

How to Handle Interpersonal Conflict Like a Pro

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Interpersonal conflict refers to any type of conflict involving two or more people. It's different from an *intrapersonal* conflict, which refers to an internal conflict with yourself.

Mild or severe, interpersonal conflict is a natural outcome of human interaction. People have very different personalities, values, expectations, and attitudes toward problem-solving. When you work or interact with someone who doesn't share your opinions or goals, conflict can result.

Conflict isn't always serious, though. Nor is it always negative. Learning how to recognize and work through interpersonal conflict in productive, healthy ways is an important skill that can help you have better [relationships](#) in your day-to-day life.

First, identify the type of conflict



Medically reviewed by [Timothy J. Legg, Ph.D., CRNP](#) — Written by [Crystal Raypole](#) on February 10, 2020

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In broad terms, conflict happens when two or more people disagree. You might experience verbal conflict, such as an argument, or nonverbal conflict, which might involve someone turning their back or walking away from you.

No matter how conflict shakes out, you can identify it as one of these six types.

Pseudo conflict

A pseudo conflict typically happens in one of the following situations:

- A misunderstanding leads to a difference of opinion.
- The people involved in the conflict believe they have different goals when, in reality, they have similar goals.
- When one person involved in the conflict mocks or taunts the other (sometimes called badgering).

In most cases, you can resolve pseudo conflict without too much trouble. It generally just takes a bit of clarification about what you actually meant or some further exploration of how your goals actually do align.

Most people don't enjoy being teased, especially in front of other people, so you may also need to [talk through](#) badgering or teasing behavior.

Fact conflict

You're utterly convinced snakes can hear, but your friend insists they can't because they don't have ears.

This illustrates a fact conflict, also called simple conflict. Fact conflict happens when two or more people disagree over information or the truth of something.

Because this kind of conflict involves facts, you can often resolve it pretty easily. All you have to do is check a credible source for the truth.

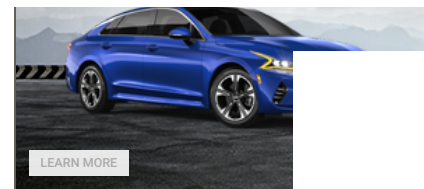
Value conflict

This kind of conflict comes up when different personal values lead to disagreement.

If you and a coworker have different views on abortion rights, for example, or you and your brother have different religious beliefs, you might find yourself in a value conflict.

This type of conflict doesn't always have a clear path to resolution. People can have such widely varying personal values and beliefs, so you may find it most helpful to just acknowledge your opposing viewpoints (respectfully) and accept that you likely won't change each other's minds.

Policy conflict



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This conflict happens when people can't agree on a problem-solving strategy or action plan in a given situation. Personality, upbringing, education, and any number of other factors might have an impact on someone's approach to policy, or problem-solving, so this kind of conflict isn't unusual.

It might happen when parents disagree on the most effective way to discipline a child, for example, or when coworkers have different ideas about the best way to tackle a big project.

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Ego conflict

Ever had an argument where neither you nor the other person involved could back down or accept a loss?

Ego conflict often develops alongside other types of conflict, and it can make any disagreement trickier to navigate. It commonly happens when conflict gets personal.

Maybe you, or others involved, link the outcome of conflict to your intelligence. Or perhaps someone uses the disagreement as a platform to make judgmental or derogatory remarks. In either scenario, attempts to resolve the actual conflict might derail as you concentrate on the ego conflict instead.

Meta conflict

Meta conflict happens when you have conflict about your conflicts.

Some examples:

- "You always nod along, but you never actually hear what I'm saying!"
- "That's so unfair. That's not what we're talking about at all."
- "You're too worked up. I can't deal with you when you're like this."

To resolve conflict effectively, you need to [communicate](#) clearly. While meta conflict might bring up issues with communication, it often does so in unhelpful ways.

When you don't address communication problems productively, especially when you're already at odds, the conflict can become more complicated.

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Then, decide your resolution strategy

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Managing conflict doesn't necessarily mean preventing conflict. Different opinions and perspectives can provide opportunities to better understand how other people feel and relate to them on a deeper level.

When conflict inevitably happens, respectful communication is key. You may not always agree with everyone, and that's just fine. Polite words and an open mind can help you resolve — or come to terms with — differences more effectively.

There are plenty of healthy, productive ways to work through conflict, though some won't work in every situation. Generally, conflict resolution falls into one of the following categories.

Withdrawal

When you withdraw from conflict, you're avoiding the problem. You don't talk about it, or you only talk about it in roundabout ways.

Withdrawal (also called avoidance) might involve:

- ignoring the other people involved
- refusing to discuss the issue
- shutting down entirely
- physically withdrawing from conflict
- brushing off the problem

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Conflict avoidance can cause problems in relationships when it happens a lot, especially if you

avoid talking about things that really matter to you or anyone else involved. Withdrawal can worsen a problem, or at the very least, make it seem more significant over time.

Someone may also choose to avoid conflict by refusing to directly discuss the issue. Instead, they continue to bring it up indirectly with sarcastic or [passive-aggressive](#) remarks. This can increase frustration and make the situation worse for everyone involved.

When to withdraw

Withdrawal isn't all bad news, though. It can be particularly useful for dealing with:

- **Intense conflict.** When emotions are high, you might temporarily withdraw in order to cool off and collect yourself. Temporary avoidance can help a lot, especially when you don't want to damage your relationship with the other person involved.
- **Unimportant conflict.** You might choose to avoid conflict if it's about something that doesn't really matter, especially if your relationship to the other person involved *does* matter. For example, your best friend insists he won your last board game tournament. You remember a different outcome, but you don't feel like arguing about it, so you stop challenging his memory.

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Accommodation

Accommodating involves putting someone else's needs first. You concede the conflict, which allows you to "be the bigger person," so to speak.

The others involved may feel positively toward you, but keep in mind that always accommodating other people when disagreements come up keeps you from getting your own needs met. Maybe you don't mind not getting what you want since you want your partner to be happy. Or maybe you genuinely don't care about where you go on vacation.

[Healthy relationships](#) should involve some give and take. Just as you consider your partner's needs and desires, they should also consider yours when you express them.

As with most good things in life, moderation is key when it comes to accommodation.

Competition

Competing, or forcing, involves pushing for your own perspective. You want to "win" the conflict, so you try to get the others involved to see things your way.

Competition doesn't always mean using aggression or manipulation tactics. You're still competing if you politely request or attempt to persuade others to go with your suggestion.

Contrary to popular belief, competition *can* lead to positive outcomes, particularly when you compete respectfully.

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have proof to back you up. When you win the conflict, everyone involved benefits. If you have more knowledge about a specific situation, you may also need to make others follow your lead, especially if there's a potential for danger.

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Conflict can sometimes escalate, though, if everyone involved wants to win, especially when no one is willing to consider other resolution methods.

It can also affect relationships. Just as always accommodating can have a negative impact over time, always forcing another person to accommodate *you* can also lead to problems, especially when competing involves coercion.

Compromise

When you compromise, you give some ground, but so does the other person. In other words, you both get some of what you want. This can make compromise seem like a great approach to conflict resolution. Everyone wins, right?

Yes, but also no, since you also lose a little. Down the line, when one or both of you remember what you conceded, you might feel frustrated or resentful. In some cases, it might even cause the initial conflict to flare up again.

Compromise can have benefits, though. It's generally better to get some of what you want than none, for one. It can also work well when, for whatever reason, it isn't possible to solve a problem in a way that completely satisfies everyone.

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Just keep in mind, once you reached the point of compromise, you can often take it a step further and collaboratively problem-solve.

Collaboration

Successful collaboration generally *does* mean everyone wins. But it requires effort on everyone's part, so while it might offer more long-term benefits than other conflict resolution strategy, it may have less popularity than quicker solutions like compromise.

To collaborate successfully, you have to communicate. You both share your feelings and use [active listening](#) to really understand the other person's point of view. You use this knowledge to work out a solution that lets you both get what you want.

It's best to try to collaborate when possible. This strategy is particularly recommended for addressing conflict with a romantic partner, or anyone else you want to maintain a strong relationship with.

To collaborate successfully, look at your conflict as a problem to solve together, not a competition to win individually. Flexibility also helps. You might think you've found the right answer, but your partner may have an idea that makes your solution even better.

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Pitfalls to avoid

It's not always easy to address interpersonal conflict, especially when the people involved have very different ideas. Avoid these destructive patterns, and you'll find you can navigate even the most difficult conflicts more successfully.

Mutual hostility

When your conflict becomes a full-blown argument, you've likely reached the point of mutual hostility. Hostility can involve personal attacks, shouting, and other types of verbal abuse.

[Brian Jones](#), a therapist in Seattle, recommends keeping an eye out for:

- contempt or exchange of insults
- criticism or attacking someone's character rather than voicing a specific complaint
- defensiveness rather than openness to feedback
- [stonewalling](#)

These tendencies can prevent any productive change, Jones explains.

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Demand-withdrawal

This pattern describes a situation where one person expresses their needs or tries to address conflict, but the other person responds by withdrawing or avoiding the issue.

Since only one person makes an attempt to solve the problem, it often doesn't get solved. Usually, the person who wants to resolve the conflict will keep bringing up the issue while the other person will keep changing the subject or exiting the discussion.

In most cases, frustration and resentment build on both sides as the problem gets worse.

Counter-blaming

This happens when one person redirects conflict by blaming the other person for the issue.

You ask your partner why they didn't vacuum the house like they said they would, and they respond by saying, "Well, you moved the vacuum, so I couldn't find it."

Conflict that involves counter-blaming can quickly get out of hand. Accusations can lead to frustration and stress, and you might feel more like snapping back a retort than taking care to respond productively.

Jones recommends using "I" statements to avoid this pattern. Instead of saying, "You did X," or "You always Y," try something like, "I have a hard time when X" or "I feel Y."

This lets you share your own perspective without blaming anyone else.

Cross-complaining

When a partner raises an issue, you might feel tempted to raise a completely unrelated issue that's been bothering you.

You say: "Can you please put your shoes in the closet when you get home? I always trip over them."

Your sister cross-complains by saying: "Oh, sure, I'll do it just as soon as you put your books away. They're all over the table and no one else can use it."

"It's a good idea to keep conversations about one specific issue," Jones says. Working through one problem at a time can make it easier to contain the conflict.

Serial arguments

Have you ever ended an argument without coming to any real resolution? You just couldn't talk about the issue any longer, so you gave up, or someone withdrew.

When issues aren't resolved, they'll probably come up again, and again, and again.

Arguing about the same thing over and over can have a serious impact on your relationship. What started as a minor problem with a fairly simple solution may become a point of contention that infuriates you both immediately.

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The bottom line

Whether conflict happens between friends, coworkers, or romantic partners, it's perfectly normal. You may feel uncertain of the best way to resolve each type of conflict as it comes up, but remember that there isn't always a "best" way.

When you approach conflict with flexibility, respect, and the willingness to listen and consider others' perspectives, you'll have a better chance of successfully collaborating to find the best solution for everyone.

Crystal Raypole has previously worked as a writer and editor for GoodTherapy. Her fields of interest include Asian languages and literature, Japanese translation, cooking, natural sciences, sex positivity, and mental health. In particular, she's committed to helping decrease stigma around mental health issues.

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