

# Lesson 13.2 Strategies for Managing Conflict


Conflict is inevitable and yet it should not be thought of as inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal communication competence involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. One key aspect of handling conflict better is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

## Identifying Conflict Patterns

Much of the research on conflict patterns has been done on couples in romantic relationships, but the concepts and findings are applicable to other relationships.

**Four common triggers of conflict include—**

- Criticism*
- Demand*
- Cumulative annoyance*
- Rejection*



This Photo by Unknownr.Anthos is licensed under CC BY-SA

Andrew Christensen and Neil S. Jacobson, *Reconcilable Differences* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 17–20.

We all know from experience that ***criticism***, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behavior, appearance, or life choices, may lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Micaela flies in to see her parents after recently accepting a new job across country and her mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Micaela, however, may take the comment personally and

respond negatively back to her mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of her visit. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage “Think before you speak.” In many cases, there are alternative ways to phrase things that may be taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn’t need to be spoken at all. Often the majority of the thoughts that we have about another person’s physical appearance, whether positive or negative, do not need to be verbalized. Ask yourself, “What is my motivation for making this comment?” and “Do I have anything to lose by not making this comment?” If your underlying reasons for asking are valid, perhaps there is another way to phrase your observation. If Micaela's mom is worried about her eating habits and health, she could possibly wait until they're eating dinner and ask her if she's been cooking for herself or eating out a lot. A discussion about food choices could possibly ensue if the timing is right.

***Demands*** also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. It’s important to note that demands rephrased as questions may still be perceived as demands. Tone of voice and context are important factors here. When you were younger, you may have asked a parent, teacher, or elder for something and heard back “Ask nicely.” As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. Remember, demands can be met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response, so if you are doing the demanding, use a higher level of information exchange in order to make the demand clear and reasonable to the other person. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings honestly will likely be more effective than withdrawing (which in actuality may escalate the conflict).

***Cumulative annoyance*** is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to work three times in a row. You didn’t say anything the previous times, but on the third time you say, “You’re late again! If you can’t get here on time, I’ll find another way to get to work.” Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. Criticism and demands can also play into cumulative annoyance. We have all probably let critical or demanding comments slide, but if they continue, it becomes difficult to hold back, and most of us have a breaking point.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC

The problem here is that all the other incidents come back to your mind as you confront the other person, which usually intensifies the conflict. You've likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you due to cumulative annoyance or surprised when someone you have blown up at didn't know there was a problem building. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. **Rejection** can lead to conflict when one person's comments or behaviors are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss her or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection is difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to assume that your relational partner is rejecting you, and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction, can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because he or she is physically or mentally tired after a long day.

Concepts discussed much earlier in the class, can be useful here, as perception checking (taking inventory of your attributions and engaging in information exchange to help determine how each person is punctuating the conflict) will enable you to better manage the four triggers of conflict we've discussed here.

## Serial Arguing

Interpersonal conflict may take the form of serial arguing, which is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue. Serial arguments do not necessarily indicate negative or troubled relationships, but any kind of patterned conflict is worth paying attention to. There are three patterns that occur with serial arguing: *repeating*, *mutual hostility*, and *arguing with assurances*. Kristen Linnea Johnson and Michael E. Roloff, "Correlates of the Perceived Resolvability and Relational Consequences of Serial Arguing in Dating Relationships: Argumentative Features and the Use of Coping Strategies," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 17, no. 4–5 (2000): 676–86.

The first pattern is *repeating*, which means reminding the other person of your complaint (what you want them to start/stop doing). The pattern may continue if the other person repeats their response to your reminder. For example, if Jonathan reminds Kate that he doesn't appreciate her sarcastic tone, and Kate responds, "I'm soooo sorry, I forgot how perfect you are," then the reminder has failed to effect the desired change. A predictable pattern of complaint like this leads participants to view the conflict as irresolvable. The second pattern within serial arguments is *mutual hostility*, which occurs when the frustration of repeated conflict leads to negative emotions and increases the likelihood of verbal aggression. Again, a predictable pattern of hostility makes the conflict seem irresolvable and may lead to relationship deterioration.



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

Whereas the first two patterns entail an increase in pressure on the participants in the conflict, the third pattern offers some relief. If people in an interpersonal conflict offer *verbal assurances* of their commitment to the relationship, then the problems associated with the other two patterns of serial arguing may be ameliorated. Even though the conflict may not be solved in the interaction, the verbal assurances of commitment imply that there is a willingness to work on solving the conflict in the future, which provides a sense of stability that can benefit the relationship. Although serial arguing is not inherently bad within a relationship, if the pattern becomes more of a vicious cycle, it can lead to alienation, polarization, and an overall toxic climate, and the problem may seem so irresolvable that people feel trapped and terminate the relationship. Andrew Christensen and Neil S. Jacobson, *Reconcilable Differences* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 116–17.

There are some negative, but common, conflict reactions we can monitor and try to avoid, which may also help prevent serial arguing. Two common conflict pitfalls are *one-upping* and *mindreading*. John M. Gottman, *What Predicts Divorce?: The Relationship between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

*One-upping* is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Grace comes home late from work and Nicki says, “I wish you would call when you’re going to be late” and Grace responds, “I wish you would get off my back,” the reaction has escalated the conflict.

*Mindreading* is communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations. If Grace says, “You don’t care whether I come home at all or not!” she is presuming to know Nicki’s thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, “You don’t know how I’m feeling!” One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Remember to use concepts like attribution and punctuation in these moments. Nicki may have received bad news and was eager to get support from Grace when she arrived home. Although Grace perceives Nicki’s comment as criticism and justifies her comments as a reaction to Nicki’s behavior, Nicki’s comment could actually be a sign of their closeness, in that Nicki appreciates Grace’s emotional support. Grace could have said, “I know, I’m sorry, I was on my cell phone for the past hour with a client who had a lot of problems to work out.” Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than react with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to deescalate the conflict. While avoiding or retreating may seem like the best option in the moment, one of the key negative traits found in research on married couples’ conflicts was withdrawal, which as we learned before may result in a demand-withdrawal pattern of conflict. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills discussed earlier in this book by making eye contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying “mmm-hmm” or nodding your head. John M. Gottman, *What Predicts Divorce?: The Relationship between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

This doesn't mean that you have to give up your own side in a conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying; rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of negative reaction.

As with all the aspects of communication competence we've discussed so far, you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication that you have after taking this class. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it's not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship's success; it's how the conflict is managed, and one person's competent response can deescalate a conflict. Now we turn to a discussion of negotiation steps and skills as a more structured way to manage conflict.

### **Negotiation Steps and Skills**

We negotiate daily. We may negotiate with a professor to make up a missed assignment or with our friends to plan activities for the weekend. Negotiation in interpersonal conflict refers to the process of attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship. The negotiation skills discussed next can be adapted to all types of relational contexts, from romantic partners to coworkers. The stages of negotiating are *pre-negotiation*, *opening*, *exploration*, *bargaining*, and *settlement*. Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 408–22.

In the ***pre-negotiation stage***, you want to prepare for the encounter. If possible, let the other person know you would like to talk to them, and preview the topic, so they will also have the opportunity to prepare. While it may seem awkward to “set a date” to talk about a conflict, if the other person feels like they were blindsided, their reaction could be negative. Make your preview simple and nonthreatening by saying something like “I’ve noticed that we’ve been arguing a lot about who does what chores around the house. Can we sit down and talk tomorrow when we both get home from work?”

Obviously, it won’t always be feasible to set a date if the conflict needs to be handled immediately because the consequences are immediate or if you or the other person has limited availability. In that case, you can still prepare, but make sure you allot time for the other person to digest and respond.

During this stage you also want to figure out your goals for the interaction by reviewing your instrumental, relational, and self-presentation goals. Is getting something done, preserving the relationship, or presenting yourself in a certain way the most important? For example, you may highly rank the instrumental goal of having a clean house, or the relational goal of having pleasant interactions with your roommate, or the self-presentation goal of appearing nice and cooperative. Whether your roommate is your best friend from high school or someone you recently met at work that agreed to move in to help keep living expenses down, you need to determine the importance of your relational and self-presentation goals. At this point, your goal analysis may lead you away from negotiation—remember, as we discussed earlier, avoiding can be an appropriate and effective conflict management strategy. If you decide to proceed with the negotiation, you will want to determine your ideal outcome and your bottom line, or the point at which you decide to break off negotiation. It’s very important that you realize there is a range between your ideal and your bottom line and that remaining flexible is key to a successful negotiation—remember, through collaboration a new solution could be found that you didn’t think of.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

In the **opening stage** of the negotiation, you want to set the tone for the interaction because the other person will be likely to reciprocate. Generally, it is good to be cooperative and pleasant, which can help open the door for collaboration. You also want to establish common ground by bringing up overlapping interests and using “we” language. It would not be competent to open the negotiation with “You’re such a slob! Didn’t your mom ever teach you how to take care of yourself?” Instead, you may open the negotiation by making small talk about work that day and then move into the issue at hand. You could set a good tone and establish common ground by saying, “We both put a lot of effort into setting up and decorating our place, but now that we're getting into the holiday season at at work, I’ve noticed that we’re both really busy and some chores are not getting done.” With some planning and a simple opening like that, you can move into the next stage of negotiation.

There should be a high level of information exchange in the **exploration stage**. The overarching goal in this stage is to get a panoramic view of the conflict by sharing your perspective and listening to the other person. In this stage, you will likely learn how the other person is punctuating the conflict. Although you may have been mulling over the mess for a few days, your roommate may just now be aware of the conflict. She may also inform you that she usually cleans on Saturdays but didn’t get to last week because she had to work a double. The information that you gather here may clarify the situation enough to end the conflict and cease negotiation. If negotiation continues, the information will be key as you move into the bargaining stage.

The ***bargaining stage*** is where you make proposals and concessions. The proposal you make should be informed by what you learned in the exploration stage. Flexibility is important here, because you may have to revise your ideal outcome and bottom line based on new information. If your plan was to have a big cleaning day every Thursday, you may now want to propose to have the roommate clean on Saturday while you clean on Wednesday. You want to make sure your opening proposal is reasonable and not presented as an ultimatum. “I don’t ever want to see a dish left in the sink” is different from “When dishes are left in the sink too long, they begin to stink. Can we agree to not leave any dishes in the sink overnight?” Through the proposals you make, you could end up with a win/win situation. If there are areas of disagreement, however, you may have to make concessions or compromise, which can be a partial win or a partial loss. If you hate doing dishes but don’t mind emptying the trash and recycling, you could propose to assign those chores based on preference. If you both hate doing dishes, you could propose to be responsible for washing your own dishes right after you use them. If you really hate dishes and have some extra money, you could propose to use disposable (and hopefully recyclable) dishes, cups, and utensils.

In the ***settlement stage***, you want to decide on one of the proposals and then summarize the chosen proposal and any related concessions. It is possible that each party can have a different view of the agreed solution. If your roommate thinks you are cleaning the bathroom every other day and you plan to clean it on Wednesdays, then there could be future conflict. You could summarize and ask for confirmation by saying, “So, it looks like I’ll be in charge of the trash and recycling, and you’ll load and unload the dishwasher. Then I’ll do a general cleaning on Wednesdays and you’ll do the same on Saturdays. Is that right?” Last, you’ll need to follow up on the solution to make sure it’s working for both parties. If your roommate continues to work doubles on the weekends and doesn’t get around to cleaning, you may need to go back to the exploration or bargaining stage.



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

## In Summary

- Perception plays an important role in conflict management because we are often biased in determining the cause of our own and others' behaviors in a conflict situation, which necessitates engaging in communication to gain information and perspective.
- We can handle conflict better by identifying patterns and triggers such as demands, cumulative annoyance, and rejection and by learning to respond mindfully rather than reflexively.
- The stages of negotiation including pre-negotiation, opening, exploration, bargaining, and settlement provide guidelines to resolve conflict by attempting to change or influence conditions within a relationship.