



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling

Conflict Styles

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling

Chapter Title: "Conflict Styles"

Pub. Date: 2017

Access Date: October 17, 2016

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781483369556

Online ISBN: 9781483369532

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483369532.n106>

Print pages: 339-341

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Conflict is part of life because people are all different and discrepancies in values and expectations are typical. Conflict involves disagreement between people and can exist in any situation where there is a difference of opinions, feelings, or needs. People have different ways to deal with conflict depending on their life histories and personalities. In the 1970s, Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a personality assessment that has been used to understand conflict style differences. This entry discusses the conflict that occurs in adult, intimate relationships, with a focus on how attachment theory explains the different behaviors that partners exhibit during conflicts and steps that people can take to change the behavior patterns associated with their attachment style.

Conflict occurs regularly in most relationships. Some people seem to be inclined to resolve conflict easily while for others that is not the case. During conflicts some people bicker, argue, or become insistent about their point of view while others become silent and withdrawn. Some try to convince the other party that their way is best by ignoring or demeaning the other's perspective; others always accommodate or give in to keep the peace. Conflict, however, does not have to be destructive to an intimate relationship. When people have the appropriate skills, conflict may even facilitate the development and maintenance of intimacy and satisfaction in a relationship. Without these skills, conflict can increase distress and create negative cycles that people can't break by themselves.

Using Attachment Theory to Understand Conflict

Attachment theory provides an explanation of human bonding and can be used to explain why people behave the way they do in conflict. It provides reasons why certain people navigate conflict and grow from it and others get hurt and stuck in it. According to attachment theory there are four types of attachment styles that help to explain and predict people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior in conflict situations. An attachment style is not a diagnosis or a mental illness, but identifying a person's attachment style can help explain that person's conflict style and how it relates to a positive or negative outcome to a conflict.

Overview of Attachment Styles

Research on adult attachment is influenced by the idea that there is a link between the emotional bond that develops between a child and parent or primary caregiver during childhood and that between adults later in life. There are different types of attachment depending on the quality of main relationships throughout life: the secure or optimally healthy attachment and various types of insecure attachment (anxious/ambivalent, avoidant/dismissive, and fearful/disorganized). Each attachment style involves different ways of manifesting and relating. People with different attachment styles perceive situations in different and often opposing manners: They pay attention to diverse aspects of situations, and they interpret them differently. Even their brain activity is often remarkably different.

Attachment style influences the ability to build or maintain successful relationships and to be healthy, happy, and balanced in life. In conflict resolution, attachment style is responsible for the ability to maintain emotional balance and the ability to take care of others and oneself. It has been estimated that just over 50% of people have a secure attachment style; the remainder have attachment styles that make it more difficult to deal successfully with conflict. In a study by Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver in 1987, 56% of respondents identified themselves as secure, while 25% identified as avoidant and 19% as ambivalent/anxious.

Attachment in early relationships influences brain development. It helps shape affect regulation, problem-solving skills, capacity for closeness and separation, empathy, and communication skills. When in conflict, securely attached people tend to promote communication and closeness while still allowing for separation times. Because they are in tune with their own feelings and needs, they can also acknowledge and validate the other party's, and are able to compromise in ways that benefit the relationship without losing themselves.

People with an insecure attachment style tend to have a more restricted ability to deal with conflict. They get stuck in patterns that tend to create more distance in their relationship over time. Insecure attachment styles are associated in general with poorer conflict resolution skills. Those with an anxious style tend to worry about the relationship and monitor it too closely. They want a close relationship, but they are afraid of losing it; they tend to pursue others when there are perceived problems in a relationship. People with avoidant styles tend to minimize the need for relationships and are afraid of being too close to others; they tend to distance themselves from others when there are perceived problems in a relationship. Disorganized style is a result of abuse and trauma, and it is not discussed further in this entry. Couples with insecure attachment styles will often include one who has an anxious style and one who has an avoidant style. These styles may manifest in a pursuer/distance pattern, which causes relational problems.

Manifestations of Anxious and Avoidant Styles

When couples experience conflict they tend to automatically function from their attachment style. The problem with having one person with an anxious style and one with an avoidant style is that they tend to antagonize one another. When they go into protection mode, the partner with the anxious style will focus more on intimacy and the partner with the avoidant style will focus more on independence, leaving little room for negotiation. When in conflict, people with anxious style tend to feel intense feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and anger with a propensity to externalize them. People with avoidant style tend to have more intense feelings of numbness and disconnection, with an inclination to internalize them and take an offended position. In terms of specific behaviors, anxious style manifests by pursuing, coercing, and manipulating the partner into displaying whatever thoughts, feelings, or behaviors they need to experience intimacy or reconnection. People with anxious style tend to focus on feelings and values (maximization of feelings). Avoidant style, on the other hand, manifests in behaviors such as withdrawing, lack of warmth and support, and excessive judgment. People with avoidant style tend to focus on facts and logic (minimization of feelings).

When coping with stress, anxious individuals tend to use emotions as their main tool and tend to sustain them or even exaggerate them. They tend to overemphasize feelings of helplessness and vulnerability, which usually interferes with their ability to problem-solve and increases the experience of negative emotions about themselves and the world. Anxious individuals have a poor ability to suppress separation-related thoughts and tend to ruminate and catastrophize, or fixate on the worst-possible outcome, behaviors that often become detrimental to the individual and the relationship. However, they also tend to be more intuitive and able to detect subtle information. They tend to be more empathic and supportive of the other person's distress.

In contrast, avoidant individuals in a stressful situation tend to detach and rely on distancing,

which is also problematic for the individual and the relationship. The person tends to lose a sense of connectedness, which can make it more difficult to achieve emotional regulation. Moreover, avoidant people tend to view emotions in a negative way and see expression of weakness or vulnerability as incompatible with their desire for self-reliance. In their effort to maintain a deactivated attachment system, they tend to promote problem-solving and disregard emotions. In this way, they refuse to care for and support the other party, which usually elicits more anger in the anxious person. However, they may also be able to remain more steady during troubled times and can be effective at problem-solving.

Anxious people tend to retrieve more painful memories from childhood and overreact to situations that might not be a threat, but are perceived in their cognitive structure as such. Avoidant people tend to block painful memories or record fairly shallow ones. They present low levels of self-reported anger while having high levels of physiological arousal and facial expressions.

Changing Patterns in Relationships

Attachment theory, although it initially developed as a theory to understand the relationship between children and their parents or early caretakers, can be used to understand the development of attachment in adult, intimate relationships. While there is some correlation between the attachment style to one's parents and one's style of attachment to a partner, people can change their way of relating. Research has indicated that whether people who had an insecure attachment with their parents as children can go on to develop what psychologists call "earned secure attachment" depends largely on their understanding of their early experiences. People with an anxious or avoidant style can learn to recognize their patterns and work to change them. There are certain patterns that people with an avoidant or anxious attachment style tend to default to when in conflict. There are also changes they can make so they do not fall into a cycle of pursuing and distancing.

Some typical reactions from people with an avoidant style include the following:

- Brushes off a partner's emotional needs.
- Makes the other person feel needy, inadequate, or foolish.
- Responds to the other person only factually and doesn't take emotions into consideration.
- Cannot get in touch with what is really bothering them.

People with avoidant style can try to keep emotionally present, be empathic, and restrain from offering immediate logical or practical solutions.

Some typical reactions from people with an anxious style include the following:

- Becomes flooded with emotions.
- Thinks in terms of black and white.
- Attacks partner.
- Wants to solve conflict immediately.

People with an anxious style can restrain from attacking or manipulative behavior. They can take time to calm down and assess the situation in a more realistic manner in order to regulate emotions and engage in productive dialogue.

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See also [Communication Errors/Problems in Couples and Families](#); [Conflict in Couples and Families](#); [Confrontation](#); [Family Stress](#); [Intimacy, Specific Threats to](#); [Nonverbal Communication](#); [Stress Management](#)

Further Readings

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483369532.n106>

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