
Dealing with the emotional aspect of conflict

Stimulating positive emotions to resolve disputes and improve relationships.

Few people can get through the day without having to deal with some type of conflict. At home, working parents may debate who is better able to stay home with a sick child. At work, a social worker and a psychologist may disagree about how best to treat a patient.

When it comes to dealing with conflict, many if not most people ignore or suppress emotions. Yet no matter how hard people try to remain unemotional, during a conflict their hearts tend to beat faster, their palms sweat, and their breathing quickens. All of these physical signs attest to underlying emotions that can complicate the discussion.

Dr. Daniel Shapiro, a psychologist who is director of the Harvard International Negotiation Initiative, has spent years thinking about how emotions can both help and hinder problem solving. Early in his career, Dr. Shapiro helped establish a pilot conflict-resolution program for patients receiving care for psychotic disorders at Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital. Later, he trained with the New York City Police hostage negotiation team. Currently he consults with international leaders about how to resolve political disputes.

And there is plenty that ordinary people can learn from hostage negotiators and international peace brokers. Simply put, they have discovered what mental health professionals may find intuitive: conflicts can be resolved more successfully when reason *and* emotion are taken into account. The challenge is to learn how to deal effectively with the multitude of positive and negative emotions—excitement, fear, pride, shame, hope, despair, elation, frustration—without becoming overwhelmed.

Dr. Shapiro and his colleague Roger Fisher, a Harvard Law School professor emeritus (and co-author of a book on negotiation, *Getting to YES*), have

developed an appealing approach to conflict resolution in their own book, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*. They have organized well-known psychological concepts into a form that is easy to teach and therefore may be useful in a variety of real-world and clinical settings.

Focus on core concerns

Shapiro and Fisher advise focusing on core concerns rather than emotions *per se*. These concerns represent basic human desires that underlie both negative and positive emotions in any conflict. They've identified five core concerns that can be used to shift emotions into a more positive, productive direction during a negotiation.

Appreciation. This may be the most important core concern to keep in mind when a disagreement arises. Appreciation encompasses the desire to be understood and valued. Expressing appreciation involves finding the merit in another person's point of view. This can help prevent a conflict from escalating, and help to resolve a dispute while strengthening a relationship.

The power of appreciation in sustaining marital relationships, for example, is illustrated by the frequently cited research of Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle. In a series of studies published in the late 1990s, Dr. Gottman and colleagues videotaped newlyweds as they argued. Researchers transcribed what was said, and also made note of facial expressions and tone of voice. These studies showed that couples who express appreciation for one another are more likely to remain married than couples who do not. Couples in stable marriages expressed about five positive emotions (showing interest, affection, or humor, for example) during the discussion for every one negative emotion (defensiveness, contempt, or anger). In

couples who later divorced, the ratio of positive to negative emotions was closer to one to one.

Early interactions set the tone, so expressing appreciation can get a negotiation off to a good start. In one study, for example, Dr. Gottman showed that it was possible to predict which newlyweds would divorce within six years by observing their interactions during the first three minutes of a 15-minute argument.

Affiliation. The antagonistic “me against you” tendency in a conflict can be offset by building an emotional connection, so that adversaries become allies. They cooperate to solve a problem.

Building affiliation entails approaching substantive differences as shared problems to be worked out together. Even when the issues dividing people are contentious and heated, collaborative problem solving can help.

Simple techniques can also help build affiliation. Examples include engaging in small talk about common interests like family or sports; using the pronouns “we” and “us” to convey the sense of shared purpose; and sitting side by side, not across a table. These strategies encourage cooperation.

Autonomy. Conflicts often develop when people feel that they weren't adequately involved in a decision that directly affected them. In a mental health setting, a common example is treatment adherence—a patient taking a medication as prescribed. A clinician may be attending mostly to alleviating symptoms, while the patient may be more concerned about side effects. If the clinician dismisses those side effects as “minor,” without understanding why a patient is so concerned, that impinges on the patient's autonomy. In response, patients may get defensive, combative, or resist following “orders” to re-establish autonomy.

To foster autonomy, Dr. Shapiro recommends the “ACBD” approach: “Always Consult Before Deciding.” That means actively involving people in a decision-making process when the outcome affects them in some way.

Status. In the heat of a conflict, adversaries may compete in terms of standing or expertise. One might say, “I’ve got more experience in this field,” or use body language that conveys superior status, such as looming over another person. Not surprisingly, this may make the other person feel diminished or resentful.

But status can also be used positively. One person can begin a discussion by asking the other person for advice. This does not diminish the first person’s status, yet it allows the other person to express a viewpoint and share expertise.

Role. People have many roles in life. An individual may be a spouse, a parent, a homeowner, and a company manager. But when it comes to resolving a conflict, the roles people play tend to be temporary and transient. They act variously as listeners, mediators, or advocates. The challenge is to determine which role is most appropriate at particular times.

In some cases, one party may need to adjust roles to resolve a conflict. For example, a wife wants to discuss a frustrating work situation when she gets home. Her husband interrupts, offering advice about how to fix the problem. The advice may be good, but his wife gets angry and scolds him for interrupting. She wants him to listen to her, because she can’t speak as freely at work. So the husband’s most productive role is not as an advocate but as a listener.

At other times, both parties can adopt different temporary roles, or even assume the same role, to solve a problem. Examples of helpful temporary roles include joint problem solver, brainstormer, devil’s advocate, or mediator.

Use lenses and levers

Some of the advice so far may seem obvious, but the trick is to put it into practice. Core concerns can be used as “lenses” first, to provide a clearer view of the negative emotions fueling a disagreement. Later, the core concerns can be used as “levers” to push the negotiation into a productive direction.

When a dispute is feeling deadlocked, Dr. Shapiro recommends first applying the lens to yourself, to understand your own negative reactions in an argument. For example, which of the core concerns might explain why you are becoming upset, angry, or frustrated? Were you feeling unappreciated? Did someone act without regard to your autonomy? Work down the list mentally and see which core concerns may underlie your emotional reaction.

Next, apply the lens to the other person’s point of view. What core concerns would explain his or her emotional reaction? Was his status diminished? Was she feeling bullied (autonomy) or marginalized (affiliation)?

Finally, assuming all parties have had a chance to reflect on the bad feelings and calm down, apply the lever to move the negotiation forward. Show appreciation to restart the discussion on a positive note. Thank the other person for returning to the table. Continue the discussion with the five core concerns in mind. This should improve the prospects for a satisfying resolution. ♥

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Words that help stimulate positive emotions

Core concern	How to evoke it
Appreciation	Find merit in what the other person is saying, feeling, or doing. Say something like, “I know that you’re concerned about drug side effects. Given your perspective, I can see why you might want to wait before beginning antidepressant treatment.”
Affiliation	Focus on shared problem solving and teamwork. Say things like, “It looks like we’re at an impasse here. Why don’t we brainstorm together about how to solve this?”
Autonomy	Actively involve people in decisions that affect them. A clinician might say to a patient, “I’m recommending this antidepressant because I think it’s most likely to be effective. But it may cause dry mouth or sexual side effects. Are you willing to risk these side effects?”
Status	Convey in words and body language that everyone involved in solving a conflict has something valuable to offer, regardless of title or rank. Ask for advice, saying something like, “What do you think the best options are in this situation?”
Role	Empower people as listeners, facilitators, or problem solvers, depending on the conflict. Say something such as, “Why don’t we both spend five minutes coming up with options and then go over them to see which we think would work?”

For more information and helpful resources, see www.beyond-reason.net or www.pon.harvard.edu/hnp/ini.