

Conflict Resolution: Mistakes to Avoid

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Conventional wisdom (and research) says that good communication can improve relationships, trust and support. The converse is also true: poor communication can weaken bonds, creating mistrust and even contempt! Here are some examples of negative and even destructive attitudes and communication patterns that can exacerbate conflict in a relationship.

How many of these sound like something you'd do?

1. Avoiding Conflict Altogether:

Rather than discussing building frustrations in a calm, respectful manner, some people just don't say anything to [the other person] until they're ready to explode, and then blurt it out in an angry, hurtful way. This seems to be the less stressful route—avoiding an argument altogether—but usually causes more stress to both parties, as tensions rise, resentments fester, and a much bigger argument eventually results. It's much healthier to address and resolve conflict.

2. Being Defensive:

Rather than addressing [someone's] complaints with an objective eye and willingness to understand the other person's point of view, defensive people steadfastly deny any wrongdoing and work hard to avoid looking at the possibility that they could be contributing to a problem. Denying responsibility may seem to alleviate stress in the short run, but creates long-term problems when [others] don't feel listened to and unresolved conflicts and continue to grow.

3. Overgeneralizing:

When something happens that they don't like, some blow it out of proportion by making sweeping generalizations. Avoid starting sentences with, "You always..." and "You never...", as in, "You always come home late!" or "You never do what I want to do!" Stop and think about whether or not this is really true. Also, don't bring up past conflicts to throw the discussion off-topic and stir up more negativity. This stands in the way of true conflict resolution, and increases the level of conflict.

4. Being Right:

It's damaging to decide that there's a 'right' way to look at things and a 'wrong' way to look at things, and that your way of seeing things is right. Don't demand that [the other person] see things the same way, and don't take it as a personal attack if they have a different opinion. Look for a compromise or agreeing to disagree, and remember that there's not always a 'right' or a 'wrong', and that two points of view can both be valid.

5. "Psychoanalyzing" / Mind-Reading:

Instead of asking about [the other person's] thoughts and feelings, people sometimes decide that they 'know' what [the other person is] thinking and feeling based only on faulty interpretations of their actions—and always assume it's negative!

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6. Forgetting to Listen:

Some people interrupt, roll their eyes, and rehearse what they're going to say next instead of truly listening and attempting to understand [the other person]. This keeps you from seeing their point of view, and keeps [the other person] from wanting to see yours!

Don't underestimate the importance of really listening and empathizing with the other person!

7. Playing the Blame Game:

Some people handle conflict by criticizing and blaming the other person for the situation. They see admitting any weakness on their own part as a weakening of their credibility, and avoid it at all costs, and even try to shame them for being 'at fault'. Instead, try to view conflict as an opportunity to analyze the situation objectively, assess the needs of both parties and come up with a solution that helps you both.

8. Trying to 'Win' The Argument:

I love it when Dr. Phil says that if people are focused on 'winning' the argument, "the relationship loses"! The point of a relationship discussion should be mutual understanding and coming to an agreement or resolution that respects everyone's needs. If you're making a case for how wrong the other person is, discounting their feelings, and staying stuck in your point of view, you are focused in the wrong direction!

9. Making Character Attacks:

Sometimes people take any negative action from and blow it up into a personality flaw. This creates negative perceptions on both sides. Remember to respect the person, even if you don't like the behavior.

10. Stonewalling:

When [someone] wants to discuss troubling issues in the relationship, sometimes people defensively stonewall, or refuse to talk or listen to [the other person]. This shows disrespect and, in certain situations, even contempt, while at the same time letting the underlying conflict grow. Stonewalling solves nothing, but creates hard feelings and damages relationships. It's much better to listen and discuss things in a respectful manner.