

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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CONFLICT: No One Likes It, But We All Have It

Whether it is with a coworker, a friend, our spouse, or our children, everyone will experience conflict at one time or another. Often we try to avoid it, but that usually makes matters worse or only prolongs the agony. Each of us is different and unique in our own way, so we can't possibly expect that we will agree with others on every single matter that comes between us. But does it really have to come between us, or can it actually represent an opportunity to enhance our relationship with the other person?

EXAMPLES

Let's look at some common examples of conflict that might arise in our lives. In the first example, it's Saturday night and John and his mother are again arguing about his curfew. John's mother and father had been increasingly upset about his obvious disregard of the weekend curfew, which he says is earlier than all of his friends' curfews. Both John and his mother become increasingly angry with each other and retreat, John to his bedroom and his mother to the den. The conflict does not get resolved, and both feel more distant from the other. In a second example, Don and Mary look like they have the perfect marriage and family. Don has a good job, Mary is active in community activities as well as those of her two children, they attend church regularly, and there is never a cross word between them. In fact, often there are very few words shared between them. Resentment and dissatisfaction lurk beneath the surface but never see the light of day so that it can be addressed and resolved.

Two very different situations, one with open conflict and the other with no apparent conflict, and yet each represents a significant strain and source of unhappiness in the relationships. As we can see, people often deal with disagreements in different ways. It may be denied,

avoided, or else one or the other may try to get their own way by manipulation or asserting their authority. In either event, one or both tends to lose. But why does either one have to lose? What if both can “win” in the situation?

THE SECRET ... BE A NEGOTIATOR

The secret to dealing with conflict is to be an effective negotiator. Effective negotiation is an active process that encourages both sides to play a role in defining the problem and in coming up with a solution. At the end of a successful negotiation, both should be reasonably satisfied with the result along with having a better understanding of the other person. Both parties usually tend to give as well as receive with regard to their expectations for the situation. So how do we set up this “win-win” situation?

Perhaps the answer to this can best be summarized in terms of listening with the goal of understanding and expressing oneself with the goal of being understood, rather than just winning an argument. Often we start a discussion on dealing with conflict by discussing the role of “active” or empathic listening, but let’s start this time with the idea of effectively expressing ourselves with the goal of being understood rather than winning. First, one needs to have in his or her own mind how she views the problem and how she would like it to be resolved. One also needs to clearly understand that her feelings are her feelings and not something created by the other person. In communicating your feelings to someone else, it is important to own them as your own. To say “You make me angry when you do (fill in the blank),” is just not accurate. It’s your feeling, so own it. A more honest and accurate communication would be “I get very angry with you when you turn and walk away,” rather than “You make me mad when you walk away from me.”

EXPRESSING

After recognizing that your feelings are your own, it then becomes important to express your ideas and feelings as your own. An effective way of doing this might involve four separate, but related, processes. The first is to express your observations regarding the situation, recognizing that the other person may or may not have the same observations or thoughts about it. With regard to the argument between John and his mother, John might want to point out that three of his closest friends whom his parents know and like are all allowed to be out an hour later on the weekend than is John. Second, it is

important to be able to openly and honestly express one's "owned" feelings about the situation. This may result in feeling somewhat vulnerable, but it is an important part of the process and worth practicing. Third, it is important to express what one needs or wants and, if possible, the reason behind that need or want. For example, John might state that he really wants to be able to go places with his friends but often that cannot happen when he has to be in earlier than his friends. And fourth, one needs to make a request as to what he would like from the other person. Regarding this last point, it is extremely important to keep in mind the difference between a demand and a request. A demand tends to either be manipulative or threatening, whereas a request tends to be simple and straightforward. Most people respond better to requests than demands. Perhaps the clearest difference between a demand and request is that the request leaves room for negotiation.

ACTIVE LISTENING

We now come to the part of communication which is often called "active listening" or perhaps "empathic listening." Whatever you may call it, the goal is to understand where the other person is coming from rather than to just convince them that you are right or that they have to do what you want them to do either because you're bigger, stronger, have more power and authority, or just because you can talk louder and longer. We again use similar principles to those we have already discussed regarding effective communication. First, we observe. We observe to try to understand what the body language or the tone of their voice might be saying. We may even want to check out the accuracy of our observations by sharing them with the other individual and seeing if our assumption is or is not correct. For example, are they looking angry because of something you said or did, or is it because it was simply a rough day at home or at the office. Then try to determine what the other person is feeling based upon what they are saying and not based upon what you think they should be feeling. Again, check out its accuracy by asking if your perceptions are accurate. Third, try to understand what the other person needs or wants from you. This may be difficult, as often we are quicker to defend our position than we are to examine it. And then again, check it out. Last, try to understand what the other person is requesting of you, clarify it, and then decide whether you can reasonably meet their request. If not, then you continue the negotiation by expressing your position as described above. This process of negotiation, also termed conflict resolution, continues back and forth until a mutually agreeable solution is settled upon.

CONCLUSION:

This may sound like a lot of work, and it is! But in the process, one demonstrates both a concern and respect for the other individual and their needs, as well as for your own, and hopefully the end result is not only a resolving of the conflict but also a deepening of the relationship. Good luck and happy conflict...resolution.

If you would like a copy of "Ground Rules for Constructive Fighting in Marriage", please e-mail us or call at 972-335-2430, and we would be happy to e-mail or fax you a copy.



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- * obsessive-compulsive disorder * traumatic stress disorder*
- from past abuse * compulsive behaviors such as sexual addiction*
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