

Conflict Resolutions Skills Packet 25

The Skills Required to Successfully Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts

[Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

Misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts are inevitable in relationships. Learning to work through interpersonal conflict successfully may be the single most important skill for personal, family, and career success. It may also be the most difficult skill to learn and do well. We are not born knowing how to resolve interpersonal conflicts effectively. Fortunately, we can learn and master these skills. Outlined below are the skills and steps to resolve interpersonal conflicts successfully.

It is essential that when you enter a conflict conversation, you do so with an attitude that you want the solution to be a win/win: that you and the other person will be satisfied with the outcome, and as a result, the relationship is stronger, and both of you are better able to interact with each other and resolve future conflicts. You must also listen to understand their perspective and needs and be open to working with them to explore options that meet your and their needs. You must also speak in ways that don't make them feel defensive, threatened, or attacked, but instead make them want to listen to you, understand you and your needs, consider what you are asking, and possibly change their behavior to help you meet your needs.

To successfully resolve interpersonal conflicts, you must be able to:

- actively listen,
- ask genuine inquiry questions,
- be skillful in using "I Statements," and
- negotiate and jointly problem solve to resolve interpersonal conflicts successfully.

For additional information on these skills, see the:

Listening & Inquiry Reading ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)),
Listening & Inquiry Skill Card ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)),
"I Statements" Reading ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)),
"I Statements Skill Card ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)),
How To Apologize Skill Card ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)),
How To Apologize Reading ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#))
Conflict Resolution Reading ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#))
Conflict Resolution Skill Card ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

Step # 1: Figure Out What the Conflict Is About, What You Hope to Accomplish by Raising the Issue, and Deciding if Raising the Issue is the Best Way To Achieve Your Goals.

Ask yourself the following questions before proceeding to Step # 2. It would be helpful to write your answers. Whenever there is a conflict, it is usually best for you to raise the issue if possible since it gives you time to think about what you want to do, what you want to say and how, what your and the other person's needs are in the situation, and what creative solutions you see to satisfactorily resolve this conflict. In addition, it will be easier to avoid many of the mistakes we make when resolving an interpersonal conflict.

Step # 1: Questions To Answer Before Having a Conflict Conversation:

1. Who is the conflict with?
2. What happened? What is this conflict about? What impact has the conflict had on me?
3. How do I feel about this situation? How do I feel towards the other person regarding this conflict?
4. What judgments and assumptions am I making about the other person?
5. How have I contributed to this problem? What is my contribution to this conflict?
6. What are my interests—that is, my true needs, wants, hopes, and fears regarding this situation? (versus my position)? What do I want to happen? What do I see as a satisfactory resolution?
7. How do I think the other person sees this conflict? What impact, if any, has this conflict had on the other person?
8. How do I think they feel about it? How do I think they feel towards me regarding this conflict?
9. What is their contribution to the problem?
10. What do I think the other person's interests are—that is, their true needs, wants, hopes, and fears regarding this situation? (versus their position)? What do I think they want to happen? What do I think they see as a satisfactory resolution?
11. Can I reach a satisfactory resolution to this conflict by only changing my contribution?
12. If I raise this issue, what do I hope to accomplish? What is my goal?
13. Is this the best way to address this issue and achieve my goal?
14. How will it affect the relationship if I don't raise this issue? How do I think I will feel about this person if I do not raise it?
15. If I don't want to raise the issue, what do I need to do to help myself to let go and move on from this situation?

See the [Conflict Resolution Step One Questions](#) in the [Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

Step #2: Things to Avoid.

Before raising the issue, check to make sure I avoid the following:

1. Saying or doing anything to make them feel defensive, threatened, and/or attacked.
2. Blaming them
3. Assuming their intentions are bad
4. Assuming I have all the information and that I am right (and they are wrong or bad)
5. “You Statements”
6. Trying to control their response
7. Focusing on my position versus my needs. See the [Focusing on Needs Versus Positions Reading](#).

See the [Conflict Resolution Reading](#) ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)) for information on how to avoid these situations and what to do if I feel defensive, threatened, or attacked.

Conflict Resolution Step One Questions

Skill # 1: Invite Them Into A Conversation

Whenever possible, it is advisable to initiate the conversation so you can enter it prepared. You can answer the Step 1 Questions and think about how to avoid saying or doing things that will make them feel defensive, threatened, and/or attacked. You can also determine when would be a good time to have the conversation that is best for both of you. Select a time when you think neither of you will be stressed, both of you are under no time constraints, and there are no distractions. Find a quiet place to have a conversation. Going for a quiet walk in nature can be very effective. Ways to invite someone into a conflict conversation include:

“I would like to have a conversation with you. Is now a good time?”

“I would like to talk with you about something that is very important to me. Is now a good time?”

“I want to talk with you about _____. I am feeling _____ about _____ and I want to explain what is bothering me, and also hear your perspective about this situation and talk about how we can go forward together.”

If they are aware of the conflict, especially if it is ongoing, it may be most effective to ask them to share their perspective first. If so, say:

“I would like to talk with you about... I know this has been a source of conflict between us. I want to come to a resolution that meets both of our needs (so we can stop fighting about it). Is now a good time?” If they agree, say:

“I want to explain what is bothering me, but first I want to hear your perspective.”

By asking them to share their perspective and needs first, listening to understand, asking genuine inquiry questions, and considering what they are saying, you communicate that you are interested in their perspective and needs and that you take this situation and them very seriously. As a result, they will probably be even more willing to listen to you, try to understand you, consider what you have to say, and possibly change their behavior to help you meet your needs.

**Skill # 2: Active Listening: Whenever They Are Speaking, Listen With Curiosity:
Listen/Paraphrase/Summarize to Make Sure You Understand and to Communicate
that You Understand and are Considering Their Perspective and Needs.**

It is impossible to work through misunderstandings and conflicts in relationships without both individuals understanding each other and their needs. We do this by listening. We want others to listen to us, understand us, consider what we are saying, and possibly change their behavior to help us meet our needs. However, if we don't listen to them, try to understand them, consider what they are saying, and consider changing our behavior to help them meet their needs, they will not listen to us, try to understand us, consider what we are saying, and possibly change their behavior. When summarizing what the speaker said, use phrases like;

"It sounds like...?"

"It seems to me...?"

"It appears to me...?"

"I can see that you are...?"

"I get the impression that you are...?"

"Let me see if I understand... (your feelings, your needs, what you want me to do, why you are angry with me...etc)?"

"It seems like you are feeling...?"

"It seems like you are feeling...because...?"

Ask: *"Did I get that right?" "Did I hear you correctly?"*

Always paraphrase with a question in your voice. This invites them to continue and avoids making you seem like an expert about them and their feelings.

See the [Listening & Inquiry Reading](#) and the [Listening & Inquiry Skill Card \(Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships\)](#) for additional information on listening and inquiry skills.

Skill # 3: When You Don't Understand or Need More Information, Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions.

Genuine inquiry questions include:

"I would like to understand your perspective and needs. Would you be willing to share them with me?"

"Tell me about what led you to that conclusion"

"I'm not sure I understand completely. Would you say some more about..."

"I'm not sure I understand"

"How are you feeling about all of this?"

"Why are you feeling this way?"

"So what happened that got you so... (upset, excited, made you feel sad, etc.)"

"What do you think is going on?"

"What do you think about that?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Can you say a little more about how you see things?"

"Tell me about what led you to that conclusion"

"Please say more about why this is important to you".

When you think you fully understand, ask:

- *"Is there anything else?"* or
- *"Is there anything else I need to know to understand fully?"*

By asking genuine inquiry questions and considering what they are saying, you are communicating to them that you are interested in their perspective and needs and that you are taking this situation and them very seriously. As a result, they will take you and your needs seriously. In addition, you need to understand them to arrive at creative solutions that will meet both of your needs.

When Listening & Asking Genuine Inquiry Questions Avoid:

1. Asking a question disguised as a statement. For example: “You aren’t going to.... are you?”
2. Asking a question that tries to cross-examine them or convince them. For example: “You seem to think...but surely you’d agree that you...”
3. Saying “but”. Saying “but” is not inquiry. It is an analysis that contradicts what they are saying. For example: “I understand that you...but...”
4. Saying “I understand”. You may not understand them, and saying this may cut them off. You demonstrate understanding by paraphrasing and summarizing.
5. Bringing your perspective and needs into the conversation until you fully understand them and they at least initially have nothing more to say.

What is most important is that you communicate that you are listening with curiosity, and really want to understand what they are saying, that you are considering what they are saying, and that the relationship is very important to you.

See the [Listening & Inquiry Reading](#) and the [Listening & Inquiry Skill Card \(Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships\)](#) for additional information on listening and inquiry skills.

Skill # 4: When You Think They Have Fully Explained Their Perspective/Concerns/Needs and You Fully Understand, Summarize:

Say: “*Let me make sure I understand*” and then summarize what they said.

Then ask: “*Do I understand what you are saying?*”

Then if they don’t volunteer any new information, ask: “*Is there anything else I need to know to fully understand?*”

When we summarize with a question in our voice, we communicate that we have listened, understand them, are considering what they are saying, and take them, their needs, and the situation seriously.

Skill # 5: When Speaking Use “I Statements”

To successfully resolve conflicts, it is essential that we be able to communicate our feelings and needs effectively. “I Statements” clearly communicate what we are feeling and our needs (and why) in a nonjudgmental way that will make it easier for others to want to listen to us, try to understand us, suspend their reaction, and consider what we are saying, and possibly change their behavior to help us meet our needs. I Statements have the following components:

Use the pronoun “I” and state what you feel or felt.

“I feel....when you...”

“I would like to tell you how I see things. From my perspective...”

Tell why you feel or felt that way.

“I feel....when you...because...”

Say how you want them to be in the future (when appropriate). Say “I would appreciate it if...”

“I feel....when you...because... In the future I would appreciate it if...”

“I would like it if you would be willing to...”

“What’s most important to me in this situation is...”

Ask them if they are willing to do what you are asking (when appropriate). Say “Are you willing to do that?”

“feel....when you...because... In the future, I would appreciate it if... Are you willing to do that?”

An example of a complete “I Statement” regarding a situation where a friend is chronically late even after you both agree on the time to meet would be:

“When you are late when we have both agreed to meet up at a specific time, I feel frustrated and stressed out because I worry that we will be late meeting up with friends or late to wherever we are going. Being late just stresses me out. “In the future, I would appreciate it if you would be on time.” Are you willing to do that?”

Other Examples Include:

"I would like to tell you how I see things". "From my perspective..."

"I would like it... or I would appreciate it if..."

If, after using an "I Statement," the person agrees without a discussion (e.g., they agree to show up on time), you are done. If they are unwilling to go along, you will need to collaborate, negotiate, and problem-solve to invent a solution that meets your and the other person's needs. You need to continue to Actively Listen, ask Genuine Inquiry Questions, and use "I Statements" throughout the process. See the "I Statements Reading" and the "I Statements" Skill Card for more information.

Skill # 6: If Both of You Have Different Needs, Then You Both Must Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem-Solve to Invent Solutions That Meet Each Other's Most Important Needs. State What is Most Important to You and What You are Willing to Do and/or Give Up. Negotiate for Needs, Not Positions.

When problem-solving, negotiate for needs. People often cannot resolve conflicts because they focus on their positions rather than their needs. The difference between the two is essential. A position is the stand we take in an argument or negotiation. I want this, "I demand that," or "I'm not doing that. Needs are what we truly want, desire, or truly need. An example of a position-versus-needs conflict is a parent and their adolescent daughter fighting over whether the daughter can attend a party. The parents' position is that she cannot go because they don't know this new friend or his parents. The daughter's position is that she wants to go to the party. If they focus only on their respective positions, their real needs are overlooked, and the daughter will not go to the party because demanding things of her parents usually doesn't work. It is much more effective to negotiate and problem-solve around each other's needs rather than their positions. In this situation, the parents' needs are their daughter's safety. If the daughter has a conversation with her parent and shares why this party is so important to her and helps the parent identify their needs behind the position (her safety) they may be able to jointly brainstorm and find a solution that meets both of their needs: the daughter is allowed to go to the party but certain conditions must be met beforehand and during the party so that the parents are confident she will be safe. See the Negotiate for Needs Reading ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)) for additional information and another example of negotiating for needs.

Examples of how to collaborate, negotiate, and problem-solve together include:

Say: *“I wonder if we can work to find a creative way to meet your needs and mine. Are you willing to do that?”*

Next, state what is most important to you and what you are willing to do or possibly give up. For examples of what to say include:

“What is most important to me is...”

“What I would appreciate the most is...”

“What I am willing to do is...”

“What is most important to you?”

“I am willing to...if you are willing to...”

“Are you willing to do that?”

Skill # 7: If They Do Not Initially Agree: Continue to Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem-Solve Together.

Examples of what to say include:

“What are you willing to do?”

“What would you like me to do?”

“What do you suggest we both do so that both of our needs are met?”

“Help me understand how that helps (meets your needs)...”

“So you would like me to...”? “You are willing to...”?

“My concern is that...” “What is most important to me is...”

Throughout This Process, Continue To:

1. Paraphrase and Summarize
2. Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions
3. Use “I Statements Whenever You Speak
4. Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem-Solve Together
5. Be Sure to Avoid The Mistakes Outlined in Step # 2 Above.

Skill # 8: Once You Reach Agreement, Summarize What You Both Agreed To

It is essential to summarize what you both agreed to so there is no confusion in the future. Failure to summarize and check for agreement can create problems down the road. An example of what to say includes:

“Let me make sure I understand what we have agreed to. I agree to...and you agree to... Is that right? Have I left anything out?”

It is also essential that you live up to whatever you agree to.

Skill # 9: What To Do If You Cannot Reach Agreement

If you cannot reach a resolution that meets both of your needs and there is no compromising, it is probably time to end the conversation and walk away. Often conflicts cannot be resolved during a single conversation. You and/or the other person may need a break to think about what has been proposed. Even if someone does not agree with your solutions, they may consider them later and realize that you have a good point. You can decide to come back to the discussion at a later date. You may even decide on a day and time. It is essential that you leave the relationship in a good place, leave the door open for future negotiation, and not storm out. Leaving on a positive note will make it easier to continue the discussion, find a resolution that is satisfying to both of you, and maintain the quality of the relationship. Before you meet again, it may be helpful to meet the other person’s needs around this situation, because they might see that you are serious about meeting their needs and reconsider.

If you decide to walk away, let the other person know why you are walking away.

An example of what to say includes:

“I need to take a break. Can we revisit this later?”

“I would like to take some time to consider what you are saying. “It’s a lot for me to process. Can we find a time in the near future to get together again to discuss this?”

“It seems like we are having trouble coming up with a solution that is satisfactory for both of us. Why don’t we take a break and revisit it on... at....? Are you willing to do that?”

“I appreciate you having this conversation with me. I am disappointed that we could not find a solution that meets both your needs and mine. Maybe we can revisit it sometime in the future after we have both thought about it.”

Skill # 10: Redirecting Conversations When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, and/or Attacked

What To Do, Say, & Avoid When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

When involved in a conflict conversation, it is easy to feel defensive, and we may feel threatened and possibly attacked. How we respond can make the conflict worse or move the conversation in a positive direction. Realize that although any accusations or judgments they are making may not be true, the feelings behind them are legitimate. Anger is often a secondary feeling (they may be feeling disappointed or hurt) and their feelings are real. Although it is difficult to do, avoid responding in a way that makes them feel defensive or attacked. An effective response is one that avoids judging, accusing, blaming, the use of “you statements” (preaching, put-downs, criticism, giving solutions, threats, ultimatums, and asking “why” out of anger) and redirects the conversation back to listening to one another, asking genuine inquiry questions, considering what each other is saying, using “I Statements”, and collaborating to find solutions that meet both of your needs.

1. Don't respond immediately. Take 2, 3, or more deep breaths.
2. Continue to breathe deeply.
3. Don't attack back.
4. Try to focus on what they are upset about, not about the accusations or put-downs.
5. Remember: anger is usually a secondary feeling (they may be feeling disappointed or hurt) and their feelings are legitimate even if their accusations and judgments are not. Avoid responding in a way that makes them feel defensive and/or attacked. As difficult as it may be, try to understand their point of view.
6. You can slow things down by paraphrasing/summarizing, asking genuine inquiry questions, and by acknowledging their feelings. This also communicates that you are trying to understand, that you are taking their feelings and needs seriously, and considering what they are saying. You cannot move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels that you are listening, that you understand them, and that you are considering what they are saying. Whenever you feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to proceed, remember that it is always a good time to listen/paraphrase/summarize, and ask genuine inquiry questions. Examples of what to say include:
 - “So you are angry at me because...?”
 - “You think I...?” What led you to that conclusion?
 - *“I'm not sure I understand. Would you please say some more about...?”*
6. If you are feeling attacked and that is making it difficult for you to listen, examples of what you can say include:
 - “I am feeling attacked”.
 - “I want to understand what you are saying but I am having difficulty listening because I feel attacked.”

7. Try to move the conversation back to mutual problem-solving.
8. Take a break. Tell the person you want to listen to what they are saying, and understand and consider what they are saying, but you are having a difficult time listening, and it's important for you to be able to do that. Reschedule a time to finish the conversation.

An example of what to say includes:

- *"I need to take a break. I want to listen to what you are saying and understand, and consider what you are saying, but I am having trouble listening now. Can we schedule a time when we can continue this conversation?"*

What to say if you are feeling frustrated or disappointed because you believe the other person is not acting in good faith, not listening to you, not considering your needs: share your feelings with them.

Examples of what to say include:

"I'm feeling frustrated because it seems to me that you are not considering my needs.

"I'm feeling frustrated because I have shown a willingness to compromise and change, but you have not been willing to do that.

"I'm feeling frustrated because I have offered several solutions that I think will meet both of our needs and you have not offered any and keep sticking to your original position".

"I feel disappointed because I don't feel like you are taking my needs seriously.

See the Redirecting Skill Card ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)) for more information.

What to say if you are wrong or if you have said or done anything to hurt the other person: apologize.

Examples of what to say include:

"I am sorry".

"I am sorry for what I said (did, didn't do)."

"I want to start our conversation by first apologizing for what I said (did, didn't do). I've felt really bad (guilty, regretful) ever since I said (did, didn't do). I wish I had apologized sooner".

"I know I said... I shouldn't have said that. I was acting out of anger. I know that is no excuse. I am truly sorry."

"I know I didn't...when I said I would." I am sorry. I will do better".

See the [How to Apologize Reading](#) and the [How To Apologize Skill Card](#) for more information.

You Have Successfully Redirected a Conversation When:

1. Neither of you is feeling defensive, threatened, or attacked.
2. You both avoid judging, accusing, blaming, and using "you statements" (preaching, put-downs, criticism, giving solutions, threats, ultimatums, and asking "why" out of anger).
3. The conversation now focuses on feelings and needs.
4. Both of you are listening to one another, asking genuine inquiry questions, considering what each other is saying, using "I Statements", and collaborating to find solutions that meet both of your needs.

You Have Been Successful in Resolving the Conflict If:

1. You and the other person are satisfied with the outcome.
2. The relationship is stronger, and you and the other person are better able to interact or work together.
3. You and the other person like and trust each other more.
4. You and the other person improved your ability to resolve future conflicts.

Stages in Learning New Social Skill

There is no more complex skill than being able to successfully resolve interpersonal conflicts, in part because it requires being skillful in many other skills, including but not limited to active listening, asking genuine inquiry questions, “I Statements”, summarizing, negotiating, and mutual problem-solving. As with any new social skill, most people go through the following stages before becoming proficient.

1. Feeling self-conscious and awkward.
2. Feelings of phoniness while using it. “This isn’t me”.
3. Skilled but mechanical.
4. It becomes automatic, and we don’t even know we are doing it. We use it effectively. We have internalized it

Summary of the Major Steps When Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts

1. **Figure Out What the Conflict Is About, What You Hope to Accomplish by Raising the Issue, and Deciding if Raising the Issue is the Best Way to Achieve Your Goals.**
2. **Understand the “Things to Avoid”**
3. **Invite Them Into a Conversation**
4. **Whenever They Are Speaking: Listen/Paraphrase/Summarize To Make Sure You Understand and to Communicate That You Understand and Are Considering Their Perspective and Needs (Active Listening).**
5. **When You Don’t Understand or Need More Information: Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions (Genuine Inquiry Questions).**
6. **When You Think They Have Fully Explained Their Perspective/Concerns/Needs, and You Fully Understand: Summarize.**
7. **When You Are Speaking: Use “I Statements”.**
8. **If Both of You Have Different Needs: Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem Solve Together to Invent Solutions That Meets Your and the Other Person’s Needs.**
9. **If They Do Not Agree With Your Initial Proposal: Continue to Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem-Solve Together.**
10. **Once You Reach an Agreement: Summarize What You Both Agreed To.**
11. **If You Cannot Reach an Agreement, Stop the Conversation, Leave the Relationship in a Positive Place, and Agree to Revisit the Situation.**