



Sailing in Turbulent Waters: How to Have Positive Conflict Resolution

This discussion will address what is commonly perceived as a very negative, unpleasant task; resolving conflict with people close to you. Conflict resolution can involve a parent, partner, sibling, child or friend. Disagreements happen to everyone and are handled in many ways, both positive and negative.

One of the most basic human needs is safety and when safety at home or in a relationship is compromised this is unhealthy for all involved. Effective communication can allow conflict to be resolved in ways that will validate and affirm each person's needs. In most cases, the commitment to understanding each other and identifying what each person needs, is a great starting point for improved communication. We are going to look at some practical ways to do this.

Most people don't tend to think of conflict in a positive light, so the ideas we are presenting will challenge you to rethink the concept of conflict. Some ways to describe conflict might be: differences of opinion, opposing views, arguments, power struggles, butting heads, disagreements, or blowups. Conflict can be anywhere on a scale of intensity, from mild and controlled to intense and even violent.

Disagreements can develop anywhere, in public places and in private. Having some healthy communication skills can make the difference between navigating through the crisis calmly or having an entire event or special day ruined. We probably can all think of a time this has happened and wish we could rewind the tape for a "do-over."

Conflict is inevitable, especially when emotions feel strong. The idea of resolving conflict can be daunting, and not something we typically think of as "positive." Imagine conflict like a sailboat that is being tossed back and forth by the heavy winds and strong waves of emotion. Managing those emotions and keeping that sailboat on course in turbulent conditions will take some skill and concentration to get safely to the intended destination.

This presentation will focus on helping you understand the factors involved when you are in conflict and provide some skills to communicate fairly. We will also address some of the sensitive aspects of conflict, when emotions flare up and behavior becomes hurtful or harmful. Our hope is to help you to stay on course and sail steady when the waters of conflict are rough.

Again, conflict can't be avoided, it's part of being human. Studies done by relationship expert Dr. John Gottman show us that in marital relationships, almost 70% of conflicts are the result of what he calls "perpetual problems." These are the hard to resolve differences that seem permanent and unfixable and tend to circle back around



repeatedly. This indicates that about 30% of relationship conflicts tend to be more easily solvable, so approximately 3 out of 10 times there may be an immediate or attainable solution.

The reality of this data shows that you are not going to fix every disagreement you have with your loved ones. Being able to identify which conflicts are especially complicated can alleviate lots of resentment at not being able to find immediate, permanent solutions. Complex conflicts may require long term negotiation and compromise.

Consider for example, if one person in a household prefers all organic foods and another person enjoys junk food. This can create challenges around meal planning and is the kind of disagreement that will definitely not be solved in one pizza and chips session! Food is just one topic that can be a great divider as much as it can bring people together, and when people believe passionately that their way is the right way, finding the middle ground can be difficult. Some of the “perpetual” types of differences or conflicts can involve finances, child rearing philosophies, lifestyles and career priorities. These conflicts are going to require some patience, persistence and most of all understanding.

One important consideration when there is conflict involving a military Veteran is to be aware of the differences between civilian life and the military culture. This awareness makes it easier to understand differences in problem solving styles. Military training is very structured, there is always a chain of command, and it is designed to get and keep our service personnel ready for confronting the enemy, to instill confidence in the service member’s ability to defend themselves when under attack. Members of the military are taught to use various tools, mental and physical, to be successful in their mission. Veterans’ thinking skills are changed and adapted to the military standard, where the responsible person in charge gives orders for missions that are expected to be followed without question, discussion or emotion. The military standard is essential for maintaining order, consistency and predictability to keep those Service members safe and so everyone knows what to do in a given situation.

When military personnel have been in this culture for an extended time, the transition back into civilian life can be hard. They must now return to socially acceptable or civilian ways to achieve personal, family or community goals using language and emotions that may not have been used or encouraged during active duty. Ideally, U.S. civilian adult relationships are supposed to be more equal, unlike active-duty military. One Veteran described it this way, “there is a disconnect between the military way of doing things and the civilian way of doing things. The transition to civilian ways of doing things isn’t always easy to adapt to after experiencing the military way.”



Differences in cultural backgrounds are another consideration in understanding communication styles. While some cultures are loud and expressive as their norm, others are quiet and subdued. It can be quite a challenge to find some middle ground when people come from vastly different backgrounds and can't understand or relate to an unfamiliar culture. Loud and animated expression may be intimidating to someone that comes from a reserved, low-key upbringing, and may create misunderstandings if not addressed. These differences can cause some sparks to fly at times but trying to appreciate and understand each other's differences can help to bridge the gaps that are created.

Another factor that can contribute to conflict arising is when there are changes or transitions in relationships. In intimate relationships there is often a honeymoon phase, in which each person is showing their best side, but over time differences may become more apparent and conflict may arise as a result. In other types of close relationships, sickness or life changes can introduce stressors that strain communication in new ways and may require finding some new communication skills or tactics.

Let's look closer at some of the misunderstood terms associated with conflict as they relate to intensity of expression and behavior. Arguing, for example, is expressing differences of opinion and is a protected right in the United States namely the freedom of speech. Arguing, while it may be unpleasant, is not emotional abuse. Speaking one's mind is not abuse, even if it hurts the other person to hear what you are saying. Raising your voice is not necessarily abuse, it is something we all do at times, when circumstances cause powerful emotions like fear or anger to rise. By contrast, emotional yelling or shouting when used as a weapon to intimidate or control, is a form of abuse. Accusations, blaming, criticism, or contempt such as using demeaning or shaming language are all forms of emotional abuse. These forms of destructive communication patterns can erode the relationship over time.

You may find that your communication, in some conflicts, is effective but under certain circumstances, when emotions are intense, it can unravel becoming negative and destructive. Some warning signs of destructive communication are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and avoiding or evading the other person. These defensive patterns of communicating occur when someone may be trying to protect themselves from being hurt or when they are trying to avoid the distress they are receiving.

Physical abuse is when there is intentional, forceful uninvited physical or sexual contact which can cause bodily injury or trauma. Both emotional and physical abuse,



the result of intense emotions, are destructive to both individuals and their relationship bond. Sometimes the person who engages in a destructive pattern of behavior may overcompensate with kind gestures to try to regain trust and keep the offended person in the relationship. Despite these gestures, after the fact, the destructive behaviors still wear away at the relationship bond.

What contributes to relationship conflicts that are acted out in this destructive way? There are probably several experiences that happened leading up to the present conflict, and there are often patterns of thinking and behaving that developed over time, frequently going all the way back to childhood. It can be eye opening to learn about each person's childhood and their family dynamics as these patterns of relating to one another are often repeated until they are understood. Understanding these influences can shed light on present behavior. It can be important to realize that that these patterns of behavior are not going to be suddenly undone or fixed without some effort or support.

There are usually multiple factors that contribute to someone becoming violent. Growing up in an environment where violence is witnessed or experienced may result in a person never having learned how to manage emotions or upsets without acting out strong feelings. Some people may never have learned how to calm and control themselves when feeling upset. They may be fearful or insecure about losing their relationship and may resort to violence, to maintain control over the other person so they don't leave them. Other factors that can also contribute to violence are the presence of drugs or alcohol, altering judgement and lowering inhibitions about restraining physical aggression. Also, untreated mental illness, past unresolved experiences with abuse or trauma, a lack of supportive relationships, or isolation can make someone more vulnerable to acting out aggressively.

The VA Intimate Partner Violence Program reports research suggesting that there is a higher potential for aggression and intimate partner violence with Veteran populations than in the general civilian population. There are also higher than usual instances of Veterans having experienced childhood trauma which if unresolved can result in acting out relational patterns in their adult life. When emotions heighten in the heat of an argument, some people become volatile and act out their differences with destructive behaviors. This can result in a disagreement quickly getting out of control if guidelines and ground rules in relationships are not carefully talked through together.



If you have trouble managing your feelings of anger without acting out violently, there is help available to change this pattern. There are strategies that you can learn, or people you can reach out to for support to stop or improve this pattern. If you are the person acting out or if you are on the receiving end of this behavior, getting help for yourself or your loved one can make a difference.

When violence or physical aggression is present or threatened, make it your business to take immediate action and take the necessary steps to restore safety. If there are injuries after a physical altercation, such as bruises, cuts, broken bones or signs of a brain injury like dizziness or forgetfulness do not delay. Get help and seek safety.

There are many resources available such as talking to your doctor or a close friend, calling the Veterans Crisis Line or National Domestic Violence Hotline which are available 24 hours a day. Sometimes it is helpful to request counseling through VA Behavioral Health or a Vet Center. The VA offers interventions for Veterans who use or are at risk of using Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and each VA medical center has an IPV Coordinator available if assistance is needed.

If steps are taken to interrupt unhealthy communication styles and replace them with more effective communication habits and skills, conflicts might not escalate to the level of becoming hurtful or abusive. If you need help getting to a healthy place in your relationship interactions, reach out for some help.

Now let's talk about some other strategies that you may consider when trying to navigate conflict in relationships. When you notice voices start getting loud, that is the time to take a break, or a time out, and get some space until feelings settle down. Angry communication doesn't serve anyone well. It's better to agree in advance that you will walk away from each other and take the time to let the adrenaline diminish. The front part of the brain shuts down when the body is pumping adrenaline, and this does not allow the most effective communication to take place. Take time to do some



focused breathing, cool down and maybe walk it off. For some people, 20 minutes is enough, but others may require more time than that.

A key part of this strategy is to negotiate a time to reconnect when you are calm. Be careful not to use this time apart to distance yourself as a punishment to the person you are upset with. Don't leave the other person wondering when you might reconnect to resolve things. The goal is to come back together when all parties are clear headed, sober and calm, to repair your bond and trust through careful communications.

If either of you tends to shut down into silence when conflict arises it may be helpful to take a step back and try to identify what is going on. There may be many reasons someone shuts down. Are you or the other person so flooded with emotion that you or they are unable to continue talking? Is shutting down an attempt to buy time to think, cool down and regain your emotional balance? Is the silence a power play intended to exert influence or gain control of the other person? Maybe shutting down or becoming silent is because you feel the other person doesn't care or doesn't want to hear what you have to say.

These behaviors and feelings can indicate feeling overwhelmed or powerless. It can take some courage to be open and share these feelings. Honest communication is most rewarding when everyone feels there is room to speak and trusts that they are being heard. So, it is important to try to calm yourself if you are flooded with feelings and to make a time and space for each person to have their voice heard.

You may realize that you have certain topics or situations that may cause you to get upset and certain topics that can cause conflict in your relationships. It can help to identify these triggers or topics that tend to escalate your emotions and set you off. Can you think of a time recently that someone pushed your buttons, and triggered you to react strongly? Maybe it was your kids, maybe it was a family member or your partner. How did you react? What was your physical state? Did you feel your heart rate speeding up, your face getting warm, your neck and shoulders getting tense? Did you get completely caught up in the conflict, or were you able to take ownership of your contribution in the situation, recognize what was happening and "stay the course," remaining calm?

Recognizing your emotional and physical response is the first step in managing reactions to your personal triggers. Once you know your triggers, you can avoid getting trapped in cycles that repeat those unwanted, negative results. For example, if you know that the first week of the month is when the bills are due, and this is a stressful time for you, try not to engage in discussions about money that week. If someone is pressing you for an increase in their allowance or wanting to buy a new vehicle, suggest



that you tackle that topic next week or at an agreed upon time. This kind of planning can help you strategize together to better manage those known triggers.

Effective communication during conflict works better when you begin with a softened start in which you start by relating your concerns in a kind, respectful manner or you assume the person didn't have any negative intentions. When you start to address something that may be difficult for the other person to hear it can help them not get so defensive depending on how you approach them. For example, a soft start up may sound like, "I am sure you didn't intend to hurt me when you forgot our anniversary, but I felt sad when you forgot" or "I appreciate how much stress you have been under but when you talked to me that way, I felt hurt". Find a way to start out on a positive note or assuming positive intentions of the other person so the message you send will be easier to take in.

Listening to the other person is one of the most critical skills needed when trying to resolve any conflict. When both of you are listening to each other and hearing what the other person thinks and feels from their point of view, this can calm even the most turbulent waters. Ask yourself, "How well do I listen to my partner?"

Do you tend to "wander off" mentally when listening to the other person? Try engaging more with a clarifying statement such as, "Let me be sure I understand you, I heard you saying that..." and then relay your understanding. Do you mentally jump ahead while your partner is talking, preparing what you will say next? This may cause you to miss the deeper meaning they are trying to share with you. Do you try to show you are listening by finishing their sentence for them? While you may have good intentions for this and want to show that you understand what they are saying, this can come across as shutting them down or cutting them off, unless they are verbally or mentally challenged and can't form the thought they need.

Listening with the intention of really trying to understand the other person and where they are coming from can be healing in conflicts. When you are caught up in your feelings and making your point, you aren't taking the other person's point of view into consideration. This can create a barrier that is difficult to bridge. Even if you disagree with the other person, if you can open your mind to consider their point of view, it will go a long way towards softening the conflict and bringing you closer. It can be difficult to listen in this way, but it can be powerful.

One option to consider when wanting to have fewer disagreements is to learn to "pick your battles" wisely, focusing on those issues that are critical for you to take a stand. Sometimes you may need to accept some of those differences that may not be easily changed. You may focus on what is negative and need to change your attitude or perspective. It's easy when you are stressed to get caught up in being critical and you may need to shift your focus on looking for the positive. A positive outcome to solving differences is that it can build on and strengthen your bond. When you each



take the time and make the effort to listen closely, respect the other person's perspective, agree to disagree sometimes, and take a break if things start to get heated, these are all ways to draw closer instead of pulling you both apart. These strategies allow trust to grow, and they create a feeling of safety rather than anger, anxiety or fear.

Sometimes the best that you can do is to share your thoughts, feelings, and opinion respectfully. Differences don't always get resolved beyond each person hearing the other out. Understanding and being open minded enough to compromise or to allow your perspective to be influenced by the other person is not easy but can make the difference between a healthy relationship and a continually strained one. Ask yourself are you stubbornly holding onto your position or are you listening and putting yourself in their shoes for better understanding and compromise to occur? Agree to consider or accept the other person's suggestions or ideas on a trial basis, maybe for a week or month. You may be surprised by the insight, wisdom and knowledge that can be exchanged by exploring new communication skills. Let them know they matter and respectfully consider what they say.

If you find that you are stuck and communication is strained, try to find some common ground. For example, find something you both agree on and then set an attainable goal. A couple may agree that you both want a vacation someday in a warm place. However, you may want it on land, and they may want it on water. Is there something that can satisfy both wants? By starting with something you have in common, it opens possibilities for compromise.

How you communicate your upset with someone also plays a role in the conflict escalating or resolving. Simply saying what is on your mind and sharing from your personal point of view may be easier for someone else to receive than if you confront someone saying, "You did this, or you didn't do that." Speaking from your own perspective using an "I statement" takes the conversation out of attack mode. It allows the other person to clearly hear what is on your mind, reducing the chance of them getting defensive. Most people do not enjoy having their mistakes pointed out or being told how to live their lives but "I Statements" can focus on your feelings, not on accusations.

Communicating with compassion and respecting the other person can keep conflict and defensiveness from arising in the first place. Using the "I statement" approach, is to identify the factual details of what happened, such as "When you didn't notice all the work I did in the yard", then describe what you are feeling with one word, "I felt sad, or disappointed, or unimportant." Then follow that with identifying what you need. "It would mean a lot to me if you could give me some positive words about all the work I got done." So instead of blasting the person with "you never notice my work", you would say, "When you didn't notice the work I did in the yard, I was disappointed, I wish you would give me some positive feedback about all I got done." This approach is



much less likely to make the other person feel defensive, because you are talking about your feelings and what you need.

As we mentioned earlier, it is difficult to think straight when the adrenaline gets going, so try to reduce your stress level before talking. The environment can play a key role in having a productive talk, so try to control noise levels, and pick an appropriate time and a good place, with minimal distractions. Some ideas may include car rides, going for a walk, waiting until after the kids are asleep, or even making an appointment with each other at a favorite coffee shop or park. Planning ahead to allow for appropriate privacy may take a little effort but could yield much better results.

Also, getting to the root of what each person needs in the disagreement will be helpful in resolving it in a way that builds better understanding and can strengthen the bond between you. For example, if you are arguing about what kind of vacation to take, step back and ask, “does one of us need some adventure?” or, “why is the person opposed to a quiet camping trip or stay-cation?”, or planning a celebration, is one person determined to include lots of people while the other person wants to keep it small and uncomplicated due to fear of anxiety? Talking about what each person needs when there are opposing views, is a way to look for what each person needs or what might be fueling conflict.

One way to invite more information and understanding of the other persons perspective is to ask them open questions. Open questions will provide the person a chance to explain themselves further and can open the conversation if it is hard to get talking. An example of an open question might be, “What are you thinking or feeling about this?” or “Can you describe your point of view a bit more?” Open questions give you more information about where the person is coming from. Avoid closed questions that require only a yes or no answer such as “Are you upset?” instead ask, “Can you tell me about what is upsetting you?” Notice the contrast in how those examples may shape a conversation.

Another open communication skill to consider is to set some basic ground rules in advance, before disagreements start, when all parties are calm, clear headed and sober. Maybe set a specific time to talk, after a meal or a walk. If you agree in advance that each person will give the other their full attention, it can be good practice for getting used to new ways to be heard and feel valued. Turn the phones off or leave them in another room to reduce distraction. Try to get to know each other better through this process.

Making time for one another to build those relationship bonds can be so important when looking to strengthen relationships. Relationships can weather the storms of conflict so much better when they build on the bond outside of the conflict. Phones, computers and electronics, even children can distract from having or making quality time together. Making time for each other, physically putting away the



distractions, sends the signal to your partner or family member that this is a priority to me, and you are important.

Spend positive time together. Try looking for daily opportunities to verbally connect and develop shared moments or activities that bring you together outside of conflict. Laugh together, make eye contact, share a dream or a goal. It helps to build relationship bonds that can withstand conflict when you notice things your partner or family member has done right. Say things like, “I liked the way you did that project today,” or “It’s so good to see you smile and enjoy talking with the neighbor.”

Another way to get to know each other and discover how your communication styles developed is to ask each other something like, “When you were a kid, how did you let people know how you felt or what you needed? Did you get listened to or did you get told to stop feeling that way or be quiet?” Discuss how you talked about or acted out your upsets or disagreements as a child and discuss how people responded to you. Did tantrums work, or did silent sulking? This kind of question can give insight into the other person’s childhood development that formed how they communicate now.

Family meetings are a terrific way to develop solid communication skills when there are children in the household. These routine group meetings can be helpful in setting good examples for children to model. Try to model the art of effective communication by having regular, family meetings where everyone has a chance to add something to the discussion. Agree to ground rules such as: only one person speaks until they are finished with no interruptions, or using an object, seashell to designate who “has the floor.” This can minimize confusion and help kids learn how to take turns respectfully listening and speaking. Using an agenda or outline can help to keep things on track. Summarizing and clarifying decisions made on such topics as family vacations, chores or solving disagreements, will help everyone walk away feeling that they were part of a process that brings you together, like a team.

One quality that can have a positive impact on developing positive communication in resolving conflict is resiliency. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. Resilient people maintain a certain toughness in dealing with crisis and demonstrate a kind of “bounce back” factor. Some of the characteristics of resilience are optimism, a “can-do” attitude, self-control, a willingness to adapt, problem solving abilities, a support system of friends and/or family, high self-esteem, a sense of humor and self-awareness.

You may ask, what does this have to do with conflict resolution? Consider for a moment how resilient you are. Caregivers are constantly faced with changing schedules, needs, and challenges that can cause an average person to become overwhelmed. But caregivers have people relying on them, sometimes numerous people, and they must hold steady through those tough times. In other words, caregivers are exercising their resiliency muscles, probably without even realizing it.



Resiliency can be utilized in resolving conflict, using problem solving skills, believing in yourself, being willing to adapt and be flexible. Being able to use a sense of humor can be instrumental in turning a potential argument into a productive time of positive communication. It is resiliency that allows you to face the “unsolvable” issues of the day knowing that everyone has problems and one way or another they will get resolved.

Sometimes it is helpful to consider all the problems you have been able to solve in the past and allow yourself to move on. Researchers have identified one of the factors which predict resilience is building your inner strength before you are in crisis. Maintaining your balance in life, paying attention to what you need, having confidence in yourself, will help you manage the conflicts you face.

Resilience is evident when, even though you know you are faced with negatives or conflict you can keep your perspective and hold on to the positives and strengths at the same time. Resilience is knowing you can work through the struggles and see your way towards resolution. Resilience comes from not losing sight of the strengths or hope and focusing on the positives in the relationship. Studies show that successful and resilient couples build on strengths by regularly expressing appreciation and taking the time to notice and acknowledge the efforts their partner makes. Successful couples develop habits of positive interaction and make a conscious decision to turn toward their partner in times of stress, instead of turning away.

What does this look like in real life? Resilient couples can de-escalate a situation when things start to unravel, either taking a break to cool down and let the adrenaline dissipate, or by recognizing early that emotions are ramping up and then taking appropriate measures to call this out and eventually return for a calm and controlled discussion. Agree in advance to set a timer to take a break if voices start to raise or the tone turns defensive. If there are children in the house, stating, “the kids are home” as the signal that it is not the right time for the discussion. Children are affected by all that happens between adults and your example is influencing how they develop into communicators as they get older. You are building not only your own skills of resilience when you are managing stresses and conflicts well, but you are also building on the resilience your children have learned from your positive example.

Remember that we all communicate on different levels and from our own point of view every day. There are the factual exchanges, like who is picking up groceries, reading the bedtime stories, or putting gas in the car. Then there is the trading of everyday, “surface” information, like “how was your day?” But, in order to get to know the inner person, there must be an intentional seeking of deeper connecting and focused listening. This level of communication builds resilience and requires breaking down barriers to develop trust that can enhance relationships and intimacy. Make a commitment to listen and talk with each other on different levels.



VA recognizes that many Veterans and their loved ones need support with managing conflict and has developed tools and resources. The VA App Store offers AIMS, to help manage anger and irritability, as well as STAIR Coach, for help managing emotions, behavior and relationships. There is also Mindfulness Coach which provides exercises to improve emotional balance, help reduce stress, anxiety, and increase self-awareness. The VA Chaplain or a spiritual advisor can help as well, to offer guidance and support. Sometimes couples focus only on those permanent disagreements we mentioned earlier, and this prevents small successes with things that are changeable.

Some VA's have introduced a couples' retreat called the Warrior to Soul Mate Program, designed to help couples strengthen their relationship. The Veteran's primary care Social Worker can let you know what your options are if you feel that you need outside assistance. Working to build and strengthen relationships will benefit everyone, you, your partner and other family members, while reducing aggression and violence. There are additional resources on the handout that we provided in your email or at the VA caregiver website.

We've talked about a wide range of ideas to help make communication with your partner or family members more positive and productive. Take that time out to calm and de-escalate before approaching the discussion or set ground rules to calm down and come back together after you are calm. Use a positive approach when addressing your concern so the other person may be less apt to feel defensive.

Remember to listen with the intention of understanding from the other person's point of view. Share your point of view with respect and compassion. Speak using an "I statement," and ask open questions with the intention to open your understanding of the other person. Seek help if you are stuck in conflict or if you struggle to manage conflict without it becoming destructive. Make the time to build on the affection and strengths of your relationships so that they are resilient and able to weather the storms of conflict that are inevitable.

Positive conflict resolution is possible. We hope you have been inspired to try some of the techniques discussed and will practice the skills mentioned. As caregivers, we know you have great responsibility. You also have the opportunity to affect those in your caregiving world in a positive way. We want you to know that you are valued. We care about you and the Veterans that depend on you. Please let us know if you need additional support. The Caregiver Support Line is available to you Monday through



Friday 8am-10pm and Saturday 8am –5pm ET. We are just a phone call away. Thank you for all that you do!

VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274