



Creating Peaceful Solutions to Make Conflict Productive, Not Destructive

Would you rather have dental surgery or confront a friend with something that bothers you?

If you picked a dental surgery, you're not alone. Most people will do anything to avoid conflict and all the accompanying feelings of anger and frustration. On the list of things people love to do, confrontation probably ranks lower than standing in line at the DMV or, yes, even oral surgery.

But conflict doesn't have to be like that. Not only is conflict a normal part of life, it can be managed and even made into a positive jumping-off point for becoming a stronger and calmer person. Confronting someone—be it a business partner or a family member—and feeling that both of you "won" can be as exhilarating as jumping out of a plane. And in the case of conflict, your life-saving parachute is a set of tools that help you survive any encounter or conflict situation.

"In many ways, conflict can be productive," writes Sam Deep, co-author of *What to Ask When You Don't Know What to Say*. "Like a grain of sand in an oyster, it can produce 'pearls' by encouraging creative thinking, risk-taking and entrepreneurial spirit."

It's not unusual for most people to hate confrontation; in fact, it's difficult for most people to skillfully handle any kind of conflict—at home or in the workplace. And yet, the benefits of doing so include more self-confidence, less anger, greater self-respect and more intimacy, according to Tim Ursiny, author of *The Coward's*

Guide to Conflict: Empowering Solutions for Those Who Would Rather Run than Fight. His book outlines practical tips for dealing with conflict with family members, friends and co-workers, including the following:

- **Start by finding something that you both agree on** (even if it's only 1%).
- **Admit your role.** If you are even

"Don't be afraid of opposition. Remember, a kite rises against, not with, the wind."

—Hamilton Mabie

partly at fault, be sure to acknowledge your mistake up front.

- **Focus on the upside.** Conflict avoiders often perceive only the downside. Consider some of the potential positive aspects of confronting someone. Just a few possibilities: greater sense of personal empowerment; deeper, more authentic relationships; freed up mental energy (because you're not ruminating on the situation).

- **Don't react with anger.** This is vital! Realize that you might behave like the other person if you were in their shoes. Look objectively at your behavior as well as the other person's.

Where there's conflict, there's usually anger. Yet it's the angry reactions that often get in the way of a peaceful solution to a problem. Ursiny advises people to look beneath their anger.

"Anger is a secondary emotion," he writes. "Many people—men in particular—react with anger when they're really feeling shame, embarrassment, pain, frustration, fear, confusion or helplessness. When you feel angry or find yourself in a conflict with someone who appears angry, pause and ask yourself why." *

10 Tips for Hard Conversations

When conversations go wrong, trust and intimacy suffer, while resentment and misunderstanding build. But it is possible to improve the way we handle our most difficult personal conversations. Consider the following:

- 1. Listen first.** Until people feel heard and safe, they won't have the mind-space to hear you.
- 2. Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity.** People typically spend only about 10% of a difficult conversation on inquiry and 90% on advocating a position. A better balance leads to a better outcome.
- 3. Set an agenda.** Lay out the problem to be discussed, indicate that you want to hear the other person's perspective and to speak your own, and that you'd like problem-solving to follow that.
- 4. Strive to understand** what people are thinking, feeling and needing, not just saying.
- 5. Keep the focus on understanding what is happening** between the two of you, not on "winning" or being right.
- 6. Don't ignore feelings.** They are often at the heart of every difficult conversation—and they matter.
- 7. Stay supportive, curious and committed to problem-solving.** Your attitude will greatly influence what you say.
- 8. Notice when you become off-center.** Breathe. Choose to return to yourself and your purpose.
- 9. Return to asking questions about the other's point of view** if the conversation becomes adversarial.
- 10. Be persistent** in your efforts to keep the conversation constructive. *

A Letter From

Rolind Jesau



Conflict is a fact of life, no matter the efforts we might undertake to avoid it. However, as the page 1 article discusses, conflict doesn't have to be excruciating. And it can lead to greater self-confidence, less anger and strife, greater self-respect and more authentic intimacy.

And when we don't have those difficult conversations that come with conflict, then trust and intimacy suffer, while resentment and misunderstanding build. The tips in the Top 10 on page 1 make those conversations go better.

The roots of the word "empathy"—"em" means inside and "pathos" means feelings—describe the word pretty clearly. It's like climbing inside another person to the extent that you can feel their feelings...feel the pinch of their shoe, as the saying goes.

Having empathy for another isn't always easy. Often, our response to someone else's behavior is intolerance, judgment, anger. But understanding each other's experience on a feeling level helps us communicate better and have more peace in our families and the world. Take the quiz to see how you score on practicing empathy. And read the page 3 article on anger to explore the connection between anger and empathy.

Finally, the back page article addresses assertiveness and the fears that keep us from speaking up when we need or want to. When we don't speak up, we minimize ourselves and hand over personal power that really belongs to us.

As always, be well, and don't hesitate to call if you'd like to work on anything that's troubling you.

How Well Do You Stand In Another Person's Shoes?

Recognizing and understanding another person's desires, beliefs and emotions is one of the most important skills we can ever acquire. That skill—empathy, or "standing in another person's shoes"—fosters meaningful relationships, and reduces prejudice and negative assumptions. It also encourages honest communication and can help avert violence. Studies have even found that people high in empathy are more confident and assertive, and they enjoy better physical and mental health. Take this quiz to see how well you practice empathy.



True False

Set 1

- 1. If I don't know enough to understand, and empathize with, another's dilemma, I try to increase my knowledge by asking questions.
- 2. I recognize that others are different from me and might see and feel things differently from how I might experience the same situation. I look at things through that person's eyes, not my own.
- 3. I don't need to be right about what I imagine the other person to be feeling. If I've misunderstood, I ask the person to help me correct my impressions.
- 4. When I show that I understand the other person's experience, I notice that the person I'm talking with opens up more.
- 5. My irritation with another person often dwindles when I understand what's going on inside him or her.
- 6. Being a good, active listener helps me "get" what someone else is going through.
- 7. I try to focus on the other person's feelings, rather than actions or circumstances. When people are upset, it's better to handle their feelings before figuring out how to solve their problems.

Set 2

- 1. If a friend complains about a boss at work, I'm likely to advise that person to find another job, change departments or speak up. I like to be helpful by offering solutions.
- 2. I'm always ready to psychoanalyze my friends' troubles.
- 3. If a co-worker expresses anxiety about her relationship with her husband, I'm quick to reassure her that all couples have their little problems, and that she shouldn't worry about it.
- 4. It seems that I always know better than my friends what's behind or underneath their problems.
- 5. When family members are upset about something, I find a way to distract them or change the subject.
- 6. I'm quick to remind people that plenty of others are a lot worse off than they are.
- 7. When empathizing with others, I imagine how I would feel in a given situation and assume the same would be true for them.

True empathy can only occur when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about others—and when we're comfortable with others' deep feelings. If you answered true more often to the second set than the first, you may benefit from learning more about how to respond with empathy, one of the greatest gifts you can give another person. *

Create Lasting Change by Understanding Anger

Anger is one of the most powerful emotions, and one of the most difficult to deal with. It's also probably the least understood. We get angry at our partners, our children, the man at the dry cleaner's, the woman cutting us off on the freeway, our boss who just doesn't understand, our dogs for barking too much, the grocery store clerk for being too slow.

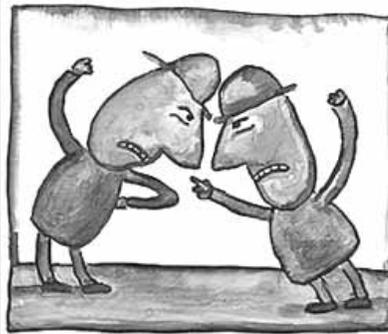
Some of us hide from this anger, hoping it will go away. Some of us let it take over, allowing rage-fests that leave us even angrier, friendless and sometimes in legal hot water.

There is another way. We can greet our anger like a welcome guest and try to understand what makes it tick. In doing so, we can learn a lot about ourselves and make real, lasting changes in our relationships.

Should We Express Our Anger or Not?

There's widespread agreement that expressing anger is much healthier than suppressing it. However, giving free rein to anger has its dangers. Recent studies on anger indicate that venting our rage doesn't bring resolution, but can just fuel the flames. Left unchecked and unconscious, anger can destroy everything we care about—our friendships, our intimate relationships, our children, our jobs and our health.

The idea of controlling our anger has lost favor in recent years, yet there's much to be said for stopping, taking a deep breath and waiting before blasting the world with self-righteous indignation. Sometimes it can be as simple as Thomas Jefferson's advice: "When angry, count to 10 before you speak; if very angry, a hundred."



Is It About Anger...or Something Else?

Research on anger shows that, actually, anger just might not be real, but a way to cover the real issue—our pain. We react in anger because we can't bear the pain underneath. Author Byron Katie, takes it one step further: underneath the pain is a thought or story that is causing us to lash out in rage and frustration. If we investigate the story, the anger often just dissolves.

Taking an everyday example, Sue is angry at her son, Nick, because he constantly drops his socks on the floor. She has nagged, threatened, yelled and even cried. She's tried tamping down her anger and soliciting "agreements" from him that don't stick. Her friends agree with her, which leaves her more convinced her anger is justified. But underneath, she feels miserable when she yells at her son, but she can't

break the pattern.

Using new techniques, Sue could try some of the following approaches to shift her anger:

Look at the anger, not the issue.

In Sue's case, getting repeatedly angry over her son's socks might be a distraction from looking at her inner dissatisfaction. Perhaps she's ready for a change but afraid to take the first step. Or she could be upset that her son is growing up and away from her. "Follow the trail of anger inward, and there you find the small, still voice of pain," writes psychologist Carol Travis in her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*.

Look at the belief that triggers the anger. If Sue questions her belief that Nick should pick up his socks, she might find that, really, Nick's socks are his business. All she can control are her own socks! As author Byron Katie puts it, "When you're in someone else's business, you're suffering." Sue can make a choice without anger: pick up Nick's socks because she wants his room to be clean or leave his socks and

let him sort out his own laundry. She can also use this technique to investigate similar beliefs she might have: teens should be neat, moms should do the laundry, friends should always agree with us, my son doesn't respect me, my life would be happier if the people I lived with weren't so messy... It's always a good idea to stop and ask ourselves if a thought is actually a belief that we can change.

Transform the anger. Deep breathing, meditation, taking a long walk in nature, painting and writing are all ways to turn the anger into peace. In his book, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh suggests ways to transform anger into compassion, gratitude and love. Instead of focusing on Nick's socks, Sue might think of the many ways her son is loving, responsible and helpful. The socks may stay on the floor but Sue will be free of her anger. (And Nick might be more likely to pick up his socks for a loving parent than an angry one.)

It's been said that anger separates us from ourselves. It doesn't have to be that way. Instead, anger can be the new friend we are curious to get to know better. And in understanding this new friend, we can come to understand ourselves even more deeply and make more lasting change in our lives. *



Empowered Living Through Assertiveness



For some people, speaking up is easier said than done. You might prefer to train wild lions than tell another person what's really on your mind.

But it is possible to develop an assertiveness connected to head and heart that clears the way for honest, empowered living—without being rude to others or surrendering to “nice-itis.”

“We all need to learn to dance in rhythm to the beat of our own soul,” writes Kelly Bryson in his book, *Don't Be Nice, Be Real: Balancing Passion for Self with Compassion for Others*.

Those who stay mum when they would be better off speaking their mind do so for a variety of reasons:

- **Fear of being rejected.** Any time you risk disclosing yourself, you become vulnerable. Communications skills, such as those taught in *Non-Violent Communication (NVC)* or *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC)*, teach how to combine vulnerability with strength and

compassion for powerful connections.

- **Fear of hurting feelings.** Related to this is the belief that it is better to please others, even at your own expense. As Bryson points out, being Mr. or Mrs. Nice Guy or Gal is actually a form of violence to yourself and others, and an escape from a fully lived life.

- **Fear of “rocking the boat,” or upsetting the status quo.** The writer Muriel Rukeyser spoke eloquently to this fear in her memorable quote: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”

- **Fear that you have nothing worth saying.** Years of poor self-image can lead to this.

- **Fear of sparking a conflict.** If you have an abusive or volatile family history, you may have learned to keep quiet or be invisible to avoid confrontation. And yet the danger is that constant suppression of powerful feelings can lead to frustration and

possibly aggressive or abusive behavior. As Rollo May writes in his book, *Power and Innocence*, powerlessness is the precursor to violence.

It is important to distinguish between being assertive and being aggressive. Aggression trespasses on another's boundaries without regard for feelings. Assertiveness, on the other hand, communicates feelings, thoughts and needs clearly and directly.

Speaking up after years of zipping your lips may not be easy. You may need to take baby steps—take classes or workshops, consult with a counselor, join an assertiveness support group. But the payoff is more effective relationships, genuine intimacy and, more than anything, an increased feeling of self-respect and empowerment. *



THE BRANDYWINE CENTER LLC
2500 Grubb Rd., Suite 240, Wilmington, DE 19810
(302) 475-1880

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