

## Peacefully resolving conflict

Everyday conflicts can escalate into violence, if people don't learn to solve them peacefully. Teens, especially, are at risk, because they have fewer skills to cope with conflict. Without supervision, conflicts among teenagers can quickly become violent. Teens and adults can benefit from the conflict resolution tips listed below.

Dealing with conflict in a positive way can be difficult. To do so, people must look at themselves, be willing to listen and learn, and be ready to try different ways of communicating. When growing up, your family may not have used the best methods of communicating or resolving conflict. It's never too late to learn, especially with a little help.

### **Look at yourself first**

To see yourself clearly, you may need outside help. Ask a close friend to help you with the questions below. Or ask for the Genesee Health System handouts called *What's your conflict and communication style* and *Easy listening*.

- How do you resolve conflict? Check your conflict style. Do you avoid it, confront it, or try to solve it? Be honest. You may use a particular style for most conflicts, but is it productive? Can you identify conflicts where using a different style would have helped?

- How do you communicate? Check yourself. Do you express yourself clearly? Do you let prejudgments interfere with your listening? Poor communication alone may be the root of a conflict. If you can express yourself effectively and listen actively, you will find it much easier to resolve conflicts peacefully.

- Realize that no one is born knowing how to best resolve conflict or how to talk and listen to every person he or she may encounter. However, you can learn to better resolve conflict and to clearly communicate.

### **Send clear messages**

Half of the communication process is listening actively. When you express yourself, you can set the tone and keep a conflict from escalating by using the right language.

- **Avoid "you-messages."** In anger, it's easy to blame or accuse people. For example, Sandra is upset when Angela tells a personal secret, so Sandra blurts: "You're a jerk. You always spread gossip; you can't keep anything quiet." By giving that message, Sandra has made her friend defensive. An argument likely will follow, and nothing will be resolved.
- **Use "I-Messages."** For a productive conversation, Sandra needs to identify how she felt and describe this to Angela without blame or accusations: "I felt really angry when I heard that you told people about my family's problem. I'm not sure I can trust you anymore." This states how Angela's behavior affected Sandra. Sandra also could let Angela know what, if anything, could make the situation better for her, again stating it in "I" terms: "And what I want is..."

### **A resolution process**

Sometimes, listening and communication techniques alone are enough to resolve a conflict. But for more complicated issues, plan the conflict resolution process using the steps below. These techniques can work with friends, a couple, a boss and employee, a teacher and student, a coach and player, a parent and child, two business people, and just about any situation.

Remember that your attitude is important. You have to want to listen, to want to communicate, and to want to solve problems peacefully.

### **Before you meet ...**

- **Identify the issues** at stake in the conflict.
- **Separate the real interest from your stance.** For instance, use the example in the box, where Sandra was angry because Angela told her secret. Sandra's stance might be that if Angela tells another secret, Sandra is going to tell everything she knows about Angela. However, the real interest is that Sandra is hurt over the broken trust, and she doesn't want to confide in Angela.
- **Choose a peaceful, neutral environment** to talk that is free of interruptions. Give yourself enough time to discuss the problem and reach a solution. Make sure the time is convenient to both of you.

### **During the meeting...**

- **Set the tone** by stating your intentions and acknowledging the other person's help.
- **Define and discuss the problem.** Both of you must agree on the problem to find a solution. Don't interrupt.
- **Summarize progress.** At each step, re-state and confirm, for instance, that you agree on what the problem is.
- **Explore solutions.** Put all solutions on the table and discuss the pros and cons of each, including future consequences. Choose a solution acceptable to both parties, specifically stating what each person will do and how and when it will be done.
- **Set a follow-up time.** Agree to check with each other in the near future to see if the solution is working and to raise any unexpected problems.
- If needed, ask for help from a neutral outsider, such as a minister, trained mediator or counselor.

### **Where to get help**

The above techniques can help prevent conflicts and help resolve them when they arise. If you need more help, talk to a counselor, or call Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740 or toll-free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310.

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