there is conflict, you can play the poor, innocent martyr in an attempt to get sympathy and control. It is false humility—you are really trying to one-up your partner and show anyone who’ll listen that you’re better.

What you need is a frank discussion of your issues. Even if you don’t assert perfectly or manage the conflict brilliantly, and there are some hot words and emotional turbulence, you can always apologise (though don’t back down from your points), and at least you have the issues out on the table. When you both cool down and have time to think, you can discuss them rationally, with the help of a counsellor if necessary.



Tips on dealing with conflict

1. *Define the issue—and stick to it*

Don’t bring up every past grievance just to score points and prove they really are an idiot. Minimise upset by sticking to the point.

2. *Speak for yourself*

Don’t try to put your feelings on someone else or spread blame for your actions.

For example, saying “You’re making me so angry” is manipulation. Saying “I’m feeling so angry” (in a way that doesn’t blame or threaten them) is fair.

3. *Use paraphrasing*

Check that you have understood rather than assumed. It may feel artificial and seem like a waste of time, but it helps them to feel you’ve at least heard and acknowledged what they’ve said, even if you go on to disagree.

4. *Open them up, don’t shut them up*

You have a choice. Do you want your partner to feel safe enough to tell you what is really going on and what they need? If so, keep calm, be quiet when they need time to think and listen respectfully till they finish. Or do you want to close them down, suppress their opinion and pretend it will all go away? If so, shout, turn on tears, bully, infer they’re silly, threaten, walk out and jump into debate before they finish.

5. *No fouls*

Admit it: when you are hurt and angry, there is satisfaction in upsetting the other person, especially if you can do it with seeming innocence, by “accidentally” hitting sensitive points. But if they hit back, the cycle will go on and on. Perhaps you will have to be the first one to inject some respect and goodwill into the situation. This will not make you look weak—it will win you credibility and trust. If you want a win-win, what you really need is a calm partner who is not about to take revenge on you. If you do foul, apologise and stop.

6. *Stop before you blow*

If the discussion is getting really heated and irrational and there's about to be serious hurt (verbally or physically), take a time-out. Agree on this beforehand so it doesn't look like a walk-out tactic.

7. *Be well rested*

Conflict takes a lot of energy, so take a break before fatigue takes away your clear thinking and emotional balance. Sure, the old proverb says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger"², and it's wise to sort out conflicts and make up before bedtime. But that doesn't mean you must sort it out before you can sleep. Who thinks clearly at 3 am after five hours of courtroom drama in the bedroom? If you agree to continue later, you'll be amazed how morning light can bring optimism and a willingness to drop petty issues.

8. *Give them wins*

If you give one, you're more likely to get one. Obviously you should not compromise on your core issues, but try to give them some wins. Remember that you do love this person and want to give them what they need!

9. *Try to think rationally*

Separate that from what you feel. Listen to your emotions, but don't just react to them.

10. *Threats and aggression*

These may seem powerful, but they make your partner feel threatened and end up escalating the conflict. Strong people don't need to threaten.

11. *Assess if there is an underlying issue*

For example: Jane buys a little black dress for a party. Andy blows up, criticising the dress out of all proportion. Jane does not retaliate, but keeps calm and listens quietly. Eventually Andy feels safe enough to say that when other men pay attention to Jane he feels that he is not attractive enough to keep her love. He has never seen it this clearly before and apologises for his blow-up. Jane shows him she loves him deeply. Andy says she looks gorgeous in the dress. (If only all conflict ended like this—with greater understanding.)

12. *Build the emotional environment*

Conflict is so much less threatening when there is general goodwill in the marriage, when each partner feels valued and secure, and your "love tank" is full. (That is, each partner's emotional need for love and acceptance is regularly met.) When you know you're loved, a difference of opinion provides a valued second opinion and a chance to understand another interesting person. But when you feel a bit insecure and second-rate, every difference seems to mean you are strange and your needs may not be met.

13. *Build hope*

Sometimes conflict can be so discouraging and hurtful that you wonder if you'll ever get out the other side. You'll be amazed at the great effect of a comment like, "I know we're angry now, but I really do love you and I want to give you what you need."

The roots of anger

If you've seen people become totally irrational in a conflict, you know that it's all about feelings. But what feelings? People will tell you that in conflict there's no other emotion but anger. But anger is not a primary emotion. It is always a response to fear or hurt, you may push those emotions down so quickly that you don't even feel them. (Men often feel fear, pain or sadness, but express these as anger because that is seen as being macho and OK.) In fact, anger is caused by two primary emotions: fear and hurt. In his realistic book *Dealing With Anger*, Frank Donovan describes how to help people look at their recent angry episodes and ask exactly what they felt—and how that linked to their past hurts and fears. He looks through past experiences to see what emotional fuel might be driving the anger, those "unexpressed, hidden, disowned but accumulated experiences of pain and fear". This throws up a list of pains and fears that can then be dealt with.

Fear, for example, of being abandoned, shamed, helpless, threatened, harmed, made to look silly and so on.

How do you deal with fear? You need:

1. **Understanding** both of yourself (why you feel that way) and from someone else (acceptance of you and your feelings). Often, expressing your fear to a good listener can take away its power.
2. **A strategy** to deal with it. This is a solid and logical way of reassuring you.

Hurt, for example, from being criticised, mocked, ignored, abandones, bullied, controlled or disrespected in some way.

People try to solve it by:

- **Repressing**—denying it hurts and soldiering on (for example, becoming a workaholic), but this only buries pain, which can come out as depression.
- **Repaying**—starting a cycle of payback, or sometimes hitting back at the wrong people.
- **Recycling**—constantly chewing over old issues, repeating them in your futurelife, being trapped in them.
- **Releasing**—talking to someone you trust about what caused the pain.

What does a hurt person need?

1. **Understanding.** You need to be able to put into words what has hurt you, describe how it felt and what you understand about the situation, and to analyse it with your brain. You also need someone else to understand
2. **You need to forgive**

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FORGIVENESS, YOU ARE
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Forgiveness in the real world

When you are hurt, you have two options: revenge or forgiveness.

If you take revenge, the chances are they will too. You will hit back, they will hit you, you will . . . and you will be stuck in an unending cycle. You will be damaged, and carry an emotional load of worry, guilt, pain and strife. If you choose forgiveness, you are mainly helping yourself move beyond past pain. You also give them the chance to cut free of past mistakes and to reinvent themselves as they would like to be. Too airy-fairy? Christian author, Lewis Smedes breaks some myths that make forgiveness seem impossible.

Forgiveness is not:

- **Tolerating wrongs.** You don't have to be hurt again or excuse bad actions. In extreme cases you have a right to justice.
- **Forgetting.** As if you could remove part of your brain.
- **Ignoring your emotions.** They need to be guided with reason, but they are valuable.
- **Soft-headed thinking.** For example, saying, "Who am I to judge?" (You have every right, because you are someone with a conscience and with rights.) Or saying, "Maybe it's partly my fault." (And maybe not—they still chose and no-one forced them.)
- **Quick and easy.**

Forgiveness is:

- **Rediscovering** the humanity of the person who hurt us (realising they're not a monster, but a person with faults—like us).
- **Surrendering** your right to get even.
- **(Gradually) revising** our feelings towards them, focusing on the positive.

When you remember that we all make mistakes, you realise no relationship could last a week without forgiveness. If you have ever experienced forgiveness (by God or people), you know how powerful it is.



REFERENCES:

1. Proverbs 16:32, The Bible.
2. Ephesians 4:26, The Bible.

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