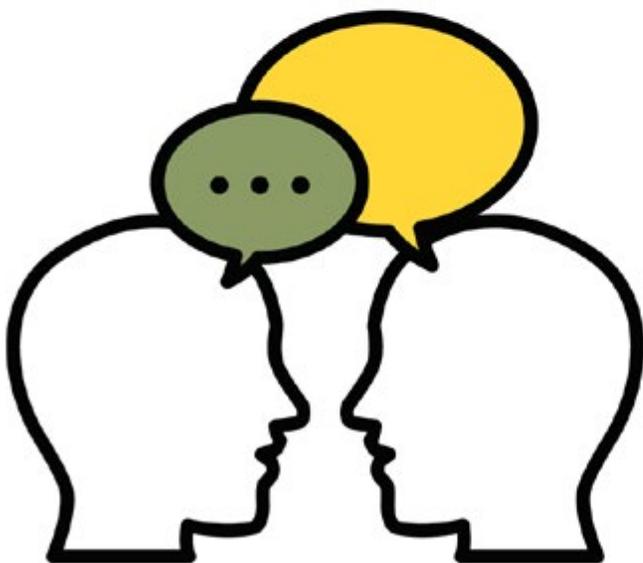

Dealing with interpersonal conflict

When you get to know someone (even a little bit), you might learn that the two of you look at the same thing in different ways, depending on your personalities, values, expectations, and attitudes. This can lead to interpersonal conflicts, which take place between two or more people.

For example, a group of housemates might have different expectations regarding the cleanliness of their house, which can create some tension when it comes to dividing the chores.

Alternatively, romantic partners may have different ways of showing affection, which could cause them both to feel unloved and result in an argument.



Conflict is natural

Although these conflicts can be uncomfortable, they are a natural part of human interaction – you are bound to meet someone who does not share your views on a particular subject. If handled with care, conflicts can have positive impacts; they can strengthen the relationship of the people involved or improve communication between them. They can even help you understand your own boundaries. However, interpersonal conflicts can also be harmful, such as when a dispute involves violence. These situations warrant thoughtful evaluation to determine safe(r) next steps. Ultimately, being able to identify and respond to these conflicts is an important skill.

Types of interpersonal conflicts

Interpersonal conflicts come in various flavors. In this resource, we are introducing only two types of conflicts – fact-based and value-based –, but many other types exist.

Value-based conflicts:

These conflicts arise when people prioritize different things in a given situation. For example, two students might disagree as to whether they should throw a house party during the COVID-19 pandemic: one sibling prioritizes public health protocols, whereas the other feels lonely and prioritizes interpersonal connection.

Fact-based conflicts:

These conflicts involve disagreement about the truth of information. For instance, a group of people might debate about which contraceptive (between a hormonal IUD and a progestin-only pill) tends to be most effective.



Types of responses to interpersonal conflict

To help people navigate interpersonal conflict, specialists have created a model that defines the various types of responses: avoidance, accommodation, compromise, competition, and collaboration.

Avoidance involves making the choice not to discuss the conflict directly. A person's feelings will likely be expressed passive aggressively, sarcastically, or through other indirect means. However, there will be no intentional dialogue about the subject. Avoidance can arise due to various factors, such as a lack of energy to discuss the problem or the belief that the conflict will go away (or won't go away regardless of communication).

Compromise involves giving up at least some of what each person wants. For instance, the student not wanting to throw a pandemic party might compromise with their roommate to instead invite a few friends over with masks (not during a strict lockdown), which is a middle ground between both people's desires. Again, this type of response is appropriate for time-sensitive conflicts but can leave remnants of frustration and regret in the long-term, as it does not meet the needs of everyone involved.

Accommodation involves completely 'giving in' to the other person, whether that means agreeing with them or providing them with what they have requested. For example, say two people are arguing about when they should hang out. If someone asks to be picked up five minutes later than what had been decided, and the delay does not impact their plans much, I could fulfil their request.

However, accommodation can sometimes end up harming both the person who is accommodating as well as the relationship. For example if one person gives in and stops asking for a particular form of affection, then they may continue to feel unloved and even grow to resent the other. Through accommodation, interpersonal conflict can be relieved in the short-term, as the people involved may stop arguing about the issue at hand.

Competition can be described as the opposite of accommodation, as it involves advocating for one's own needs and ultimately 'winning' the interpersonal conflict. For instance, the student wanting to throw a pandemic party might be successful in persuading their housemate regardless of their opposition. While this could create positive outcomes, perhaps by relieving the loneliness of both students and helping everyone have a good time, it disregards the views and needs of the other person involved, which could harm the students' relationship in the long term.

Collaboration involves a dedicated effort to meet the needs of everyone involved in the conflict. Professionals agree that collaboration is generally the ideal response to interpersonal conflict. It can be time-consuming, requiring effort from everyone involved in the conflict.

However, it tends to create long-term benefits, such as stronger relationships. Going back to the house party example, the two students can listen more closely to each other's needs: what one student really wants is to ensure the health of students and what the other student really wants is to feel less lonely. Through collaboration, they can create a solution, such as a virtual game night, that helps address both their 'sides'.



How to engage in listening that will support finding a solution

Overall, active, empathetic listening is crucial for interpersonal conflict resolution. In order to engage in this kind of listening, particularly in the context of interpersonal conflict, you can take the following measures.

1. Remove distractions such as cellphones and earphones, so that you can better focus on the other person.

2. Pay attention to your body language: find a way of discussing that helps you and the other person feel comfortable. For example, you may prefer to face the person and make eye contact, but others may feel more comfortable walking side-by-side.

3. Do not look for holes in the other person's argument as they are speaking. Focus on understanding the other person's perspective rather than 'winning' or being understood yourself. You may do this by asking questions to clarify the meaning of the other person's statements, rather than suggesting their meaning yourself.

4. Respect the boundaries of yourself and others involved. For example, if the other person has identified a topic that is troubling for them, be sensitive when bringing up the topic if it is necessary and ask their permission to discuss it in the moment.

5. Recognize the wisdom of the person to whom you are listening. While you may have a solution to offer or an insight to share, refrain from giving advice unless you are asked to. If you are inclined to share regardless, ask permission for whether you may give your advice. If they say no, respect their wishes.

6. Be mindful of the language that you are using: Refrain from the use of slurs and other types of derogatory language. Offending the other person does not create a space conducive to finding resolutions.

7. Focus on impact rather than intention: performing harmful actions does not by default make someone a 'bad' or ill-intentioned person. The conversation might be more productive if you talk about an action that a person took, rather than making judgements about their character.

8. Use gentle assertiveness: Assertiveness involves clearly describing what you are feeling to another person and why, typically when we are feeling negatively about that person. Assertive statements often involve starting with, "I feel" rather than "You made me feel". Speaking this way avoids blaming the other person for how we are feeling. Instead, it can be used to gather information about what both parties are feeling and figure out the best way to move forward together.

Without being assertive of our pain, emotions manifest outwardly in a different way. Individuals who suppress their feelings can become aggressive or shut the other person out all together by giving them the silent treatment. Neither of these alternative reactions solve the problem or move the relationship in a positive direction.

