



Growing Through Facing Conflict

Bonnie Knox, Summit Clinician

SUMMIT CLINICIANS

Joyce Babb
M.S.W., L.C.S.W., B.C.D.

Sharon Beck
D.N.P., P.M.H.N.P.-B.C.,
L.C.S.W.

Beverly J. Burch
M.A., L.C.P.C.

Todd Cartmell
Psy.D.

Lisa Hopkins
N.C.C., L.C.P.C., C.A.D.C.,
P.C.G.C.

Bonnie Knox
M.Ed., L.C.P.C., C.A.D.C.

Anna Mackender
M.D.

Andrew C. Nichols
M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

Danielle Romano-Cihak
Psy.D.

Jeffrey L. Santee
Ph.D.

Daniel Wyma
M.D.

"If you won't acknowledge or engage in any conflict, your issues and problems have very little chance of getting solved."

— Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D.

MOST OF US HAVE BEEN IN situations where we would rather avoid/run/hide than engage in a disagreement or difficult situation. But if handled correctly, conflict can be healing and beneficial. When we don't express ourselves, we internalize our feelings, which negatively affects our bodies, minds, and energy levels. Avoiding conflict keeps us from releasing what's bothering us, so it starts to eat away at us. We end up not resolving what is wrong or bothering us. It takes a lot out of a person to hold onto unpleasant feelings instead of expressing them.

Three typical types of conflict avoiders are those who ignore the problem, those who change the subject, and those who shut down. Instead of trying to avoid conflict, you can learn how to face situations constructively, without letting things escalate into destructive arguments. Until they're addressed, the same issues will keep arising.

Why is it important to deal with conflict avoidance?

- 1 Emotional health.** If we avoid conflict, then we are essentially suppressing our emotions. By pushing down our feelings to avoid conflict, it is more than likely that they will surface

elsewhere as anxiety or anger and when you least expect it. Tensions can rise and impact other areas of your life when it is not appropriate for them to come out.

- 2 Avoidance can create fear.** Constantly avoiding conflict teaches the brain, in a negative way, that this is what is keeping us safe from unpleasant feelings. The problem is that by avoiding the conflict, we are only putting off what we need to do.

- 3 Missed opportunities.** Avoiding conflict means we are usually missing opportunities, not just for personal growth but in life, too; we can stunt our personal growth. Dealing with conflict is a chance for change and growth and stops us stagnating.

Here are some ways to overcome conflict avoidance:

- Ask yourself: what is the absolute worst that can happen if I confront this person or situation?
- Think about what's rational and what's irrational when considering approaching your conflict. See what

your mind is telling you, and see what your fear may be generating that could be irrational.

- Try approaching a small conflict first, then build up to larger ones.
- Use "I" language when confronting the person or conflict: "I'm feeling uncomfortable or upset about something that you did (or said) to me last week, and I'd like to talk through it." To maximize your chances of success, don't blame the other person, or pin it on them.
- Be clear on what you want: you're going to have so much more success if you know what you want, and clearly express that to the person you're talking to.
- Remember that people's feelings are their own! You're not responsible for their feelings or their reactions. If they indeed get upset with you, that's theirs and theirs alone.
- Be proud of yourself when you successfully confront a conflict situation or person.

If you respect yourself, and deal with your conflict, other people will respect you, too.

They may not always agree or like what you're saying, but you'll be confident enough and have the right tools to be a pro in dealing with conflict. ■

Bonnie Knox, LCPC, CADC, provides individual and family therapy to adolescents and adults. In addition to treating depression and anxiety disorders along with addictions, she specializes in offering EMDR services.



630.260.0606
www.summitclinical.com
1761 S. Naperville Road
Suite 200
Wheaton, IL 60189

Q&A

Q What is the key to healthy conflict resolution in relationships?

A First, let's be clear that it is normal, necessary, and inevitable to have some conflict in a relationship. But how conflicts are handled is critical. If handled in a relational manner, conflicts can lead to a deeper understanding and respect, but if handled with a win-lose attitude, conflicts can be destructive and divisive.

Healthy conflict resolution can occur when both partners look for the best solution for both, not just for themselves. You must be equally invested in your own and your partner's best interests. On the contrary, striving to get what you want while minimizing your partner's needs, or using fear and intimidation, can lead to resentment, alienation, and mistrust. Although you may win, the relationship loses in the long run.

So remember, hang in there and refrain from giving in or fighting to get only what you want. Instead, work toward a solution that is best for both of you. Focus on what you both can gain, not on what you could lose. That way, the relationship as well as both of you win. ■

Jeffrey L. Santee, PhD
Clinical Psychologist

Healthy Marriage, Healthy Life

ANYONE WHO HAS STRUGGLED in a marital relationship laden with conflict knows how emotionally exhausting it can be. Conversely, a strong marriage relationship with good communication skills and mutual support seems to buffer one against the rough places in life, increasing emotional resiliency in all aspects of life. It is common knowledge that married people have longer lifespans than single people. In a large study done in 2004, marital satisfaction was shown to be more important to life satisfaction than either work satisfaction or good health.

Most recently, intimate partner relationships have been strongly linked with each individual's physical and mental health. A review titled "Lovesick: How Couple's Relationships Influence Health", a meta-analysis done in 2014 by Robles et al., concluded that influences marriage partners had on each other's health were

as strong as effects of diet and exercise on health outcomes.

The "Lovesick" article goes on to describe recent research on intimate partner relationships and health. One important outcome of the research involved the link between poor marital relationship and depression. Unhappy marriage partners of either sex had a twenty-five-fold increase in symptoms severe enough to have a diagnosis of major depressive disorder, over partners reporting happy marriages. People who are clinically depressed have an increased inflammatory response, which has been linked with numerous chronic disorders, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, chronic pain, etc. In addition to higher risk for chronic illness, depressed individuals are less likely to exercise, eat nutritiously, and more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, which lead to other negative health outcomes.

So, in light of this research, what are a few things to do to ensure care for one's marriage?

- 1 Early intervention is important.** Often in the early stages of a relationship, patterns can be altered easily. It is more difficult as time goes on, and patterns of interaction become more ingrained. A few sessions with a good marital therapist can teach couples ways to manage conflict before long-term patterns get set.
- 2 Conflict can be healthy in a long-term relationship.** It is important to recognize each partner's individual history, and response to conflict learned in the family of origin, in order to alter unhealthy patterns.
- 3 Learn about, and understand your partner's love language,** in order for each individual to feel supported in the relationship. ■

Sharon Beck, DNP, PMHNP-BC, LCSW, is a nurse practitioner and therapist who sees both adults and adolescents for medications.

Say Goodbye to Sibling Conflict

YOU CAN GET YOUR KIDS AND family on the road to good habits for handling everyday conflict. I have already mentioned the key word: *habit*. Your kids naturally tend toward bad habits, as do we all. It is easier to impulsively shout than to carefully choose your words. But you can help them get started on the road toward good conflict resolution habits that can replace the bad ones.

Here is how you get started:

Step 1 > Start Having Family Meetings. Having regular family meetings communicates that your family is important. It is also where you will have some of your most fun family times and meaningful family discussions. Include a fun activity and a short time of meaningful discussion.

Step 2 > Decide what kind of family you all want to have.

The sentence to be completed is: "We want to have a family that..." Let everyone supply phrases that will complete that sentence until you have at least a half-dozen phrases that you all agree on. Possibilities include: is respectful, has fun, is close, loves and obeys God, listens to each other, talks respectfully, doesn't hurt each other, solves problems the right way, and so on.

Step 3 > Make it clear that hurtful behavior is a no-go.

Make it clear that it is never okay with you if anyone in your family (starting with yourself) hurts others with their words or actions. This is a big one—because your kids will be watching your example. Emphasize that hurtful words or actions (clearly define

these) will result in immediate negative consequences for those who choose them.

Step 4 > Think of respectful ways to solve everyday problems. Make a list of situations that result in sibling conflict and help your kids identify respectful things they can say or do to resolve these situations in a respectful way. Once you have a simple plan for a situation, practice it together so your kids see how it will work.

Continue to have regular family meetings, evaluate your plans and refine them as needed. Make sure you point out your kids' positive choices when you see them use their plans. As you continue this process, you will be building new positive family habits and getting rid of the old ones. ■

Todd Cartmell, PsyD, is a child psychologist and author of 8 Simple Tools for Raising Great Kids.

