CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflicts are typically about a topic being discussed or the process of how to obtain a desired result, but they can also arise from relational issues and most conflicts are a combination of both these issues.

Once a conflict begins we decide how to respond. Avoiding the conflict (or accommodating) is sometimes a wise choice, but it’s better to deal with the situation as it comes up. Accommodating is a way of preserving peace, but this approach is based on the assumption that the only way for one party to reach its goals is to overcome the other. Collaborating involves working together (Win-Win) to resolve conflicts and compromising requires that each party sacrifices something he or she is seeking to gain an agreement (You Win - I Lose).

Conflict is a normal. After all, people can’t be expected to agree on everything, all the time. Learning how to deal with conflict—rather than avoiding it—is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to relationships, but when handled in a respectful, positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between people.

Workshop facilitators can briefly cover the basic information they feel is most important; Conflict 101, How conflicts can be opportunities, Conflict Skills and Tips for Managing and Resolving Conflicts, Stress and Emotional Awareness. Following this, ask youth to offer some “real life” examples for group discussion.

Conflict 101

- **A conflict is more than just a disagreement.** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).
- **Conflicts continue to fester when ignored.** Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- **We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions** of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.
- **Conflicts trigger strong emotions.** If you aren’t comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them in times of stress, you won’t be able to resolve conflict successfully.
- **Conflicts are an opportunity for growth.** When you’re able to resolve conflict in a relationship, it builds trust. You can feel secure knowing your relationship can survive challenges and disagreements.

Turn Conflicts into Opportunities

Conflict arises from differences, both large and small. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences appear trivial, but when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal need is often at the core of the problem; like the need to feel safe, respected or valued.

The ability to successfully resolve conflict depends on our ability to

- **Manage stress quickly while remaining calm.** By staying calm, you can accurately read and interpret verbal and nonverbal communication.
- **Control your emotions and behavior.** When you’re in control of your emotions, you can communicate your needs without threatening, frightening, or punishing others.
- **Pay attention to the feelings being expressed** as well as the spoken words of others.
- **Be aware of and respectful of differences.** By avoiding disrespectful words and actions, you can almost always resolve a problem faster.

Develop skills!

- the ability to **quickly reduce stress in the moment**
- the ability to **remain comfortable enough with your emotions** to react in constructive ways even in the midst of an argument or a perceived attack.
Tips for managing and resolving conflict

- **Watch your stress levels**
- **Use emotional awareness**
- **Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When we listen we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us when it's our turn to speak.
- **Pay attention to nonverbal signals.** When you’re in the middle of a conflict, paying close attention to the other person’s nonverbal signals (facial expressions, posture, gesture, pace, tone and intensity of voice) may help you figure out what the other person is really saying.
- **Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or “being right.”** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than “winning” the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.
- **Focus on the present.** If you’re holding on to grudges based on past resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.
- **Pick your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it’s important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy. Maybe you don’t want to surrender a parking space if you’ve been circling for 15 minutes, but if there are dozens of empty spots, arguing over a single space isn’t worth it.
- **Use Humor (not sarcasm) when possible.** You can avoid many confrontations and resolve arguments and disagreements by communicating in a humorous way. Humor can help you say things that might otherwise be difficult to express without offending someone. However, it’s important that you laugh with the other person, not at them.
- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you’re unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can’t come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

**STRESS AND EMOTIONAL AWARENESS**

Stress limits our ability to

- Accurately read another person's nonverbal communication
- Hear what someone is really saying
- Be aware of your own feelings
- Be in touch with your deep-rooted needs
- Communicate your needs clearly

Three common ways people respond when they’re overwhelmed by stress:

- **Foot on the gas.** An angry or agitated stress response. You’re heated, keyed up, overly emotional, and unable to sit still.
- **Foot on the brake.** A withdrawn or depressed stress response. You shut down, space out, and show very little energy or emotion.
- **Foot on both gas and brake.** A tense and frozen stress response. You “freeze” under pressure and can’t do anything. You look paralyzed, but under the surface you’re extremely agitated.

Is stress a problem? You may be so used to being stressed that you’re not even aware you are stressed. When you’re tired, your eyes feel heavy and you might rest your head on your hand. When you’re happy, you laugh easily. And when you are stressed, your body lets you know that too.

- Feeling tense or tight somewhere in your body
- Not aware of movement in your chest or stomach when you breathe
- Conflict absorbs your time and attention

Be your own stress-busting superhero. Everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it’s happening in the moment. With practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds. Learning quick stress relief won’t happen overnight. Like any skill, it takes time, self-exploration and above all, practice. But think of it as an education with a huge payoff.
Hush the voice that’s telling you, ‘Oh, I’m fine.’ Notice how you’re breathing has changed. Are your muscles tense? Awareness of your physical response to stress will help regulate the tension when it occurs.

Get in the habit of paying attention to your body’s clues.

- **Observe your muscles and insides.** Are your muscles tight/sore? Is your stomach tight or sore? Are your hands clenched?
- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you “forget” to breathe.

**Emotional awareness** is the key to understanding yourself and others. If you don’t know how you feel or why you feel that way, you won’t be able to communicate effectively or resolve disagreements. Although knowing your own feelings may sound simple, many people ignore strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. Your ability to handle conflict, however, depends on being connected to these feelings. If you’re afraid of strong emotions or if you insist on finding solutions that are strictly rational, your ability to face and resolve differences will be impaired.

**Emotional awareness helps**
- Understand what is really troubling other people
- Understand yourself, including what is really troubling you
- Stay motivated until the conflict is resolved
- Communicate clearly and effectively
- Attract and influence others