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Conflict Resolution: Helping Families Find Peace

By Richard D. Berrett, PhD*

Conflict occurs daily in our experiences. It may be internal or interpersonal in nature, may manifest itself in confusion, frustration or depression. Helping individuals and families often involves conflict resolution. This article will list some assumptions I make, and strategies I have used to help clients achieve peace in their hearts and in their homes by resolving intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict.

ASSUMPTIONS: I believe that conflicts occur as individuals come together in a relationship. I think that because two people have different perspectives, different beliefs, different attitudes, they must resolve dissonance as they try to achieve unity. The word dissonance can be illustrated by picturing a duet in which each is singing in a different key. The two voices do not harmonize but are in competition with one another in dissonance, being out of tune. Conflict is the result when you and I are not in tune, not in agreement, and it occurs as we try to achieve unity and intimacy.

Second assumption: the counsel that some give to “forget about conflict” is, I believe destructive to unity. I do not believe you can achieve unity by pretending that conflict is not there, or by forgetting about it. I think, rather, that you need to examine conflict, you need to understand conflict, and it is only through examination and understanding that you can then remedy conflict.

A third assumption I make about conflict is that it rarely destroys relationships. I believe that the destructive agent is the inadequate approach to dealing with and resolving conflict, rather than the conflict itself.

A fourth assumption I make about conflict is that it has many sources. For example, intrapersonal sources create conflict. The way I think, the way I interpret the world around me can, in itself set me up to be in conflict. Intrapersonal sources occur, as mentioned previously, when two people come together and try to achieve intimacy. There are social or community realities that poverty, alcoholism, and even inflation are related to family conflict.

A final assumption I make is that in order to achieve the Kingdom of our Father in Heaven, there to live with the Prince of Peace, members of that Kingdom will have learned how to deal with conflict in a Christ-like, caring manner.

STRATEGIES: The first strategy, an intrapersonal one, is based on the wheel of self awareness found in Alive and Aware (1975), and relates to the therapy approaches of Ellis (1961), Maltby (1977), Dyer (1976), and Chamberlain (1978). In this perspective, conflict is created by our thinking. I generally find that if I can help people recognize the personal responsibility that they have in the process of conflict formation and resolution, part of the conflict is defused. My goal in using these resources is to help the clients focus on their thoughts and how they affect feeling, and that by changing thoughts, feelings can be altered.

For example, Mary is at home waiting for her husband to come. She has an anniversary dinner prepared and she is very excited. She knows that her husband is going to be there right at 6:15 p.m., so at 6:10 p.m. she is going to slide the steak under the broiler. She wants it to come out of the oven just after he arrives. She has the table set with candles, a beautiful tossed salad is ready, everything is prepared for a very romantic anniversary dinner. The time of 6:15 p.m. comes, she expects the door to open and it does not; at 6:20 p.m. she takes the steak out, fearful that it will become overdone. At 6:25 p.m. Mary begins to wonder where he is. “How could he do this to me on our anniversary?” At 6:35 p.m., “If only he knew all of the work I have done just for him.” It is now 6:40 p.m., and she feels, “At least he could be considerate enough to phone.” At 6:45 p.m., he walks in.

Mary’s feelings during this half hour wait are directly related to the thoughts she experienced. She will likely feel anger, maybe some hurt and disappointment. When he walks in her feelings may lead to a desire to punish him; hence, she may state in a tone of voice which suggests anger and accusation, “Where on earth have you been?”

In another home Sue has a 6:15 p.m. anniversary dinner planned and her husband is also late. While waiting Sue has these thoughts: “I wonder where he could be? Maybe he had to stay at the office; perhaps there was heavy traffic; maybe I had better say a little prayer,” and then he walks in at 6:45 p.m.

Sue feels relief and desires to comfort, to love, to express affection and will interact with her husband in a very tender way, unlike the punishing interaction that is happening in Mary’s house.

It is possible that Sue’s and Mary’s husbands were delayed by the same problem. However, the independent variable that the wives have some control over, and that has influence on the outcome is the thinking of Sue, and the thinking of Mary between 6:15 and 6:45 p.m. The awareness wheel will help people become aware of
their thoughts, how they influence their feelings, their desires, their actions, and how they are responsible for these thoughts.

Interpersonal conflict is frequently related to what George Bach and Peter Wyden labeled “gunny sacking” (1969). This is holding our emotions inside until they become distorted and fermented and are expressed in vicious, attacking, and painful ways which contribute to tremendous marital conflict. This is the holding back process; on the other hand, it is an individual who does not monitor his honesty with love and sensitivity. Like a bull in the china shop, the individual breaks delicate and special aspects in a relationship.

Part of my therapeutic responsibility in helping people work through problems is to teach them some skills which help them share aspects of problems without destroying the relationship. The first strategy I find helpful is the marriage conference (Mozak 1977). To carry out a marriage conference, a couple is asked to sit back-to-back so there are no non-verbal cues being exchanged. The purpose of reducing the non-verbal communication is to delete the conflict message sent on this level. When these aspects of conflict are taken out of the communication, it is surprising how the importance of the message is dealt with, and the emotional impact is lessened.

While the couple sit back-to-back, each is assigned the role of talker and listener. They assume one of these roles at a time. The goal is to be eventually move them face-to-face, and have them demonstrate careful listening to each other.

Prior to beginning the marriage conference, I explain three levels of communication, e.g., me-to-you about things; me-to-you about me (self disclosures), and me-to-you about you (feedback). I request that they talk at each of these levels. While one person talks, (for a minimum of 15 minutes) the other is encouraged to listen carefully. It is interesting that several minutes usually pass before level two and level three communication is reached.

I have found that psychological and emotional intimacy is achieved as the couple spends time in self-disclosing and feedback. As these levels of communication are reached, the individual often moves through the secondary emotions such as anger and shares the primary emotions such as hurt, disappointment, and problems with self-esteem. When they begin to reveal themselves and reveal their fears about the relationship, it is touching the way the listener becomes primarily caring, and supportive rather than an enemy. After person one has talked for the designated period, he or she then becomes the listener and the other person the talking partner. The model used in the therapy session should then be discussed, clarified if necessary, and assigned for a longer period of time as homework.

Caution should be used in that the marriage conference is not assigned if people are in intense stages of antagonism. Antagonism must be defused before the couple can experience the closeness and understanding found in the marriage conference.

Finally, a third strategy, family circles (Lowe 1977), is carried out with several families by having children sit with the therapist in an inner circle with the parents sitting directly behind their children in an outer circle. The parents assume the role of the listener and observer. They hear their child or children and hear and observe the other children in the circle. This accomplishes the defusing of negative non-verbal communication between parent and child and facilitates more openness in problem solving. The goal is to allow people to be heard by giving the role of listener to one group, and the role of talker to another group.

The children discuss their thoughts, feelings, and intentions with the therapist and with each other, a guided catharsis session, then the children sit behind their parents so they hear their parents and see and hear the other parents. The parents now have the time to share thoughts, feelings, and desires with the therapist and each other. It is not long before the therapist can introduce direct discussion by saying something like, “That is an interesting thought. Would you be willing to turn to your child and talk about that for just a minute?” The parents may then turn from the inside circle and talk with their son or daughter for a few minutes and then turn back to the circle of parents.

Ultimately, the goal is to have each of the families involved participate directly in resolving the conflict. The circles break into family groups at this time with the therapist moving, as appropriate, from family to family. As in the marriage conference, the opportunity to speak and listen without interruption serves to reduce tensions and defenses, and opens the way for fruitful cooperation in resolving problems.

In summary, I have suggested several assumptions I make regarding interpersonal conflict resolution. I have presented individual dyad and familial strategies to assist clients through these problems in a cooperative way. These approaches have been useful in my practice. Perhaps they may aid those attempting to help others.

References:


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