

# Dealing Successfully with Conflict

*Healthy communication is based on the assumption that we all have the right to experience and express our feelings honestly in ways that respect others. Personal relationships become more genuine and satisfying when we share our honest reactions with others and allow them the freedom to do the same. Below are some helpful hints to assist you in expressing yourself appropriately.*

- 1. Be aware of what you're making things mean and check out your assumptions.** Intention and interpretation are rarely the same. For instance, just because you think someone was "inconsiderate" doesn't mean that the intention was to offend you, so recognize what you're making the behavior mean and if you can't let it go, check it out with other person. For instance, "When you leave dishes for that long, I make it to mean that you don't care about the rest of us or that you want us to do it for you. Are either of those accurate?"
- 2. Consider your timing.** Generally, feedback is most useful soon after the given behavior, depending of course on the person's readiness to hear it and your own emotional state. In any case, delaying for long periods of increases your frustration and leave the other person with the experience of you as dishonest.
- 3. Use "I" statements.** For example, use the statement "I am angry with you" rather than "You make me angry." This takes responsibility for the reaction rather than making the other person wrong. It increases the likelihood that your message will be heard rather than reacted to defensively.
- 4. Make statements based on observations rather than inferences.** Use what you actually *saw* or *heard* in the behavior of another person rather than what you "think" someone meant. For instance, "I notice that the dishes have been in the sink for a week" rather than "It's really rude of you to think we're going to clean up after you."
- 5. Describe your own reaction** rather than judging the other person's behavior. For instance, telling someone "I felt dominated when you \_\_\_\_\_" is a description of your reaction rather than a judgment. It informs the other person of what occurred for you from your perspective. On the other hand, telling someone, "you were being dominating" is an evaluative judgment of the other person's behavior; judgments lead to defensiveness, denial, and disagreement.
- 6. Stick to the facts.** The facts are external events plus your internal reactions to what happened. For instance, "Earlier when we were deciding our roles for the group project, I tried to share my opinion and you interrupted twice [external event]. I ended up feeling frustrated and like we hadn't all contributed [personal reaction], and I'm wondering what we could do about that." Facts keep you out of personal judgments such as "You're disrespectful," or "You don't care what anyone else has to say" which inevitably create conflict.
- 7. Paraphrase to ensure understanding.** One way to work towards resolution is to have each receiver rephrase the feedback he or she has received for accuracy. Try rephrasing both the content and the emotion of the sender. For

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instance, "What I get from what you said is that you don't like feeling as if you can't leave a dish in the sink overnight in your own home and that you also get irritated when I wash them for you. Is that right?"

- 8. Make direct statements about things the receiver can control.** People will inevitably be frustrated if they're criticized about things they can't control. For instance, telling someone "that's just like you to be late" after a tire blew out will create frustration!
- 9. Avoid ganging up.** Speak directly to the individual involved. Seeking out allies may relieve your distress temporarily, but it decreases the likelihood of actual resolution. Do your best to resist the temptation of negative gossip, and if you do speak to others about the situation, acknowledge that to the individual when the two of you speak. Ideally, speak with others about the situation only if you need guidance on how best to deal with it.
- 10. Make the conversation and the solution work for both parties.** Feedback can be destructive when it serves only your needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. Ask for the other person's viewpoint. When suggesting a solution, ask "Does that work for you?" or "What would work for you?" After all, if it doesn't work for both parties, it's not going to happen. This also means that if a proposed resolution doesn't work for you, you have to be responsible for saying so.
- 11. Get outside assistance if needed from a neutral third party.** If the parties involved are too emotionally triggered for discussions to be effective, consider pulling in a neutral third party to facilitate discussion. The UT Mediation and Facilitation Clinic can assist (471-1950).
- 12. Remember that conflict is a normal part of life and growth.** It's only a "negative" experience if you don't allow yourself your honest reactions or don't know how to communicate your needs and perspective to others. So, plan to become an expert communicator and practice expressing yourself on the little issues so they don't have to become big ones!

## Suggested Readings:

Robert E. Alberti and Michael Emmons, *Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living* (1995).

Theodore I. Rubin, *The Angry Book* (1998)