

# Dealing Successfully with Conflict

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Healthy communication is based on the assumption that we all have the right to express our feelings in ways that respect others. Personal relationships become more genuine and satisfying when we share our honest reactions with others and allow them to do the same. Below are some helpful hints to assist you in expressing yourself appropriately.

- 1. Use "I" statements.** For example, use the statement "I am angry with you" rather than "You make me angry." This takes responsibility for the reaction rather than making the other person wrong. It increases the likelihood that your message will be heard rather than reacted to defensively.
- 2. Describe your own reaction** rather than evaluating the other person's behavior. Describing your personal reaction leaves others free to listen to your perspective and avoiding evaluative language makes others less defensive. For instance, telling someone they are "dominating" is an evaluation; telling someone "I felt dominated when you \_\_\_\_\_" takes responsibility for your own reaction and reduces the likelihood of conflict.
- 3. Be specific.** To tell someone that they are "disrespectful" is a blanket evaluative statement. Instead, stick to what happened in a specific incident such as "Earlier when we were deciding our roles for the group project, I tried to share my opinion and you interrupted twice. I ended up feeling like we hadn't all contributed, and I'm wondering what we could do about that."
- 4. Avoid ganging up.** Speak directly to the individual involved. Seeking out allies may relieve your distress temporarily, but it decreases the likelihood of actual resolution. Do your best to resist the temptation of negative gossip, and if you do speak to others about the situation, acknowledge that to the individual when the two of you speak. Ideally, speak with others about the situation only if you need guidance on how best to deal with it.
- 5. Make statements based on observations rather than inferences.** Use what you actually *saw* or *heard* in the behavior of another person rather than what you "think" someone meant. For instance, "I notice that the dishes have been in the sink for a week" rather than "It's really rude of you to think we're going to clean up after you."
- 6. Watch what you make things mean and check out assumptions.** Intention and interpretation are rarely the same. For instance, just because you think someone was "inconsiderate" doesn't mean that the intention was to offend you, so recognize what you're making the behavior mean and if you can't let it go, check it out with other person. For instance, "When you leave dishes for that long, I take it to mean that you don't care about the rest of us or that you want us to do it for you. Are either of those true?"

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7. **Consider the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback.** Feedback can be destructive when it serves only your needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. Ask for the other person's viewpoint. When resolving a situation, ask "Does that work for you?" or "What would work for you?" After all, if it doesn't work for both parties, it's not going to happen.
8. **Paraphrase to ensure understanding.** One way to work towards resolution is to have each receiver rephrase the feedback he or she has received for accuracy. Try rephrasing both the content and the emotion of the sender. For instance, "What I get from what you said is that you're not comfortable not being able to leave a dish in the sink overnight and that you get irritated when I wash them for you. Is that right?"
9. **Make direct statements about things the receiver can control.** People will inevitably be frustrated if they're criticized about things they can't control.
10. **Make well-timed statements.** Generally, feedback is most useful soon after the given behavior, depending of course on the person's readiness to hear it, and the support available from others.
11. **Get outside assistance if needed from a neutral third party.** If the parties involved are too emotionally triggered for discussions to be effective, consider pulling in a neutral third party to facilitate discussion. The UT Mediation and Facilitation Clinic can assist (471-1950).
12. **Remember that conflict is a part of life and commit to learning to handle it effectively.** For additional assistance, contact the UT Counseling Center or the UT Mediation and Facilitation Clinic.

### **Suggested Readings:**

Robert E. Alberti and Michael Emmons, *Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living* (1995).

Theodore I. Rubin, *The Angry Book* (1998)