



How to deal with **CONFLICT**

Have you ever been in a conflict or been angry at someone and not known how to solve it? Healthy and creative conflict resolution is an essential skill that many adults don't know how to master. Whether it's defusing potentially damaging fights with a spouse or tackling tough problems in the workplace or at school, a couple of key pointers will go a long way in equipping you with the right tools to resolve conflicts.

HOW DO YOU STAY CALM DURING A CONFLICT?

Accept that it's normal to have strong emotions

- Being prepared for intense feelings will allow you to sidestep some of them: Instead of being taken by surprise, you anticipate that you might have them. Emotions are sometimes easier to handle if they don't take you completely by surprise.
- If you're feeling overwhelmed by emotions—especially if you're angry or anxious—wait until you're feeling calm again before you try to talk about it.
- While it's tough to cool down in the heat of the moment, it can be helpful to tell yourself something like, "Okay, I know that arguing with Kabelo usually gets my blood boiling, so I'm going to try to stay calm. I won't let my emotions dictate the tenor of the conversation. Count to three before responding to any of his statements, especially if I perceive them as accusations."

- **Try to deal with the conflict as soon as possible to avoid anxiety**
- Some (small) conflicts fizzle out and die if ignored for long enough; but most bigger conflicts, ironically, get worse if categorically ignored. Even though dealing with conflict is stressful, it will get worse if you put it off. Commit to handling it as soon as you're able.
- Approach the situation head-on from the beginning. If the other person or persons suggests a heart-to-heart, accept. If the other person seems standoffish, reach out to them.



Try to manage your stress during the conflict itself

- It's normal to feel some anxiety or even anger when dealing with a conflict. This is definitely stressful. But while stress sometimes serves a very good purpose, it's not very productive in an argument. It can produce argumentative, aggressive behaviour, momentarily subdue rational thought, and cause defensive reactions. By managing your stress, you can hopefully mitigate those other reactions.
- Take deep breaths to keep yourself calm. Breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- You could also have a tough conversation in a space where you feel comfortable. If you need to talk to a friend, try a coffee shop that you like. Maybe you could have a tricky work discussion in the breakroom so that you'll be on neutral ground. Choose a location that feels good to you.





WHAT SORT OF BODY LANGUAGE SHOULD I USE DURING A STRESSFUL CONVERSATION?

Keep your posture open

- Most conflicts are mediated through language, but that doesn't mean that the only thing you need to pay attention to is the phrasing of your words — which are, by the way, important. Maintain a friendly posture when you're having a discussion.
- Don't slouch, sit with your arms crossed, or face the other way. Don't fidget with something like you're bored. Sit or stand with your shoulders back, your arms at your sides, and facing the subject at all times.

Maintain eye contact with the other person

Show them that you're interested in what they're saying by being alert and showing concern in your face. Don't stare at them aggressively, though. It's okay to blink normally and even glance away occasionally.

The point is just to let them know that you are paying attention to what they are saying.

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH CONFLICT IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

Stay calm and respectful

- If you react this way, it's much more likely that your partner will stay level-headed, too. Take a deep breath if you need to but try to keep your tone of voice steady and avoid saying hurtful things. This is especially hard when you're dealing with someone you love, but it's really helpful.
- For example, avoid something like, "I hate when you're like this! I don't even want to deal with you!" Instead, try "I feel like we're having trouble communicating. Can we start this conversation again? I'll be calmer."

Be open-minded instead of jumping to conclusions

- Even if you feel like you understand what the person is saying and where they're coming from, let them say it themselves. It's important, both for catharsis and communication, that they feel that they are equally important in this conversation.
- Instead of assuming your partner is always late coming home because they don't care about you, try saying, "Is everything okay at work? I've noticed you're getting home really late."

Accept accountability for your role in the conflict

- When you're having a tough time dealing with someone, it's easy to blame them for all of the trouble. Even if it is their fault, try to look at things from their point of view. They probably see it differently, so take accountability for your part in the conflict.
- Maybe you and your partner are arguing about who does the most work around the house. Even if you feel like you do the majority of it, suggest setting up a chore calendar or finding another way to divvy up duties.



HOW DO YOU REDUCE TENSION DURING A CONFLICT?

Show that you're open to compromise

- Throw away the idea that you're going to get completely what you want without having to sacrifice anything. That's probably not going to happen. You're going to have to compromise, and you want to show compromise because you care about the other person, not because you know it's something you're being forced to do. The one gesture comes from a good place, the other from a not-so-good place. A couple of things to keep in mind when you compromise:
- Under-promise, over-deliver. This is the manager's mantra, but it may as well be yours. Don't promise the other person the world just because you're sick of the conflict and want it resolved quickly. Promise the other person slightly less than what you think you can deliver — be realistic about it — and then wow them by exceeding their expectations.
- Don't punish them after you compromise. Don't purposefully do a bad job at whatever you said you'd do because you don't really believe in the compromise. This will only prolong the conflict.

Use safe humour to ease the situation

After emotions run high and all the logical arguments have blunted your ability to think clearly, a little bit of humour can really ease tensions between two people. Try a mildly self-deprecating joke to show the other person you're not so high and mighty. And remember to laugh with the other person, not at them, for best results.



HOW DO YOU REDUCE TENSION DURING A CONFLICT? - continued



Take a step back from it all if you're too caught up in the moment

- A lot of couples, for example, give themselves a 20-minute cooling-off period in which they let their emotions and stress calm down before tackling an issue. This makes communication easier for a lot of people. Sometimes, all it takes is a little self-imposed perspective on the situation to see the forest from the trees.
- Ask yourself — how important is this thing we're arguing about? In the grand scheme, is this going to make or break my relationship with this person, or is it something I can let slide?
- Ask yourself — is there anything you can do about the situation? Sometimes, we get mad about problems over which other people have no control.

If you need help resolving conflict, contact Platinum Health's Mental Health Services on 014 590 1700. EAP Counselors (010 133 0525) are also available 24/7 to give guidance and support.

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