

your family and in your social interactions. For example, do you think the following are true or false?

- Conflict is best avoided. Time will solve the problem; it will all blow over.
- If two people experience relationship conflict, it means their relationship is in trouble.
- Conflict damages an interpersonal relationship.
- Conflict is destructive because it reveals our negative selves—our pettiness, our need to be in control, our unreasonable expectations.
- In any conflict, there has to be a winner and a loser. Because goals are incompatible, someone has to win and someone has to lose.

These are myths and, as we'll see in this chapter, they can interfere with your ability to deal with conflict effectively. Some methods of approaching conflict can resolve difficulties and differences and can actually improve a relationship. Other reactions to conflict can hurt a relationship; they can destroy self-esteem, create bitterness, and foster suspicion. Conflict does not mean that someone has to lose and someone has to win. Both parties can win. Your task, therefore, is not to try to create relationships that will be free of conflict but rather to learn appropriate and productive ways of managing conflict so that neither person has to be considered a loser.



VIEWPOINTS: Conflict Issues

What issues do television characters fight about? Are the issues fought over in situation comedies different from those in your own life?

Principles of Interpersonal Conflict

11.2 Explain the six principles of interpersonal conflict.

Interpersonal conflict is a process that is complex and often difficult to understand. The following principles will help clarify how interpersonal conflict works: (1) Conflict is inevitable—you can't avoid it, (2) conflict can center on content and/or relationship issues, (3) interpersonal conflict can occur in all communication forms, (4) conflict can have positive as well as negative effects, (5) conflict is heavily influenced by gender and culture, and (6) the style of conflict you use will have significant effects on your relationship.

Conflict Is Inevitable

Conflict is a part of every interpersonal relationship, between parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, lovers, coworkers. One study found that people have approximately seven conflicts per week (Benoit & Benoit, 1990). A more recent poll claims that married couples have 182 conflicts each year (approximately 3.5 conflicts per week), each lasting on average 25 minutes, with another 30 minutes for sulking.

The very fact that people are different, have had different histories, and have different goals will invariably produce differences. If the individuals are interdependent, as shown above, these differences may well lead to conflicts, and, if so, they can focus on a wide variety of issues and be extremely personal. And, of course, some people have greater tolerance for disagreement and consequently are more apt to let things slide and not become emotionally upset or hostile than are those with little tolerance for disagreement (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998; Wrench, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2008).

Conflict Can Center on a Variety of Issues

According to the eHarmony.com website nine issues are at the heart of couple conflicts: Free time, money, household responsibilities, politics, sex, children and pets, religion, jealousy, and stress. And, in a study on the issues argued about by gay, lesbian, and

heterosexual couples, researchers found that respondents identified six major issues that were virtually identical for all couples (Kurdek, 1994). These issues are arranged here in order, with the first being the most often mentioned. As you read this list, ask yourself how many of these issues lead into interpersonal conflict:

- *intimacy* issues, such as affection and sex
- *power* issues, such as excessive demands or possessiveness, lack of equality in the relationship, friends, and leisure time
- *personal flaws* issues, such as drinking or smoking, personal grooming, and driving style
- *personal distance* issues, such as frequent absence and heavy school or job commitments
- *social* issues, such as politics and social policies, parents, and personal values
- *distrust* issues, such as previous lovers and lying

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INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT
Social Allergens

Examine your own behavior for possible social allergens and identify at least three. What are some of the things you might do to reduce their frequency and perhaps eliminate them from your relationship life? What are some of the things you might do to reduce social allergens in a partner's behavior?

Another class of issues that create conflict is that of the **social allergen**, a personal habit of a friend or romantic partner that you find annoying or inconsiderate. Each person has his or her own list of what constitutes an annoyance, but common allergens between men and women include using the silent treatment, being too critical, forgetting important dates, and having a wandering eye (Cunningham, 2009; Eccles, 2009).

Depending on how these conflicts play out, they may focus largely on content issues (on the budget or the vacation plans) or on relationship issues (on who is in charge and who makes the final decision). And sometimes, it's a combination of content and relationship issues. Often a conflict starts out as a content conflict (say, the budget) but escalates into a relationship conflict (who has the right to make financial decisions).

In the workplace, conflicts also center on both content and relationship issues. As you can appreciate, conflict is an especially important issue in the workplace because of its many potential negative effects such as personnel leaving the job (necessitating new recruitment and retraining), low morale, and lessening of the desire to perform at top efficiency. Workplace conflicts, according to one study, center on such issues as these, a clear mix of both content and relationship issues (Psychometrics, 2010):

- personality differences and resulting clashes, 86 percent
- ineffective leadership, 73 percent
- lack of openness, 67 percent
- physical and emotional stress, 64 percent
- differences in values and resulting clashes, 59 percent

Conflict Can Occur in All Communication Forms

In large part, the same conflicts you experience in face-to-face relationships can also arise in online communication. Yet there are a few conflict issues that seem to be unique to online communication, whether in e-mail, in social networking sites such as Facebook or Google+, or in blog postings. For the most part, online conflict results when people violate the rules of politeness identified throughout this text. For example, sending a message to an entire listserv when it's relevant to only one member may annoy members who expect to receive messages relevant to the entire group and not personal exchanges between two people. Other potential causes of online conflict are ill-timed cell phone calls, calling someone at work just to chat, or criticizing someone unfairly or posting an unflattering photo on social network sites.

Conflict Can Be Negative or Positive

Although interpersonal conflict is always stressful, it's important to recognize that it has both negative and positive aspects.