Avoidance and Fighting Actively

Conflict avoidance may involve actual physical flight: You may leave the scene of the conflict (walk out of the apartment or go to another part of the office or shop), fall asleep, or blast the stereo to drown out all conversation. It also may take the form of emotional or intellectual avoidance, in which you may leave the conflict psychologically by not dealing with any of the arguments or problems raised.

Nonnegotiation is a special type of avoidance. Here you refuse to discuss the conflict or to listen to the other person's argument. At times, nonnegotiation takes the form of hammering away at your own point of view until the other person gives in—a technique called "steamrolling."

Another form of avoidance is **gunnysacking**. The term *gunnysack* refers to the kind of burlap bag that years ago held potatoes. As a conflict strategy, gunnysacking involves storing up grievances (as if in a gunnysack) and then unloading them on the other person—even when the grievances have nothing to do with the present conflict. As you can imagine, as a conflict strategy, gunnysacking is highly unproductive. The immediate occasion for unloading stored-up grievances may be relatively simple (or so it may seem at first); for example, you come home late one night without calling. Instead of arguing about this, the gunnysacker pours out a mass of unrelated past grievances. As you probably know from experience, however, gunnysacking often begets gunnysacking. Frequently, the trigger problem never gets addressed. Instead, resentment and hostility escalate. Instead of avoiding the issues:

- **Take an active role.** Involve yourself actively as both speaker and listener. Turn off the phone, television, or computer; face the other person. Devote your total attention to the other person.
- **Speak and listen.** Voice your feelings, and listen carefully to the voicing of the other person's feelings. When appropriate, consider taking a moratorium, a time-out. Be careful to keep these feelings between the two of you; avoid writing on the person's Facebook wall, for example, and thus airing the conflict for your entire network to read.
- **Own your thoughts and feelings.** For example, when you disagree with your partner or find fault with her or his behavior, take responsibility for these feelings, saying, for example, "I disagree with…" or "I don't like it when you…" Avoid statements that deny your responsibility, for example, "Everybody thinks you're wrong about…" or "Chris thinks you shouldn't…"
- **Focus on the present.** Focus your discussion on the here and now, rather than on an issue that occurred two months ago.
- **Express your support, empathy, and agreement.** Say and mean, for example, "I can understand how you feel. I know I control the checkbook, and I realize that can create a feeling of inequality."

Defensiveness and Supportiveness

Although talk is preferred to force, not all talk is equally productive in conflict resolution. One of the best ways to look at destructive versus productive talk is to look at how the style of your communications can create unproductive **defensiveness** or a productive sense of **supportiveness**, an approach developed by Jack Gibb (1961) that is still used widely by communication and conflict theorists and interpersonal textbook writers. The type of talk that generally proves destructive and sets up defensive reactions in the listener is talk that is evaluative, controlling, strategic, indifferent or neutral, superior, and certain.

EVALUATION When you evaluate or judge another person or what that person has done, that person is likely to become resentful and defensive and is likely to respond with attempts to defend himself or herself and perhaps at the same time to become

equally evaluative and judgmental. In contrast, when you describe what happened or what you want, it creates no such defensiveness and is generally seen as supportive. The distinction between evaluation and description can be seen in the differences between you-messages and I-messages.

Evaluative You-Messages	Descriptive I-Messages
You never reveal your feelings.	I'd like hearing how you feel about this.
You just don't plan ahead.	I need to know what our schedule for the next few days will be.
You never call me.	I'd enjoy hearing from you more often.

If you put yourself in the role of the listener hearing these statements, you probably can feel the resentment or defensiveness that the evaluative messages (you-messages) would create and the supportiveness from the descriptive messages (I-messages).

CONTROL When you try to control the behavior of the other person, when you order the other person to do this or that, or when you make decisions without mutual discussion and agreement, defensiveness is a likely response. Control messages deny the legitimacy of the person's contributions and in fact deny his or her importance. They say, in effect, "You don't count; your contributions are meaningless." When, on the other hand, you focus on the problem at hand—not on controlling the situation or getting your own way—defensiveness is much less likely. This problem orientation invites mutual participation and recognizes the significance of each person's contributions.

STRATEGY When you use **strategy** and try to get around other people or situations through manipulation—especially when you conceal your true purposes—others are likely to resent it and to respond defensively. But when you act openly and with spontaneity, you're more likely to create an atmosphere that is equal and honest.

NEUTRALITY When you demonstrate **neutrality**—in the sense of indifference or a lack of caring for the other person—it's likely to create defensiveness. Neutrality seems to show a lack of empathy or interest in the thoughts and feelings of the other person; it is especially damaging when intimates are in conflict. This kind of talk says, in effect, "You're not important or deserving of attention and caring." When, on the other hand, you demonstrate empathy, defensiveness is unlikely to occur. Although it can be especially difficult in conflict situations, try to show that you can understand what the other person is going through and that you accept these feelings.

SUPERIORITY When you present yourself as superior to the other person, you're in effect putting the other person in an inferior position, and this is likely to be resented. An attitude of **superiority** says in effect that the other person is inadequate or somehow second-class. It's a violation of the implicit equality contract that people in a close relationship have—namely, the assumption that each person is equal. The other person may then begin to attack your superiority; the conflict can easily degenerate into a conflict over who's the boss, with personal attack being the mode of interaction.

JOURNAL
INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT
Fighting with Trolls

Someone trolls your posts, and no matter what you say, this person takes issue with it, criticizes it, and says all sorts of negative things. *What are some of the ways you might deal with trolling in general?*

CERTAINTY The person who appears to know it all is likely to be resented, so **certainty** often sets up a defensive climate. After all, there is little room for negotiation or mutual problem solving when one person already has the answer. An attitude of **provisionalism**—"Let's explore this issue together and try to find a solution"—is likely to be much more productive than closed-mindedness.

Instead of defensiveness, try supportiveness:

- **Talk descriptively** rather than evaluatively.
- **Focus on the problem** rather than on the person. Even when the problem is the person's behavior, focus on the behavior rather than the whole person.