



Now You're Talking

Practical ways to effectively manage conflict

By Ruth Koch, M.A., NCC

Can We Talk?

A woman went to see a divorce lawyer. Frantically, she said, "I must have a divorce from my husband immediately!"

The lawyer asked, "Is he beating you up?"

"No," the woman replied. "I get up before he does."

"Do you have grounds?" the lawyer asked.

"Yes, about five acres," she answered.

"I mean, do you have a grudge?" the lawyer questioned.

"No, just a carport."

Exasperated, the attorney demanded, "Madam, why do you want a divorce from your husband?"

"Because it is impossible to communicate with that man!"

That lady might have been talking, but she certainly wasn't communicating!

Interesting, isn't it, how each of us can hear and understand things differently?

And isn't it interesting that we are so blind to our own faults, unaware of our limitations and what we do that contributes to our problems with others?

Often, it's hard to understand conflict and disagreement. Perhaps the way we see a certain problem, things are pretty simple and the solution is obvious. But the other people in our lives may see that same problem differently. Sometimes we become frustrated and angry. "Why does this have to be so hard?" we may ask ourselves.

Sometimes we say things we don't mean.

Sometimes we are genuinely confused about what is happening in our relationships and in our families.

Listen to Helen:

"I don't know what goes wrong. All I do is tell Charlie that I'm tired from working all day and that the kids need more help with their school work or how not paying the bills on time really makes me scared.

"Then he just gets mad and blows up and starts telling me how hard he works and that I spend too much money and that I don't help the kids enough. "Then I get mad and yell back and everything seems to get worse from there.

"I think we're both pretty worried about the bills and the kids and we just kind of blow off steam when we argue. The trouble is, sometimes we say things we don't mean and then it's hard to forget that."

"Lately we've been trying not to argue too much, but now we just have a lot of silence and I really hate that. I think I hate that more than arguing.

"I think Charlie kind of likes the silence because he really hates conflict. I don't like conflict either, but I feel so alone and so scared when we don't talk to each other."

Let's Talk About Conflict

Charlie and Helen's arguments aren't really so unusual, are they?

Every marriage, every family, and every relationship has conflict. Hassles and disagreements are just part of living together and being involved in each others' lives. And when things like job worries, money problems or the kids' school problems raise the tension level, conflicts are inevitable.

Conflict could be a sign of a healthy relationship.

Sometimes families disagree about everyday things like which movie to see or who should help with the housework. While we don't like those arguments, it seems that we can still talk some things over. Every now and then we can actually get one of those everyday problems solved. That is really satisfying!

But sometimes family arguments are about big things like whether to stay married or about a family member's alcohol use or drug abuse. If you argue a lot about those really heavy issues, you'd probably benefit from talking to a professional counselor. To get in touch with a counselor, ask a trusted friend or a minister, or call a mental health center near you. Lots of people find the help they need when they admit they can't do it by themselves.

Let's Talk About Conflict As a Sign of Health

It may seem strange, but conflict and arguments about everyday things could actually be a sign of a healthy relationship. When you really care about each other, care about what other people think and what they're doing, you're bound to have some conflict. For instance, sometimes you want to give advice about how someone should handle a problem at work—and your advice might not be welcome.

Or, you offer an opinion about what your partner or child is doing or not doing—and your opinion might not be welcome. Being involved with each other and caring about each other can sometimes mean that you clash over what is the best thing to do.

When you risk telling your opinions and ideas, or risk sharing your dreams and plans, you also risk having someone disagree with them. Other people may try to offer what they think is a better idea or plan.

Disagreements and arguments don't feel very good at the time. You wish you didn't have to listen to anybody who resists your ideas or challenges your decisions. But isn't it comforting to know that someone cares enough to listen to you and to risk sharing a different viewpoint? Even if you don't like conflict, conflict can be a sign that you care and that others in your family care, too.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that conflict can have a good side, especially if you've seen the kind of destructive conflict that hurts people and leaves some pretty painful wounds. Lots of people have good reason to be scared of conflict.

Let's Talk About Being Scared

Do any of these fears sound familiar to you?

- “When my husband and I argue, I'm afraid I'll lose my temper and say something I'll be sorry for later.”
- “I just hate to quarrel with my daughter because I'm afraid it's going to damage our relationship.”
- “I'm afraid I'll make a fool out of myself and will just end up looking silly.”
- “My wife is so much better with words than I am and I'm afraid I can't really express what I want to say. I call it a “War of Words”—but she's got all the heavy artillery!”
- “When I was growing up I was always told, ‘Anyone who gets angry is a fool.’ I don't believe that now, but I still have a hard time admitting I'm angry and talking about it.”
- “A lot of people won't admit it, but I will. I want to win every argument. And I'll do whatever it takes to win. It scares me a lot to think of losing to someone else, anyone else, because then they would be in control.”
- “I saw my Dad physically abuse my Mom and I promised myself I'd never do that. But I'm not sure I can keep that promise, so I just say, ‘It's not worth it’ or ‘I don't care,’ and I walk away.”

Anger is a normal part of every human being.

- “My first wife just walked out in the middle of an argument and never came back. That just wiped me out. Now I get scared every time my girlfriend and I disagree, even if it's about something that's no big deal. Will she walk out on me someday, too?”

Many people feel pretty scared about conflict in their homes and families. Sometimes people deal with their fears by hiding themselves and their opinions and ideas. Now that's pretty safe! And it can be pretty lonely, too. They try to avoid conflict so they won't have to deal with it. But that is impossible to do, because just about every kind of relationship will have conflict at some time. A woman named Leslie had to struggle with another issue that hurt her communication:

“It hasn’t been easy for me to get over the belief that conflict is wrong. This notion must have been so deeply rooted in me that I find it surfacing even though I now know that it is how we handle conflict that can be wrong, and not the conflict itself.”

Perhaps you, too, learned as a child that anger and conflict are wrong. Maybe you saw a lot of uncontrolled anger and a lot of destructive conflict and promised yourself that you would always avoid conflict and never feel angry. That kind of promise made a lot of sense at the time, but as time went on you’ve probably found it impossible to keep such a promise.

It’s impossible to avoid all anger because anger is a normal part of every human being’s emotional make-up. Some people are surprised to learn that the Bible records that even Jesus became angry. So by itself, anger isn’t the problem—it’s how you ‘express’ the anger and how you ‘react’ to the hassles and aggravations of everyday life that can make anger a problem.

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For example:

The first step toward dealing with conflict is recognizing our own destructive communication habits.

- If your motto is “I don’t get mad, I get even,” you probably have lots of conflict in your life. Getting even doesn’t usually stop the conflict. In fact, getting even often just makes both people more determined to even the score.
- If you react to all of life’s dime-sized hassles with a \$10 shot of anger and emotion, you probably find yourself mad at just about everyone most of the time—and exhausted!
- If you have to name a Bad Guy, someone to blame for everything, each time something goes wrong at work or at home, you may find that a lot of people avoid you, just to stay off your Bad Guy list.
- If you just walk out of the room or the house whenever you get mad at somebody (or whenever somebody gets mad at you), you’ve probably got a lot of unfinished business with people, and maybe a lot of strained relationships.
- If you hold grudges against people who have hurt you and regularly remind them, “I can forgive, but I can’t forget,” you’re probably just about to burst with painful memories of injustice and hurt at the hands of others.

Those are painful and not very productive ways to deal with anger and conflict. You see people handling conflict like that everywhere: in our homes, among our friends, on television and in the movies. We have to admit that we even see this in ourselves. The first step toward dealing with conflict is recognizing our own destructive communication habits. As you will see, these destructive habits come quite naturally.

Let's Talk About What Comes Naturally

Some things that come naturally:

- Looking out for number one.
- Trying to win an argument no matter what the cost.
- Seeking revenge and getting even.
- Bickering, feuding, backbiting, and attacking.

Some call this behavior “the survival of the fittest.” Some call it “common sense.” Some call it the “law-of-the-jungle.” Some call it “self-preservation.” God calls it “sin.”

God knows that we try to turn every conflict to our own advantage, to do whatever it takes to win every argument, and to come out the winner of every squabble. God knows the strong desire we have to hurt people who hurt us first.

God knows that in our heart of hearts we have the capacity to betray the very people we love, to abandon the people who depend upon us and to devastate, demean, and humiliate people with our accusations. God knows that, left to ourselves, in the face of anger and conflict, we are capable of seriously hurting other people with our words. That's the bad news.

The good news is that God doesn't leave us alone to solve our communication problems.

God knows we need a change from the inside out, because even our best intentions don't make a lasting change. Those good intentions are like New Year's resolutions that we keep for a few days or weeks before we go back to our old hurtful, painful habits.

This is not what God wants. The Bible tells us that He created us to live in harmony with each other and with Him. We have placed ourselves in conflict with God, because we have rebelled against Him.

Let's Talk About God's Answer to Our Conflict

God makes changes that last. He has enough love to change us from the inside out. He has enough love to repair the damage inside and enough love to bring peace to our troubled, wounded hearts.

Jesus Christ is the proof of God's powerful love. Jesus is the Son of God, but He became a human being. He knows personally the pain of injustice and betrayal.

Jesus lived without ever sinning: when He was angry, He didn't lash out to hurt. When He was hurt, He didn't try to get even; and when He was falsely accused, He didn't make plans for revenge. In every conflict of His life (and there were plenty!) He was honest, respectful, and direct.

How could anybody live like that?

Jesus lived that way because He depended on the love of God, His Father. The same love and power that Jesus used to deal with conflicts and problems in His life are available to you. God wants to draw you into the circle of His love and give you the peace you so desire.

God gives us a fresh start, a second chance.

God doesn't want to give you just a temporary fix-it-up. God wants you to have a whole new life; new from the inside out. The Bible tells us that we don't have to be "good enough" or in anyway deserving of this wonderful gift of new life:

"But God showed how much He loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful. Even when we were God's enemies, He made peace with us ... Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by His Son's life." (Romans 5:8,10) (CEV).

The proof of God's love and peace is the death and resurrection of Jesus. God gives you His love and peace and erases the conflict between you and Him. It can change the way you deal with conflict because God gives you His kind of peace, not as the world gives peace, but a peace that comforts you when you're scared, or lonely, or when things are not peaceful.

God stands beside you as you look at the painful truth of how you may have handled conflict in the past, how you've hurt people, how you may have been committed to winning at any cost. God invites you to take responsibility for your wrong behavior. And God gives you the power to turn away from the sin that hurts you and the people you care about. God has forgiven that sin! God gives us a fresh start, a second chance.

Not only does God give you a new life now—confidence to deal with conflict and forgiveness when things don't go right—He wants an eternal new life for you! The death of Jesus Christ broke down the wall of sin that kept you from being friends with God. He made you God's friend. What good news that is!

Oh, you'll still have people problems, disagreements, conflict, and arguments— but you'll also have the love of God to comfort and change you. The people in your life will notice the difference. They'll see that you are a person who wants to work for peace.

Peace Talks

"I'd really like to change the way we handle disagreements in my family, but I don't think anybody else would go along with it. I kind of feel helpless to make any changes because I don't think my family wants to change the way we do things now—even the things that aren't working very well."

Maybe that's something you've thought once or twice yourself.

One person can make a difference!

When world leaders get together to talk about peace between their warring countries we call those discussions Peace Talks, because they are trying to make peace a reality in their countries.

You, too, can take a leadership role in helping your family learn to settle arguments and disagreements in a more peaceful way.

One person can make a difference! It is possible that the changes you make in the way you deal with conflict can start changes in the way your whole family deals with conflict. When one person makes a change, other people usually respond to the first change with their own changes.

Talking It Over

Because God has dealt with our conflict with Him we are able to manage our conflict with other people in positive ways.

Here are 18 helpful hints for building stronger relationships:

- 1. Absolutely no physical, verbal, or emotional abuse allowed!** Control your hands and your tongue. No physical violence and no sarcasm, put-downs, or insults.
- 2. Don't avoid talking about problems.** The problems won't go away by themselves and you'll only get more frustrated and upset.
- 3. Make an appointment to talk.** Agree on a time that is good for both of you—when neither of you is too tired, too rushed, or too worried about other matters.
- 4. Don't try to scare the other person.** No threats or rash statements, no promise to leave if you don't get your way. Scared people don't always think clearly, and you won't be able to work together for a solution.
- 5. Don't bring up the past.** Let the past pass. Talk about the here and now, and talk only about the current problem. If there are things from the past that need to be discussed, agree to write them down and make an appointment to talk another time.
- 6. Use "I" language, instead of "you" words.** People hear "you" words as accusation and blame and usually rush to defend themselves. If you want to talk about a problem, use "I" words such as "I think" or "I feel" and "I'd like to see this change."
- 7. Give the other person a chance to respond—and don't interrupt!** Listen, really listen! Allow some silence so that you both have time to think about what the other person has said. Listen until you can hear the other person's meaning. Let the other person finish the sentence and the paragraph, even if you don't agree or if you know for sure the person is wrong. Because when you interrupt, you'll only invite more anger.
- 8. No "dirty tricks" allowed!** People who use dirty tricks try to win, no matter what. Avoid sweeping generalizations using words like "always," "never," and "everybody." Don't apologize if you don't mean it ("OK, OK. I'm wrong. I'm always wrong. You're always right. Now are you happy?") Pay attention to your body language (no rolling your eyes, or looking out the window, or turning your back on your partner.) No dirty tricks allowed!
- 9. Don't walk out.** Agree to a "time out" if tempers get out of control.
- 10. Know when to quit.** Recognize mental and emotional overload and agree to another time to talk if necessary.
- 11. Some problems don't get completely solved with just one talk-through.** Sometimes you have to agree to talk about a problem in stages. The time in-between your talks can be valuable time to think about the other person's points and re-evaluate your own point of view.

12. **Some problems don't get solved.** You may have to agree to disagree about some things. Every relationship and every family has a few irreconcilable differences—problems that don't get solved no matter how hard we try. Focus on all the other things on which you do agree.
13. **The other person has a right to his own thoughts, feelings and opinions, and preferences.** Respect the fact that each human being is different—God planned it that way. Don't insist that the other person think and feel as you do.
14. **Be flexible.** Most problems have more than one solution. Find a solution on which you both can agree.
15. **Be truthful.** Explain your thoughts and feelings accurately and truthfully. Say it kindly.
16. **Don't drag in outsiders.** Don't repeat his mother's remarks about his father or your sister's opinion of his intelligence. And don't tell your friends the details of your disagreement. The information you share may leave your partner feeling exposed and vulnerable. And your partner may have a hard time trusting you in the future.
17. **Ask God to help you forgive.** God forgave our wrongs against Him because of Jesus. Remembering that you are both people for whom Jesus died gives you the power to forgive the wrongs someone else has done to you. Forgiving does not mean that the other person's actions are acceptable, forgiving means that you are not going to bring it up again and that you are going to move forward with the relationship.
18. **End your argument with some small sign of good will.** Not necessarily a super-grand sign of reconciliation or a big show of affection—just a glass of iced tea, an offer of a walk together, an ice cream cone—some small gesture that says, “We have a future together, and I'm glad.”

Learning to talk things over in a calm, constructive manner is an important way to build healthy relationships. It's great to be able to talk about a problem with someone you care about—and it feels great to be heard!

Let's Talk About Patience

We don't want you to get the idea that by following these steps everything will be perfect in your relationship, it won't. Even if you try to follow these steps there will still be times when you fall back into painful and unproductive habits.

A bumper sticker reads: “Christians Aren't Perfect, Just Forgiven.” Sadly, sometimes people get the idea that they have to be perfect all of the time before God will love them. We've already shown that God loves us in spite of our imperfections. But sometimes we wrestle with internal conflict. We want to do the right thing, but we always seem to do the wrong thing. A pastor named Paul wrote to some friends about his internal conflict:

Be patient with yourself and others.

“For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Who will rescue me? ... Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:19, 24, 25).

Paul had learned to be patient with himself because he had come to realize that God oftentimes changes people slowly.

When God makes you new from the inside out, you'll find that a lot of things start to change: Like the way you act when you're angry, and the way you talk to people who hurt you; and the way you handle family disputes and arguments. Remember—be patient with yourself and others.

Talking The Truth

Speak the truth in a spirit of love!

That's what Paul wrote to Christians many centuries ago. It's still good advice today.

When you honestly tell someone your thoughts and feelings, when you tell what you appreciate and what you'd like to see change, when you make the effort to hear the meaning and truth from another person, you can strengthen a weak relationship or make a good relationship even better.

That "spirit of love" doesn't come naturally. God helps you love—even when your partner is difficult, your children are a challenge, and your friend disappoints you.

You can depend on God for the love and the courage to talk through the conflicts and disagreements and problems of life. God loves you, and He loves your family. And God wants to help you live in peace.

And when you speak the truth in a spirit of love, you will find that—*Now You're Talking.*

Encouragement for dealing with conflict:

"A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated" (Proverbs 14:17).

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

"He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends" (Proverbs 17:9).

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven; a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,7).

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26).

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

"Shout for joy to the lord, all the earth. Worship the lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful songs.

Know that the lord is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.

Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise; give thanks to Him and praise His name.

For the lord is good and His love endures forever; His faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 100).

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