

Coping with Conflict

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Conflict

Conflict is part of all human relationships. Sooner or later, two or more people will disagree, because we are all different. We can want different things, we can see the same thing differently, we have different likes and dislikes, and so on. Wherever differences occur, there is a possibility of conflict.

What matters is not so much that there is disagreement, but **how it is handled**. There can be conflict, destructiveness and disrespect, or differences can be resolved constructively and respectfully.

We all learn our own way of handling disagreements with others. Our way becomes a habitual reaction to any conflict. This leads to a pattern developing of what happens in conflict.

We can learn new ways to deal with conflict. We can then choose to respond from habit, or choose to deal with each new disagreement in a different way – this often feels uncomfortable at first, but becomes more natural the more we practise it.

Conflict in families where there is substance use

Disagreement frequently arises in families where there is substance use, because the user wants different things from other family members.

For example, a substance user may want to spend household money on drugs or alcohol which other family members want to spend on food, rent or bills.

Families cope as best they can with what they know. However, often entrenched patterns of conflict develop which are stressful, upsetting and frustrating.

Conflict is created by both people

Whatever happens between two people, including conflict, is created by both of them – as they say, it takes two to tango. Both people create what happens, because each influences the other and is affected by the other. For example:

Tom comes into the living room looking stoned. His dad shouts in an exasperated way ‘I’ve told you, don’t use drugs in the house’. Tom reacts by angrily saying ‘you never leave me alone’. Tom’s mum then intervenes and says ‘you shouldn’t shout at your dad, he’s only trying to help’. Tom reacts by getting angry with his mum. Mum starts to cry. Dad then says ‘look what you’ve done to your poor mother again’.

There isn’t necessarily anything wrong with what they believe or feel, such as Tom feeling got at, dad believing Tom shouldn’t use drugs in the house and being angry about that, or mum getting upset because she was shouted at. It is how they respond to believing or feeling these things that is problematic.

Two significant things are happening here. How they behave **invites** a certain kind of **response** from the other person, and how they **respond** to others is them taking up the ‘**invitation**’ to respond that way. This is how conflict is created by everyone involved.

Noticing how people create conflict together is not about saying who is to blame, or that the conflict is a particular person’s fault. Typically, people are coping as best they can and inadvertently create the conflict.

How to ‘break out of it’ using the idea that conflict is created by both people

- If how I **behave** invites a certain kind of response from the other person, then I can **choose** to behave in a way that invites them to respond in the way that I want.
- If how I **respond** to others is to accept their invitation to react in a certain way, then I can **choose** to decline their invitation and react in a different way.

When we choose our response and behave differently, then often other people respond differently to us. What we put out, we get back. Therefore:

You can’t change someone else, but...

You can change your response to them.

This then invites a different response from them, and...

They may respond this way and change.

So if you want to change someone, try changing yourself!

In conflict we tend to either give up and feel powerless to affect the ways someone behaves, or we try to dominate and control them. However, the reality of any relationship is somewhere between these two – we do have influence.

Our influence has limits

This isn't magic and doesn't always work – the other person may not 'hear' your invitation as you meant it, or they may decline to take up your invitation.

Coping with conflict

The first step is to choose to not be in conflict.

Ideas for using your influence to encourage negotiating include:

Knowing about conflict

Reflect upon what happens in the conflicts you have with the family member who uses substances. To help, ask yourself:

- What are the triggers to conflict starting? Does it even have to start?
- What are the fixed patterns to how conflict goes?
- What are the roles people adopt?
- What are the payoffs people get for the roles they play?
- What are the prices people pay for the role?
- What is my responsibility, because this is the bit I can change?

Being assertive

Using our personal power assertively, rather than being aggressive, passive or passive-aggressive. Assertiveness leads to 'win-win' outcomes.

Setting boundaries

It may be necessary to set a boundary, such as around how you talk about the issues that provoke conflict or around the issue of disagreement.

Developing a dialogue

In conflict there are usually two or more monologues – people are talking at each other and not listening. Aim for dialogue, which can be done by...

- Choosing your moment – e.g. not when someone is under the influence of drink/drugs
- Slowing down the conversation
- Listening
- Being open and honest
- Respecting the other person. You do not have to like or respect some aspects of a person's behaviour. Respecting someone is recognising that they are more than some of their behaviour and they are worthy of respect as another human being. We are all different and we are all equal

- Accepting and understanding the other person's point of view, even when we don't agree. Two people can experience the same thing differently
- Using 'I' statements to own what we say
- Recognising our part of the responsibility for what has happened
- Recognising that others are responsible for their choices they make and their behaviour
- Acknowledging how we feel and how the other person feels
- Expressing feelings appropriately
- Recognising the need for all to exercise both rights and responsibilities
- Collaborating rather than confronting
- Commenting on what someone does rather than what they say, such as 'I note you say again you won't use drugs in the house, but in the past you always have'
- **Staying in this role. You will be inviting others to respond this way.**

Negotiating

- Starting easy and finishing strong, ratcheting up the toughness of your response only as necessary
- Collaborating, being flexible and willing to compromise to reach an agreement, but...
- Holding out for what is most important and compromising on lesser things
- Assessing the likely risks to people's health of the consequences of any negotiation
- Aiming for everyone to feel they have got something. The idea of 'win-win' as opposed to – 'win-lose' or 'lose-lose'
- Helping people to save face, rather than humiliating them
- Agreeing the terms of the resolution, such as when it will start, when you will talk about it again, the consequences of any boundary being broken etc
- Making a clear agreement.

Supporting ourselves

- Contacting organisations that can help, such as family support groups (listed on the Adfam website), mediation services, counselling, Refuge for domestic violence, etc
- Accepting the support of people you know, either to talk about the difficulties of the conflicts you have, or to have a diversion away from them
- Letting ourselves have a break from conflict/having a place of sanctuary to go.

Though conflicts are frequently seen as a crisis, they may also be seen as an opportunity for positive change.

Coping with other people's anger

If we react to others defensively by attacking or withdrawing, conflict often increases. If, instead, we respond assertively we can help to bring the conflict to a level at which emotions can be reduced and negotiating then becomes possible.

Saying 'enough' or 'I don't want your anger'. Firmly putting our hand up as if stopping traffic. Everyone has the right to say to someone else that they are angry with them. No one has the right to be abusive and aggressive to someone else.

Making an 'action-response-outcome' statement. The three parts of this are 'When you...I feel...and I ask that'. This is saying how someone's behaviour leads you to respond and what you want to happen, e.g. 'When you break our agreement not to use drugs in our home, I feel so angry and exasperated with your behaviour. I ask again that you honour what we agreed'. What is important is that **action** describes the user's behaviour and not them as a person, **response** is about your reaction, and **outcome** is what you want and not just a demand.

Being a 'broken record'. Keep repeating what you want and don't let yourself be deflected away.

Compromising or playing for time now, and negotiating later when dialogue is possible.

If all of the above feel too much of a risk because you feel threatened, then withdraw from the situation. This could be anything from a few moments apart to ending all contact.

Unhealthy ways of dealing with anger

Anger is a natural human emotion and one that can, in some circumstances, be an understandable and even healthy way of reacting. However, it can also be potentially dangerous to ourselves and others. Therefore there are many unwritten social rules inhibiting anger to control these risks. We typically swallow these rules whole as children, and then have beliefs such as 'it is unreasonable to be angry', 'people who are angry are out of control', or 'it's bad to be angry'.

This fear and shame about anger can mask it or lead us to modify what we do with it, with potentially unhealthy consequences. When we are not aware of being angry, or are aware but don't express it, anger can then become modified.

- Anger we are unable to effectively express can become persisting bitterness
- Anger that is denied can be displaced onto other people or organisations
- Anger that is denied can also be displaced within ourselves, becoming guilt and potentially depression
- Unexpressed anger that is suppressed within us can lead to tiredness, depression and physical illness
- Anger occasionally leads us to regress, as if we were a rebellious child again, and can lead to us living a restricted life of acting out our anger through our behaviour.

Signs that can indicate we might be unaware of our anger include regularly feeling irritable, critical, bored, dissatisfied or disturbed.

Signs that can indicate we are misplacing our anger include being overly sensitive to minor annoyances, being angry with people who don't 'deserve' it, a regular sense of injustice, or regularly blaming ourselves or others.

Often suppressing, denying or inappropriately expressing anger invites or perpetuates conflict.

Seeking support

Coping with conflict is difficult for most people. It can be especially hard if we feel isolated and unsupported. It can be beneficial to find individuals or organisations who will support you as you try to address the conflict that is happening in your relationships. You can search for local services which support families affected by substance use on the Adfam website www.adfam.org.uk. It also has a list of national support and information agencies which may be able to help you with the specific problems you face.

Adfam also has printable handouts about **setting and keeping boundaries** and **supporting ourselves** available for free download from www.adfam.org.uk.