

Confidence & Self-Respect Through Conflict

Question: Would you rather go to the dentist for a root canal or go to a friend and confront her with something that bothers you?

If you picked a root canal, 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.

“Don't be afraid of opposition. Remember, a kite rises against, not with, the wind.” —Hamilton Mabie

“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:

- **Focus on the upside.** Conflict avoiders often perceive only the downside. They

need to see the positive side of confronting someone.

- **Start by finding something that you both agree on** (even if it's only 1%).
- **Admit your role.** If you are even partly at fault, be sure to acknowledge your mistake up front.
- **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 Addiction Clues

Abuse of or addiction to alcohol or other substances is not always easy to spot. If many of the following clues are present, it could be that you are dealing with someone who needs help.

- 1. Minimizing.** The common refrain is, “I can stop anytime I want.” Hiding the use of substances is also a major clue.
- 2. Belligerence and intimidation.** Mean-spiritedness, intense sarcasm and/or regular belittling usually leads to people feeling as though they must “walk on eggshells” around the person.

- 3. Lying and promise-breaking.** Both hallmarks of substance abuse or addiction, these include the oft-made (and broken) promise to “never do it again,” whatever “it” is.

- 4. Recurring financial difficulties.** You may witness repeated money crises, a lot of borrowing and a general sense that the person is “digging a hole.”

- 5. Mood swings.** While this may have other origins, it often stems directly from the contrast of being under the influence (happy, calm, outgoing) or not (irritable, angry, withdrawn).

- 6. Lack of self-responsibility.** Someone abusing substances will tend to habitually blame others for the negative circumstances in which they find themselves.

- 7. Sense of entitlement.** A common attitude is, “The rules don't apply to me.” Justifying illegal or immoral actions because “I deserve it” is another form of entitlement.

- 8. Oblivious to negative effects.** No matter how far down they sink, people who abuse alcohol or drugs often do not seem to “get” how bad things are.

- 9. Surrounded by enablers.** Someone abusing alcohol or drugs likes to be around people who will cover up, make excuses for, or “rescue” them.

- 10. Thriving on turmoil.** While there may be lots of trauma and drama, professed goals are never reached and there is little to show for all the “excitement.” ■

A Letter From FirstStep Counseling, Inc.

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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.

Blame, the topic of this issue's quiz, is one of the primary instigators of conflict, and yet it masks the true nature of the problem. When we make someone or something else responsible for our feelings or the negative things that happen to us, we don't have to do anything; blaming others keeps us from learning and growing.

If we are prone to finding fault, we usually find plenty of reproach and criticism to fling in our own direction for not being perfect. The page 3 feature notes looks at self-acceptance as a way to quiet the shameful, negative, self-loathing voices inside so that we can move more peacefully through our lives.

The Top 10 delves beneath surface "evidence" of problems with alcohol or drugs to look at other clues that can tip us off to a loved one's possible need for help with these issues. And finally, the back page feature reminds us that gaining insight into ourselves helps us parent better, and helps our children, too.

Enjoy this issue, and please don't hesitate to call to talk about whatever concerns you.

Are You Playing the "Blame Game?"



When things go wrong, blame is an easy way of taking the spotlight off ourselves and shining it on others. From the first excuse we used as a child, shifting blame often becomes an all-purpose gadget in our toolbox of defenses, so handy we often reach for it without even thinking. Blame helps maintain our self-image and preserve our dignity, it's a convenient form of procrastination, it's less painful than blaming ourselves, and it can be a potent psychological weapon. Basically, it lets us off the hook. Take this Thriving quiz to see whether you're playing the "Blame Game."

True False

- 1. I have used the phrase "How could you do this to me?"
- 2. I would be more punctual, except my carpool is always late (or my spouse doesn't have breakfast ready on time, or my son never puts the car keys where they're supposed to go or...).
- 3. If I'm angry at someone, I usually start off my sentence with "You make me so angry!"
- 4. I've been known to put off projects, but it's because I don't have what I need. For example: "I would have had that report for you today if my assistant had gotten me the numbers I needed."
- 5. I'd be a better dad/mom if only my boss didn't demand so much of my time.
- 6. My children always have an excuse. I hear "It's not my fault" from them all the time.
- 7. If I trip or stumble, my reaction is usually something like, "What idiot left that brick here for me to trip over?"
- 8. If it weren't for _____ (fill in the blank), I'd be a success.
- 9. I can't help it if I am the way I am. My childhood was pretty rotten.
- 10. It seems I'm always getting stuck in someone else's messes.
- 11. When something goes wrong in the house or at work, I immediately look for whose fault it is.
- 12. When others don't act the way I would, I perceive them as being wrong...and might just let them know it!

Blame obscures the true nature of problems. As long as someone or something else is responsible for our feelings, failures or our lives, we don't have to do anything. Blaming others holds us in the past and keeps us from moving forward toward growth.

Like using chewing gum and baling wire for a repair job, blame may be a handy tool, but it won't hold up over time. Using blame makes us forget we have power over our own lives and that we're responsible for ourselves. When we stop expecting someone else to take care of us or do what needs to be done, then we have the power to do what we want and need to do. If you would like to look at ways you play the "blame game," don't hesitate to call.

Learning to Live With (and Love) Ourselves

Mary thinks she'd be happy if she could just change her weight, her looks and her job. Sean believes that he's an okay person except for certain personality traits, such as anxiety, impatience and his quick temper. Yolanda's shelves are bulging with self-improvement books; she's read them all but she still hates herself.



Who among us doesn't believe that with a little tweaking, we could be just right—self-realized, self-actualized and self-helped to just short of perfection? But, the problem for many is that all the books, self-improvement tips and positive affirmations don't seem to make us any happier. Worst of all, the minute we "fix" one ugly piece of ourselves, another nasty monster rears its head and starts screaming for attention.

When does self-help become self-hell? What would happen if we simply started by realizing how wonderful we already are?

As the pioneering psychologist Carl Rogers once wrote, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

"Believing that something is wrong with us is a deep and tenacious suffering," writes Tara Brach, in her book, *Radical Acceptance*. "The more we anxiously tell ourselves stories about how we might fail or what is wrong with us or with others, the more we deepen the grooves—the neural pathways—that generate feelings of deficiency." She lists common ways people try to manage this pain of inadequacy:

- Anxiously embarking on one self-improvement project after another.
- Holding back and playing it safe rather than risking failure.
- Withdrawing from our experience of the present moment.
- Keeping busy.
- Becoming our own worst critics.
- Focusing on other people's faults.

"Convinced that we are not good enough, we can never relax," Brach writes. "We stay on guard, monitoring ourselves for shortcomings. When we inevitably find them, we feel even more insecure and undeserving. We have to try even harder."

Accepting ourselves does not mean self-indulgence or being passive. Rather it means turning off the shameful, negative, self-loathing tapes within ourselves and just relaxing.

The blaring voices of our culture certainly don't help, with promises that buying something, owning something, achieving

something will make us better people, that success is measured by looks, wealth or possessions. A healthier life finds deeper meaning and greater satisfaction in self-love, compassion, intuition, taking responsibility and forgiveness (particularly of ourselves).

Sometimes it is our so-called faults that can actually lead us to a healthier life. Pioneering psychologist Carl Jung called it our "shadow side," that part in all of us we are ashamed of and that we often reject. Understanding and accepting that shadow side can lead to enormous freedom and self-acceptance.

Science and research has revealed much about what we can and cannot change about ourselves, according to Martin Seligman, Ph.D., author and Director of Clinical Training in Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. "Some of what does change is under your control, and some is not," he writes in his book, *What You Can Change and What You Can't: The Complete Guide to Self-Improvement*.

Seligman lists some characteristics that are easier to change, such as everyday anxiety, specific phobias, panic, anger and certain beliefs about life. He advises people to discard the notion of changing that which hurts the most (for example, your extra weight) and instead concentrating on those parts of yourself that will respond most successfully to your efforts to change them (for example, your shyness or impatience with your spouse).



In the end, all the energy we put out to change ourselves may just take us back to where we started—to ourselves. And if we can truly accept ourselves as we are, that's the best place to be. ■

Five Ways to Love Yourself

- 1. Stop criticizing yourself.** When you criticize yourself, your changes are negative. When you approve of yourself, your changes are positive.
- 2. Be gentle with yourself.** Praise and support yourself.
- 3. Love your negatives.** Acknowledge that they fulfilled a need and now you don't need them anymore.
- 4. Take care of your body** in the ways that please you.
- 5. Do it now.** Don't wait until you get well, or get sick, or lose the weight, or get the new job or the new relationship. Begin now. And do the best you can.

—from *Heal Your Life*, by Louise Hay

Growing Yourself as a Parent

"Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them."
—Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*

Imagine a baby shower where the guests bring a special kind of gift for the new parents.

Not baby clothes. Not strollers or cribs. Not even a single book on child-rearing.

The gifts for the new parents? Self-awareness, self-love and self-growth as a parent, as well as a parent.

The best parenting requires that we not only work to nurture and care for our children but that we nurture and care for ourselves.

Parenting is one of the—if not *the*—most challenging jobs on the planet. There is the awesome responsibility of raising and guiding another human being, of course. But it's the daily interactions between children and parents that can require almost super-human amounts of flexibility, patience and awareness. All the experts and all the books aren't there when it's your toddler who won't nap, your child who stole a valued toy from his best friend, your depressed teen who is desperately searching for answers, your adult child who can't hold down a job.

Successful—even joyful—parenting is about listening to ourselves as well as listening to our children. It's a hands-off

approach that brings the focus back to what we are feeling and experiencing, so that we don't unthinkingly rain anger and fear down upon our children. Being aware of ourselves helps us develop a strong "inner authority" or an intuitive sense of knowing what is best for us and our children in any moment. (And accepting that sometimes we really don't know yet!)

"We guide (our children) not because they have basically shabby motives, but because they lack the one strength most of us have: awareness of the world," write authors Hugh and Gayle Prather in their book, *Spiritual Parenting: A Guide to Understanding and Nurturing the Heart in Your Child*.

Their book calls parenting a spiritual path that helps us grow as people while we are helping our children grow into

adults. Our children challenge us and if we can truly listen, we can grow.

One of the first challenges is to understand that old patterns—often formed in our own childhoods—can often rule our behavior as parents right now. For example, if our own parents tried to fix everything that went wrong, we may try to do the same with our children. But our children may need us just to listen to their fears and not jump in with our own fears and try to "fix" it all.

In the process, we allow our kids to make mistakes, and that means we can, too. And if we can forgive our kids and accept them in all their flawed glory, it can't be too big a jump to do this for ourselves.

As author Joyce Maynard writes, "It's not only children who grow. Parents do, too."

As much as we watch to see what our children do with their lives, they are watching us to see what we do with ours. I can't tell my children to reach for the sun. All I can do is reach for it myself." ■



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