

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT Conflict often leads to increased negative regard for the other party. One reason for this is that many conflicts involve unfair fighting methods and are focused largely on hurting the other person. When one person hurts the other, increased negative feelings are inevitable; even the strongest relationship has limits.

At times, too, conflict may lead you to close yourself off from the other person. When you hide your true self from an intimate, you prevent meaningful communication from taking place. Because the need for intimacy is so strong, one or both parties may then seek intimacy elsewhere. This often leads to further conflict, mutual hurt, and resentment—qualities that add heavily to the costs incurred by the relationship. Meanwhile, rewards may become difficult to exchange. In this situation, the costs increase and the rewards decrease, which often results in relationship deterioration and eventual dissolution.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT The major value of interpersonal conflict is that it forces you to examine a problem and work toward a potential solution. If the participants use productive conflict strategies, the relationship may well emerge from the encounter stronger, healthier, and more satisfying than before. And you may emerge stronger, more confident, and better able to stand up for yourself (Bedford, 1996).

Through conflict and its resolution, we also can stop resentment from increasing and let our needs be known. For example, suppose I need lots of attention when I come home from work, but you need to review and get closure on the day's work. If we both can appreciate the legitimacy of these needs, then we can find solutions. Perhaps you can make your important phone call after my attention needs are met, or perhaps I can delay my need for attention until you get closure about work. Or perhaps I can learn to provide for your closure needs and in doing so get my attention needs met. In this case, we'd have a win-win solution; each of us gets our needs met.

Consider, too, that when you try to resolve conflict within an interpersonal relationship, you're saying in effect that the relationship is worth the effort; otherwise, you would walk away from such a conflict. Usually, confronting a conflict indicates commitment and a desire to preserve the relationship.



“It was so great to meet the neighbors and resolve our differences.”

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Conflict Is Influenced by Culture and Gender

As in other areas of interpersonal communication, it helps to view conflict in light of culture and gender. Both exert powerful influences on how people view and resolve conflicts.

CONFLICT AND CULTURE Culture influences not only the issues that people fight about but also what people consider appropriate and inappropriate in terms of dealing with conflict. Researchers have found, for example, that cohabiting 18-year-olds are more likely to experience conflict with their parents about their living style if they live in the United States than if they live in Sweden, where cohabitation is much more accepted. Similarly, male infidelity is more likely to cause conflict between American spouses than in southern European couples. Students from the United States are more

likely to engage in conflict with other U.S. students than with someone from another culture. Chinese students, on the other hand, are more likely to engage in conflict with non-Chinese students than with fellow Chinese (Leung, 1988).

The types of conflicts that arise depend on the cultural orientation of the individuals involved. For example, in collectivist cultures, such as Ecuador, Indonesia, and Korea, conflicts are more likely to center on violations of collective or group norms and values, for example, the failure to provide for family members or publicly disagreeing with a superior. Conversely, in individualist cultures, such as the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, conflicts are more likely to occur when people violate individual norms, for example, not defending a position in the face of disagreement (Ting-Toomey, 1985).

The cultural norms of organizations also influence the types of conflicts that occur and the ways people may deal with them. Some work environments, for example, would not tolerate employees' expressing disagreement with high-level management; others might welcome it. In individualist cultures, there is greater tolerance for conflict, even when it involves different levels of an organizational hierarchy. In collectivist cultures, there's less tolerance for these things. And, not surprisingly, culture influences how a conflict will be resolved. For example, managers in the United States (an individualist culture) deal with workplace conflict by seeking to integrate the demands of the different sides; managers in China (a collectivist culture) are more likely to call on higher management to make decisions—or not to resolve the conflict at all (Tinsley & Brett, 2001).

CONFLICT AND GENDER Not surprisingly, research finds significant gender differences in interpersonal conflict. For example, men are more apt to withdraw from a conflict situation than are women. It's been argued that this may be due to the fact that men become more psychologically and physiologically aroused during conflict (and retain this heightened level of arousal much longer) than do women, and so they may try to distance themselves and withdraw from the conflict to prevent further arousal (Goleman, 1995b; Gottman & Carrere, 1994). Another position would argue that men withdraw because the culture has taught men to avoid conflict, and still another would claim that withdrawal is an expression of power.

Women, on the other hand, want to get closer to the conflict; they want to talk about it and resolve it. Even adolescents reveal these differences. In research on boys and girls ages 11 to 17, boys withdrew more than girls (Heasley, Babbitt, & Burbach, 1995; Lindeman, Harakka, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1997). Other research has found that women are more emotional and men are more logical when they argue. Women have been defined as conflict "feelers" and men as conflict "thinkers" (Sorenson, Hawkins, & Sorenson, 1995). Another difference is that women are more apt to reveal their negative feelings than are men (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988).

It should be mentioned, however, that some research fails to support these stereotypical gender differences in conflict style—the differences that cartoons, situation comedies, and films portray so readily and so clearly. For example, several studies dealing with both college students and men and women in business found no significant differences in the ways men and women engage in conflict (Canary & Hause, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1999; Wilkins & Andersen, 1991).

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INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT
Preventing Conflicts in Social Media

In a variety of social media sites, you can disable comments on a post that might be causing conflict, prevent it from being shared, or remove your post entirely. In what ways might these capabilities be applied to face-to-face conflict?

Conflict Styles Have Consequences

The way in which you engage in conflict has consequences for the resolution of the conflict and for the relationship between the conflicting parties. Here we consider five basic styles (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Blake & Mouton, 1985; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2013). As you read through these styles, try to identify your own **conflict style** as well as the styles of those with whom you have close relationships.

COMPETING: I WIN, YOU LOSE The competitive conflict style involves great concern for your own needs and desires and little for those of others. As long