



# The Power of CONFLICT

Conflict is an essential  
part of our intimate  
relationships.

Learn new ways of handling conflict and have  
more intimacy and trust in all of your relationships.

## How you handle conflict is central to your relationships.

Anika spent the last four days stewing in anger, sadness and frustration. She felt it was pointless to bring up their latest disagreement with her husband, Gabriel. So she went about her life trying to forget her disappointment. She took care of her work, parenting and household responsibilities as usual.

But the gloom of last weekend's disagreement tainted everything.

Anika didn't know how to handle conflict well and it impacted her marriage, her friendships and her family.

She's not alone. Conflict has been a core issue in every session I've facilitated in my three decades working with clients. Every. Single. Session.

It's obvious that how we handle conflict is important.

What isn't obvious is how conflict has the power to deepen our connections with our spouses, friends, family members and even our coworkers.

**If you want to build trust and intimacy in your relationships, conflict is the gateway to achieving what you long for.**

# Conflict is more than you realize.

Conflict is more than arguments and upsets. It's more than discord and disagreement. It is an important part of the energy flow between people. The essential rhythm of relationships is moving from harmony to disharmony, to repair and back to harmony over and over and over again.



## It's disharmony.

Last week, Gabriel forgot Anika's plan for the entire family to spend Saturday cleaning up their overflowing garage together. So when the chance to go on a 30-mile bike ride came up, Gabriel committed to going with their oldest son, Ben. He even invited Ben's best friend and his father to come along.

On Saturday, the mix-up came to light. Gabriel chose to follow through with his plans without discussing it with Anika. *This* was the biggest point of disharmony for Anika.

## It's unavoidable.

You *will* have disharmony in *all* of your intimate relationships.

Gabriel wants to have a close, loving and supportive relationship with Anika, and she with him. He didn't commit to the bike ride out of malice. Scheduling snafus happen to all of us at some point. We miscommunicate. We make mistakes. We forget important dates. Beyond that, we have different – and changing – tastes, wants and energy levels. These things lead to disharmony in our relationships.

## It happens frequently.

Babies and their mothers spend around 70 percent of their time together in disharmony. Seventy percent. It's the same with our adult relationships.

*We are in disharmony more often than not.*

The issue with the missed garage-cleaning date was just one of hundreds of moments of disharmony Gabriel and Anika had last week. From Anika accidentally waking Gabriel up early, to his unintentionally throwing away a keepsake from her grandmother, disharmony happened regularly.

## It's different for different people.

Some people feel the adrenalin that often comes with conflict as a rush of excitement. Other people shut down. Others feel personally attacked.

Gabriel thrives in his job as an executive in a financial firm because he loves the high-pressure negotiations it requires. Anika flourishes as the owner of a tutoring service. That is until she has to fire a vendor or deal with students' parents who aren't paying on time.

## It's influenced by our early experiences in life.

Our skills in handling the phase of disharmony form during childhood in the families we grow up in. This is where we learn a winner-take-all or avoid-at-all-cost approach to conflict. Many of us learned an approach to conflict that disconnects us from the people we long most to be connected to.

Gabriel's family taught him to debate his way to victory or be considered a loser. In his childhood home, the best debater got his way. The lesser-skilled debater went away defeated and resentful. In contrast, Anika learned as a girl to acquiesce for the sake of keeping the peace. On the rare times she didn't give in, there was hell to pay.

## And it's filled with potential.

Remember, this is where we spend about 70 percent of the time in our relationships. *We can* improve how we handle disharmony, when we rewire our brains for a new approach and learn the skill of repair. *We can* make our relationships more satisfying by tapping into the power of conflict.

After 18 years of marriage, Gabriel and Anika miss the closeness they used to feel. They want to regain the trust and intimacy they've lost over the years. Improving how they approach conflict has the potential to get them the relationship they crave.

# Tap into the power of conflict.

For us to tap into the power of conflict, we must master two things. We must hone our abilities to *control our reactivity* and *repair the disharmony*.



Anika and Gabriel were ready to try a new approach. They worked on building their skills of controlling their responses and repairing their connection.

So after four days of gloom, Anika calmly asked Gabriel if they could talk that night about the planning snafu from Saturday.

A few minutes into their talk, Anika felt her heartbeat speeding up and her anger rising. She recognized she was switching into fight-flight-or-flee mode. She knew this was a turning point. Previously, she would have defaulted to listening to her instincts telling her to flee.

We can tap into the power of conflict by learning *when* we need to take a time out and to *take* it.

Start paying close attention to what happens at the first sign of conflict. Check in with yourself. What is your level of emotional centeredness?

## Learn to recognize when your brain switches to a state of reactivity.

This is a foundational skill. And it's most helpful when you recognize any emotional changes *earlier* rather than later in times of conflict.

When Anika realized she was feeling reactive, she told Gabriel she needed to take a break. She promised to come back to the conversation after a 30-minute break.

When you realize you're not emotionally centered – you feel attacked or your primal instincts clamor to run the show – stop.

## Learn to take a time out.

Excuse yourself from the situation. Do things to soothe yourself, like exercising, meditating, dancing to your favorite music, or snuggling your pet.

Recognize you have the ability to change your automatic reactions.

And most importantly, remember *love*. Before returning to the conversation, remember your goal is to repair the situation, not prove your stance is right and the other person is wrong. You want to return to the conversation ready to connect with love.

After excusing herself from the conversation, Anika walked around the block and made a list of the things she loved about Gabriel.

## Learn to value and see the full picture.

Many of us get tunnel vision when we're in conflict with someone. Often, our default is for defensive, blaming or hurt thoughts to play on a loop in our heads. It's easy to get stuck feeling victimized or self-righteous.

What is hard is seeing things from the other person's perspective. It's also difficult to see the greater value of the relationship beyond the immediate disagreement. But these are the very things that empower us when in conflict. And practice makes it *much* easier to access these powerful skills.

So, the next time you're in conflict with someone, take a time out and soothe yourself. Then intentionally seek to put yourself in the other person's shoes.

When you do this, you probably will realize the other person doesn't know the full story behind your disharmony. You might also realize the conflict was a natural byproduct of being human, with no one having ill intent.

Then, take another step back and see the full picture of your relationship.

When we evaluate the conflict through our wisest lens, it's much easier for us to act with love and kindness. And, we're able to honor the entire relationship, not just fixate on the current discord.

Taking this broader view is a skill. Building this skill requires practice, but it's worth the effort.

When you see the full picture, it's much easier to remember we *want* to meet our partner's and our friends' needs. It makes it easier to act in our best interest, which is to protect and improve our most important relationships.

For Gabriel, realizing he wanted Anika to feel as good as he did about the outcomes of their disagreements changed everything.

He stopped seeing conflicts as debates with winners and losers. Instead, he practiced a mindset where the goal was *connection* and the *relationship was central*. This new mindset has improved his friendships, work relationships and dealings with family, as well as his marriage.

Now Gabriel strives to approach conflict as an advocate for Anika's needs, not just his own.

There's a simple method for getting to this place where you seek to address your needs *and* your partner's or friend's needs.

## Learn to speak about the feelings that come up for you not *from* the feelings.

Feeling angry, anxious or awkward is natural. We all have examples of the damage done to a relationship when we spoke *from* our feelings.

Anger, contempt, sadness and hopelessness, to name a few, can be overwhelmingly powerful when bottled up inside. This is why Anika's efforts to ignore the fallout from Saturday wasn't working.

So she shared with Gabriel how hurt she felt about his bike ride with Ben on Saturday. Gabriel hadn't understood the impact of his actions until Anika explained how she felt angry, unimportant and taken for granted. He was able to hear her with an open mind because she wasn't yelling at him or accusing him.

Naming your feelings and speaking *about* them lets you successfully share your perspective. It diffuses the intensity of those emotions. And hearing what your mate or friends are feeling often brings you closer together.

Once you've spoken about your feelings, you're ready for the most potent step for tapping into the power of conflict.



# Learn to repair.

Remember, we spend approximately 70 percent of our relationship time in disharmony. Learning to repair – to move from conflict to connection – can powerfully improve our relationships.

The goal of repairing is to create something you *both* can live with. You're seeking to meet the needs of both people. This way, you nurture the relationship and the people in it.



To create something you both can live with, start with how you speak and hear.

Make sure when you speak, you do so to make things *better*, not worse. Seek to hear and understand the other person. Validate your spouse's or friend's perspective. You do not need to agree with that perspective to do this.

Anika expressed her understanding of the jam Gabriel found himself in on Saturday morning. She validated his views on the importance of exercise, one-on-one time with each child, and encouraging their children's friendships. She acknowledged how he worried about canceling plans with family friends, especially since he had made the invitation.

Next, take responsibility for the parts of the other person's experience you are responsible for. For example, did you (like many of us) default to blaming and defensiveness? Had you unintentionally, but insensitively, dismissed your spouse's idea? If so, acknowledge it, own it, and sincerely apologize.

When Anika explained her perspective, Gabriel realized the impact his actions had on her. He saw what was important to her, even though he wouldn't have been upset had the roles been reversed. He apologized for making plans without checking with her. And he was remorseful for going on the bike ride without considering the impact it would have on the entire family.

Just as it is important to acknowledge what you're responsible for, it's important to explore *together* the things you don't agree with. It's healthy to *not* take responsibility for what is untrue for you. And remember to talk about your perspective in a way that makes things better.

Gabriel wanted Anika to know the scheduling mix-up on Saturday was unintentional. She responded by apologizing for spending the last four days avoiding connecting with him. She knew it wasn't his fault she'd repeatedly blown off his attempts to talk during that time.

They agreed to check with each other before making any plans that would impact their time together as a family. And they agreed the next time a schedule conflict came up they'd decide *together* how to resolve it.

Making this contract on how to handle future situations – and following through on it – builds valuable trust. This deepens connection and helps return the relationship to harmony.

By the end of this conversation, Anika and Gabriel felt they'd reached a new level of connection, love and support.

The same can be true for you. When you and the other person repair your disharmony, both of you feel heard, validated and valued. This works for every close relationship you have.

## Connect powerfully in your relationships.

How we handle conflict *directly* links to the levels of intimacy and trust in our relationships.

Build your skills of controlling reactivity and repairing the relationship and you will tap into the power of conflict. You will be able to move from disharmony to harmony faster and smoother. Very quickly, you'll find you have more understanding and connection in your marriage and friendships. And when you improve the quality of your relationships, you improve the quality of your life.

