

Employee Assistance Program

Healthy Communication During Conflict

Disagreements are a normal part of life. We are not always going to see eye to eye with people. Ongoing conflict can be a sign of an underlying unmet need, so it is important to step back and ask yourself what is really at the core of some conflicts. A disagreement can be triggered by something trivial, like how your partner loads the dishwasher, when you have really been feeling disrespected and unvalued. If you can examine what is beneath the conflict, you can start to communicate about that unresolved issue or feeling, versus the seemingly surface level complaint.

You might say, why not avoid conflict all together? While it's important to choose your battles, expressing differences or disapproval is in fact a very healthy and necessary part of any relationship. It's the way we respond to and communicate disagreement that can determine whether we grow and further our relationships through conflict.

So how, in the midst of an argument with emotions running high, do you stay focused on using this as an opportunity to improve the relationship?

- **Stay calm.** Many of us have a fight or flight response to conflict that can automatically trigger stress and increase emotions. On top of that, we have all developed different approaches to handling conflict throughout our lives that may not mesh well with the other person's style. Staying centered and avoiding saying things you might regret later is important. It will help you recognize your authentic feelings in the moment and express them in a coherent and respectful way.
- **Listen respectfully.** Remain open and receptive to the other person so you don't make assumptions and miss what they are really trying to communicate. By doing this, you're also modeling the way you want to be heard when it's your turn. Each party has needs that should not be discounted.
- **There is no "winner" and "loser".** Prioritize the relationship. If you focus on coming out ahead, you will become defensive and come at conversation with your guard already up. This is a conversation to express unmet needs and could bring up strong emotions, but as much as you can, try to remain neutral.
- **Focus on this moment in time.** Try to let go of arguments from the past. There will always be things we can bring up from the past that will hurt our partners. You will be tempted to bring these moments up, but stay focused on the present. We can't repair things if we are always digging up the past.
- **Let some things go.** Consciously choose what is really worth bringing up. Ask yourself, is calling attention to this important? Maybe it is, or maybe lack of sleep or other issues have triggered you and the feeling will pass. If not, you could revisit at a later time if it's something that could fester.


If you find yourself in conflict with others more often than not, or would like to talk to a professional about improving your communication, consider contacting your Employee Assistance Program at the number below.

References

Jean Segal, Ph.D., Lawrence Robinson, and Melinda Smith. Conflict Resolution Skills, Last updated: June 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm>

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