

What's your conflict and communication style?

What's your style of dealing with conflict, of communicating? Most people learn how to handle conflict and how to communicate by the example of their own families. However, families don't always handle conflict positively. Nor are they necessarily the most effective communicators.

To pick up where your family left off, check your style, using the questions below. Then, use the handout *Peacefully resolving conflict* to see how your style influences how you resolve conflicts and where you may need to make changes in your style.

How do you handle conflict?

Most problems stem from a person's conflict style, which he or she learns while growing up. Check the list below to identify your conflict style.

- **Avoidance.** Most people think conflict is bad, so they try to avoid it. This can appear in subtle ways:
 - **Denial:** If you deny conflict exists, you actually may be very angry. Since you can't express that, you bury your feelings, which lead to frustration and more anger. You may backbite or gossip, which worsens the conflict.
 - **Accommodation:** If you feel that agreeing is easier than disagreeing, you may find yourself smoothing over a potential conflict. You may apologize, find reasons to justify a difference of opinion, or change your own opinion, desire or behavior to match those of the other person. This actually can work if it's a one-time incident of small importance. If you accommodate often, resentment may build, leading to serious and disruptive conflicts.
 - **Confrontation.** Some prefer to avoid conflict; others like to meet it directly. If you view conflict as a "win-lose" situation, you may try to win a conflict to prove you're right. You're likely to state your opinions and flat-out disagree with the other person. You may blame or even use insults or threats to make a point. This style usually doesn't work well. It can quickly lead to a serious struggle, even becoming a long-term conflict.
 - **Problem solving.** If you view conflict as a natural part of relationships – rather than a win-lose situation or as a disruption to be smoothed over – you may use a problem-solving style of dealing with conflict. You're less concerned with who's right or wrong and more concerned with finding a solution to satisfy those involved. You may use one or both of the problem-solving methods below.
 - **Compromise:** If you choose to compromise, you assume that to resolve a conflict, each person involved must give up something. In effect, each person involved "wins" and "loses." Each person keeps those issues most important to him or her and gives up those of lesser importance. A problem arises if one person has given up too much for the sake of compromise, which leads to resentment.
 - **Collaboration:** Instead of assuming that you must give up something, you and the other person can explore together what you both need and find a mutual solution.

For a "win-win" situation, each person must understand what's at stake for each other and what led up to the conflict. You solve the immediate problem this way and avoid future problems.

How do you communicate?

The root cause of many conflicts is poor communication. One person misinterprets what another person said, takes offense, starts an argument – and violence may be the result. As a speaker, you should make yourself clear. As a listener, you should make sure you understand what you think you hear. This can be difficult because your values, perceptions and assumptions influence communication:

- **Values** – what you believe to be right – define who you are. Values shape your decisions and the course of your life. If you have a conflict over values, the conflict can be very difficult to resolve. With someone with values very different from your own, you both may feel threatened, resulting in a breakdown of clear communication. To avoid such a breakdown, identify your values, and try to understand how they affect behavior.
- **Perceptions** – your viewpoints in response to a situation – are shaped by your values, previous experiences, culture and expectations. Because of this, two people can experience the same event but perceive entirely different things, causing misunderstanding and conflict. For effective communication, you must be willing to look at the situation from the other person's perspective – and accept that point of view as valid.
- **Assumptions** – a statement or judgment that is accepted as true without proof or demonstration – develop from your values and perceptions. A stereotype, for example, is a conclusion that is drawn about an individual or group of people based on limited information or a single characteristic. Suspicion is an assumption that involves doubt or mistrust. If two people enter into a discussion with very different assumptions about an issue or about their relationship, miscommunication can occur.
- **Communication style.** Communication can be disrupted by subtle differences in style, such as how close you stand to another person while talking, the tone and loudness of your voice, and the words you choose. A similarity in style makes it easier for people to focus on the content of the discussion, though conflicts still may arise. If your communication style is very different from the other person's style, you must both work harder to communicate clearly. Remember that how you say something and the nonverbal cues you give have as much effect on the listener as what you say.

If you need help

If you need more help, 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. www.genhs.org ©