

STRATEGIES AND SKILLS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Dr. E. Anthony Allen
MB, BS, MDiv, MRC Psych, DM (Psych)
Consultant Psychiatrist
Consultant in Whole Person Health
and Church-based Health Ministries

Conflict is inevitable and often when properly handled it can be useful. Nevertheless, unnecessary conflict is one of the greatest sources of stress in individuals, families, organizations, communities and in general relationships. Major weaknesses in highly conflicted relationships include a lack of: a) sharing responsibility, b) regard for the time of others, c) appropriate expressions of anger, d) respect, e) cooperative “win-win” solution seeking, and f) getting help for growth.

Below are some suggestions for useful behaviours to avoid such conflict. These are described for the different contexts of relating.

The avoidance of irresponsibility, disrespect and defensiveness opens the door for the other person, family, organization or community in a conflict to look at their role in contributing to it. Thus, both parties are now better able to engage in meaningful communication and problem solving.

You may find these guidelines useful in helping yourself and others make attempts toward change.

I. THE RUNNING OF THE HOME, ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNITY

Negative ways of working together in these areas can be a source of great frustration. These can be prevented by:

1. *Avoiding procrastination* in performing assignments.
2. *Sharing* in family, community and organizational tasks.
 - (a) by STICKING TO ARRANGEMENTS.
 - (b) by OFFERING HELP IN TIMES OF NEED.
3. Respecting the *property* of others. Do not “take” or “borrow”.
4. Respecting the *privacy* and *space* of others.

II. TIME

Abusing the time of others is a common source of stress. Help to prevent this in others by:

1. *Sticking to arrangements* ABOUT TIME.
2. *Respecting the time* of those who are helping us, i.e. NOT TO KEEP THEM WAITING.
3. *Informing* THE PERSON OR REPRESENTATIVE AHEAD OF THE DEADLINE IF SOMETHING UNEXPECTED HAS CAUSED A DELAY.
 - (b) if this is not possible EXPLAIN AND APOLOGIZE as soon as the person or representative is seen.
 - (c) Respect the possibility that THE PERSON OR REPRESENTATIVE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO WAIT.
4. *Planning ahead* in order to AVOID UNNECESSARY LAST MINUTE REQUESTS.

III. DEALING WITH ANGER

Anger is natural. In one to one discussions and in meetings, it is necessary to express one's concerns in a way that is *assertive, but not abusive*. This involves:

1. Avoiding Verbal Confrontation:

- (a) SHOUTING
- (b) SWEARING
- (c) INSULTING "putting down"
- (d) NAME CALLING, e.g. "stupid," "idiot," etc.
- (e) THREATENING
- (f) PHYSICAL CONTACT

2. Avoiding Physical Confrontation:

- (a) SHOVING
- (b) ARM TWISTING
- (c) "DRAPING UP" by the collar
- (d) HOLDING SOMEONE DOWN
- (e) PREVENTING THEM LEAVING THE ROOM
- (f) USING ANY OBJECT AS A WEAPON

3. Avoiding (a) SPEAKING ALOUD TO ONESELF within hearing range of the other person.
 (b) DISCUSSING SOMEONE ELSE AS IF THEY ARE NOT THERE IN THEIR PRESENCE.

4. Avoiding (a) INTERRUPTING in discussions or
 (b) RUSHING the other person
 i.e. waiting until the other person is through and *listening carefully*.

5. Avoid ARGUING JUST FOR THE SAKE IT but try to *discuss and come to an agreement* or *postpone the discussion* - one may win an argument, but lose a friend.

6. Avoiding HAVING DISCUSSIONS WHEN FEELING VERY UPSET or in a temper.

Keep checking yourself for physical sensations of anger, such as a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath and tightening muscles. Excuse yourself, leave the room or area and pick up the discussion later.

7. Avoiding HOLDING IN FEELINGS and UNNECESSARILY USING SILENCE AS A WEAPON. *Talk it out*, but with respect.

8. Avoiding **blame using "you statements"**. Use "I statements", such as "I feel hurt" rather than "you hurt me" or "you are too difficult". This allows for the possibility of admitting a misunderstanding or a weakness on one's own part. It will also encourage the other person to look for the same within themselves.

9. *Redirecting anger in non-destructive ways*

a) At an individual level

- 1. Sharing one's feelings with someone else
- 2. Using a journal
- 3. Crying (men too!)
- 4. Exercising
- 5. Hitting a pillow or punching bag

- 6. Creative writing
- b) At a group level
 - 1. Sharing feelings in group discussions
 - 2. Using drama and song
 - 3. Sports

IV. RESPECT

Respect is unconditional. Every person, family, organization or community, regardless of anything negative about them, has a basic right to respect. This is ensured by:

- Avoiding
- (a) RIDICULE
 - (b) NEGATIVE CRITICISM
 - (c) HOSTILITY
 - (d) PRODUCING SHAME
 - (e) EMBARRASSMENT BEFORE OTHERS, or publicly
 - (f) TREATING AN ADOLESCENT OR ADULT LIKE A CHILD, for example *talking down to, lecturing, interrogating*
 - (g) USING MANIPULATION to get one's way or to get attention
 - (h) TRYING TO CONTROL

V. THE 5 MAGIC PHRASES FOR “WIN-WIN” SOLUTIONS

The language we use facilitates effective conflict-management. Useful expressions and intents include:

- 1. “I love you” or “I really want the best for you”.
- 2. “I am sorry” and “I will genuinely try to be different”.
- 3. “I forgive you”.
- 4. “Let us see how we can work out this problem together, so that we both win”.
- 5. “I appreciate the good things that you do and admire your Achievements”.

VI. GETTING HELP FROM OTHERS

If an individual, family, organization or community finds that much of the above behaviours are difficult to carry out on a consistent basis, one can seek to grow individually or corporately by:

- (a) Using SELF-HELP BOOKS, AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIAL and a JOURNAL
- (b) Seeking the help of WISE CLOSE FRIENDS OR ADVISORS
- (c) Seeking SPIRITUAL HELP
- (d) Seeking PROFESSIONAL HELP

RULES FOR MAKING PEACE*

- ✓ *TALK TOGETHER;*
- ✓ *USE A TRAINED MEDIATOR IF NECESSARY;*
- ✓ *IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM;*
- ✓ *FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM;*
- ✓ *ATTACK THE PROBLEM—NOT THE PERSON, OR THE FAMILY, ORGANIZATION OR COMMUNITY. AVOID BLAME OR “SHAME”;*
- ✓ *LISTEN WITH AN OPEN MIND;*
- ✓ *TREAT THE FEELINGS OF THE PERSON, FAMILY, ORGANIZATION OR COMMUNITY WITH RESPECT;*
- ✓ *TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS AS AN INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, ORGANIZATION OR COMMUNITY;*
- ✓ *CONSIDER THE VARIOUS OPTIONS FOR SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS RAISED AND CONSIDER THE BEST ONES TO TRY.*

* Adapted from document by PALS (Peace and Love in Schools), Jamaica.

7/5/03