

## Chapter 11

# Interpersonal Conflict Management



*There are many ways to resolve conflicts; seeing other sides of the issue is often a great start.*

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### CHAPTER OUTLINE



### Learning Objectives

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What Is Interpersonal Conflict?	<b>11.1</b> Define <i>interpersonal conflict</i> and identify the popular myths about conflict.
Principles of Interpersonal Conflict	<b>11.2</b> Explain the six principles of interpersonal conflict.
Conflict Management Stages	<b>11.3</b> Define and illustrate the stages of conflict management and explain how this model can be used in resolving interpersonal conflicts.
Conflict Management Strategies	<b>11.4</b> Define and distinguish between the effective and ineffective conflict management strategies.

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Among the most important of all your interpersonal interactions are those involving conflict. Interpersonal conflict creates uncertainty, anxiety, and problems for the relationship but also, as you'll soon see, opportunities for improving and strengthening the relationship. Understanding interpersonal conflict and mastering the skills of conflict management—the subject of this final chapter—will prove immensely effective in making your own relationship life more satisfying and more productive.

## What Is Interpersonal Conflict?

### 11.1 Define *interpersonal conflict* and identify the popular myths about conflict.

Interpersonal conflict is a special type of conflict, so we need to define here what this type of conflict is and what it isn't.

### A Definition of Interpersonal Conflict

You want to go to the movies with your partner. Your partner wants to stay home. Your insisting on going to the movies interferes with your partner's staying home, and your partner's determination to stay home interferes with your going to the movies. Your goals are incompatible; if your goal is achieved, your partner's goal is not. Conversely, if your partner's goal is achieved, your goal is not.

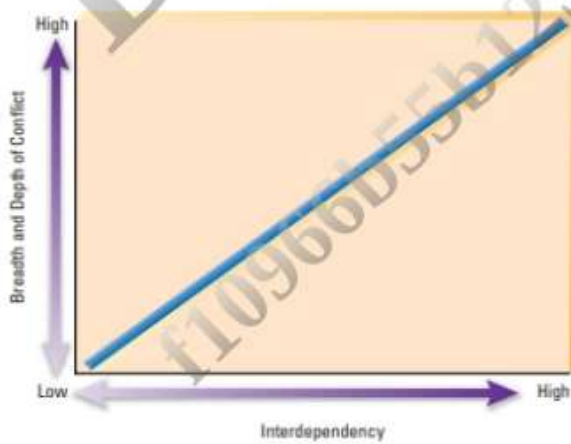
As this example illustrates, **interpersonal conflict** is disagreement between or among interdependent individuals (for example, friends, lovers, family members) who perceive their goals as incompatible (Cahn & Abigail, 2007; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2013; Hocker & Wilmot, 2007). More specifically, conflict occurs when people:

- are *interdependent* (they're connected in some significant way); what one person does has an effect on the other person.
- are *mutually aware of incompatible goals*; if one person's goal is achieved, then the other person's goal cannot be achieved. For example, say you have a limited budget and one person wants to buy a new car while the other person wants to pay down the mortgage, there is conflict.
- *perceive each other as interfering* with the attainment of their own goals. For example, you may want to study but your roommate may want to party; the attainment of either goal would interfere with the attainment of the other goal.

One of the implications of this concept of interdependency is that the greater the interdependency (1) the greater the number of issues about which conflict can center and (2) the greater the impact of the conflict on the individuals and on the relationship. Looked at in this way, it's easy to appreciate how important understanding interpersonal conflict and the strategies of effective conflict management are to your relationship life. Figure 11.1 illustrates this relationship between interdependency and the breadth and depth of conflict issues.

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**INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT**  
Confronting a Problem

Your next-door neighbor never puts out the garbage in time for pickup. As a result, the garbage—often broken into by stray animals—remains until the next pickup. You're fed up with the rodents the garbage draws, the smell, and the horrible appearance. *What are some of the things you can say to get your neighbor to be more responsive and yet not hate you in the process? What channel would you use?*



**Figure 11.1** Conflict and Interdependency  
This figure illustrates that as interdependency increases, so do the potential for and the importance of conflict. *How effectively does the relationship predicted in this figure depict your own interpersonal conflicts?*

### Myths about Conflict

Many people have problems dealing with conflict because they hold false assumptions about what conflict is and what it means. Think about your own assumptions about interpersonal and small-group conflict, which were probably derived from the communications you witnessed in