

Resolving Conflict and Gaining Support.

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

Some people see stress as something you can resolve entirely in your own mind. And there is some truth in that – there are some great mental strategies for us – but on the other hand it's also important to look at our surroundings. Rather like a perfectly good plant can be spoilt by weeds encroaching on it, or not having enough nutrients in the soil, our surroundings are important to us too.

Resolving Conflict.

If we are the fine healthy plant, then conflict is the bad weeds that do us no good. Some people maintain that they thrive on conflict but this is unlikely to be so. So how do we get rid of it? There are several answers, the first of which is 'just do it'. Make a resolution not to involve yourself in conflict. There is an old saying that 'it take two to tango' and there is a lot of truth in that. Some people simply refuse to involve themselves in conflict, and that's not a bad idea.

Who would you rather know? Someone who spends their time in arguments or conflict or someone who thinks and talks about good relationships and activities?

There are better things to do.

Refusing to involve yourself in conflict can get you a very long way. But you can push that still further by routinely focusing your mind on the positive things you want to achieve or involve yourself in. This cements your wise refusal by leading your thought processes onto constructive new ground and good relationships.

Case example:

John is a 45 year old businessman who sought help because he said he was 'getting tired'. It was striking just how many conflicts he was involved in – both at work and personally. To him this was normal. He said that it was the way that he had been brought up, his father and brother both behaved the same way. He said that his father's favourite saying was 'Don't let people walk all over you'.

What John's father had apparently failed to realise was that its best to follow your own path in life and that, if you stop every 5 minutes to fight with somebody, then you walk that path much more slowly.

John could see the truth of this and could see that he wanted to walk his own path through life. On the other hand he was used to stopping to fight with anybody that gave him even half an invitation to do so. In some way he almost seemed to enjoy it. 'Not really though' he said – although there was some adrenaline-rush to it, 'really it gets me down'. He could see that it was sapping his energy and he wanted to break this habit. Even so it was a long hard job for him, and he later estimated that it took him about 2 years to fully break away from getting into conflicts with people.

Mythbuster.

To get involved in a bit of conflict gives you a high, it gets the adrenaline running.

This may be so for some people, but it also distracts them from where they want to go in life. While other people are doing what they want to do, these people are sidelined, busy in conflict.

Gaining Support.

People are social animals and having friends and family around us who are supportive means that we are more likely to thrive. The major secret of success in this area is double sided. It's best if you show interest in other people, yet also allow them to show an interest in you.

Showing an interest in others.

To show an interest in other people you simply ask them questions and listen properly to the answers. Some of the best questions often begin with the words 'What' and 'How'. Questions like 'How are you?' asked sincerely and as though you are interested in the response and 'What have you been doing?' likewise, are usually welcomed. Neither disinterested nor 'nosey' they strike a middle ground of being 'interested'. But you do have to listen properly to the answers and ask follow up questions as needed!

How to allow people to be interested in you?

It's best if you are 'open but not too open'. The research shows us that other people are most supportive to us when we are honest about our feelings but not so graphic as to frighten people away. So, to say something like 'I've been a bit worried recently' is fine and will probably lead to somebody talking to you about it. On the other hand, to say 'I'm so worried I just can't see the point in carrying on' frightens most people away, even if it is the truth! So, ironically, even if you are at your wits end, it's best to tone it down a bit. As with everything else, 'you can have too much of a good thing'.

Case example:

Jane was 33 and described herself as a 'worrier' but she didn't like to burden people with her problems. This meant that Jane cut herself off from potential help and support. When this was discussed with her she could see this was the case but still felt she didn't want to 'offload' onto other people. The breakthrough came when Jane realised that (a) she didn't have to 'totally offload' onto people and (b) that many people like to be supportive and helpful to their friends. Even so she did not find it easy.

She started by 'dipping her toe in the water' and telling one of her best friends that she was worried about what she was going to wear at a friend's forthcoming wedding. (Even this was something that she would not have shared previously.) She was surprised when her friend saw this as a source of interest rather than concern, and was keen to make suggestions and even go to the shops with her.

This encouraged Jane and she was then able to talk about something more important to her, namely her money worries. By this stage she realised that she didn't have to talk about these things with an air of gloom and desperation, and that it's perfectly fine to talk about worries as though they might be interesting topics to discuss. And, curiously perhaps, other people's worries tend to be interesting rather than concerning for many people.

Jane was amazed by the result. She said that what surprised her was only partly the ideas that people suggested. What surprised her more was that other people had worries of their own, and sometimes they were very similar worries to hers. She said this made her feel 'less stupid' and more 'part of the human race'.

In session discussion.

Do you know people who seem to get involved in a lot of conflict? What effect does it have on them?

What experience have you had of sharing your worries with other people? When has it worked badly and when has it worked well? What words do you use?

After session project.

Choose whichever project is best for you.

Project one: If you are someone who tends to get into loads of conflict, or are already in conflict, then resolutely apply what's being described here to get out of that conflict. It 'takes two to tango'.

If you are someone who has never shared your worries, then dip your toe in the water. Choose something that worries you a bit and share it with someone that you know well. Remember, you don't need to be 'heavy' about it. What is worrying for you is normally simply of interest to other people who may enjoy talking to you about it.