

The Dating Game

Age

Middle school aged youth and older

Teaching context

The activity works well at older youth group meetings and retreats and can be used when presenting programs that focus on helping youth identify what's involved in healthy relationships.

Time needed

At least 30 minutes

Description

This activity encourages youth to explore how communication or lack of communication effects dating relationships. The activity also examines issues related to harmful and abusive relationships.

Advance preparation

1. Decide which of the attached questions are appropriate for your group. Copy them, and cut into individual slips of paper.
2. Make five signs that read:
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - It all depends
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
3. Tape the signs, in the order listed above, at intervals along a wall.
4. Consider making a large sign listing the “ground rules” for discussion.

Hint

In our changing society, norms and standards that were in place only a few generations ago no longer define dating relationships. Today's youth are growing up with much broader attitudes toward diversity. As a result, it is no longer as problematic as it once was for youth from different religions, cultures or ethnic groups to date one another. At the same time, there are other issues with regard to dating that can create a great deal of anxiety for some youth—particularly those who are not interested in pursuing relationships with the opposite sex.

Regardless of your views on homosexuality, as a youth educator you owe it to the young people with whom you are working to be sensitive to the kinds of issues they may be facing in their personal lives. As you facilitate the Dating Game activity, you may wish to modify or adapt some of the questions in order to respond to the needs of all the youth in your group. If you do not feel comfortable handling these kinds of issues and the discussions that may arise, consider bringing in a special speaker with expertise in this area to help co-facilitate this activity.

For resources, contact your local public health department or county human services agency. Or, contact the nearest chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN), or Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Directions

1. Introduce the activity by commenting that even though dating is a lot of fun, it can get complicated. That's because boys and girls don't always think about things the same way. Explain that this activity is going to give everybody a chance to talk about some of these things.
2. Explain that during this activity, youth will be asked to share their own thoughts and opinions, and that they might not always agree with one another. It will be important to follow these ground rules (you may wish to post these on the wall):
 - *Be honest about your feelings and opinions.*
 - *Only one person gets to talk at a time.*
 - *It's okay to disagree but it's against the rules to insult or put down another person for what he or she has said.*
3. Divide into "Advice Teams" of two to four people. Give each team a question. Teams will have five minutes to discuss the question and decide what should be done about it. Each group will need to select someone to be their spokesperson.
4. After five minutes, have groups take turns reading their question and describing what they think should be done about the situation. Following each group's report, the other youth must signify agreement or disagreement by standing along the wall under the sign that best corresponds with the way they feel about the advice that has been given. Youth should be prepared to give reasons for why they feel the way they do about the issue being discussed.

Follow-up Discussion

When each group has had a chance to share its advice, take a few moments to ask youth the following:

- What are their reactions to the kind of advice that was shared?
- How would they define "abuse"?
- What was the most difficult issue that was discussed? Why?
- What are some other issues that can make dating difficult?

Sum it up.

1. **Point out that good communication is important when people are dating. It helps them get to know each other better and have more fun together.**
2. **Remind youth that good relationships involve mutual respect. That's why it's not worth it to put up with someone who insists on always having things his or her way.**
3. **Finally, be sure to repeat whatever has already been said about the importance of leaving a dating relationship that is physically or emotionally abusive.**

Dating Questions

1. Dear advice team:

Is it okay for a girl to ask a boy for a date, do the driving and pay for things that cost money when they go out?

2. Dear advice team:

Should a girl pay her own way when a boy takes her somewhere or should he pay for everything?

3. Dear advice team:

My boyfriend never takes me anywhere cool. We always just go to the arcade at the mall or else we sit around at his house and watch videos. I'm getting bored and would like to do something that's more fun. How can I get him to try things I enjoy for a change?

4. Dear advice team:

There's a boy that has been calling me up a lot. I don't want to go out with him but I don't want to be mean about it. How should I handle the situation?

5. Dear advice team:

I really like someone a lot but I'm not sure if he likes me. How can I find out?

6. Dear advice team:

I'm a really shy person who has been wanting to ask this one girl out. I think she likes me but I don't know for sure and I'd feel dumb if she says no. What should I do?

7. Dear advice team:

I have a date with someone I've wanted to go out with for a long time. Now I'm afraid I'll screw things up and he won't ever want to go out with me again. I don't know what to talk about or how to act. What's your advice?

8. Dear advice team:

I like this girl but she's kind of different and not real popular. I want to ask her out but am worried about what the other kids will think. What should I do?

9. Dear advice team:

I've gone out with this boy a couple of times but I don't really like him. The problem is he thinks I do. How can I get the message across without hurting his feelings?

10. Dear advice team:

What's the best way of breaking up with someone?

11. Dear advice team:

I've been going out with a girl for about six months and I thought she really loved me. But somebody told me that somebody told them that she said she wants to break up with me. I don't know what to think. What should I do?

12. Dear advice team:

I'm still in love with someone who broke up with me a few months ago. Everybody says I'm better off without him but I don't think so. Every time I see him I could just die. This is killing me. How long does it take to get over something like this? What can I do to make the time go quicker?

13. Dear advice team:

My girlfriend thinks it's cool to use really gross and obscene language. At first I didn't think anything of it because it's no big deal to hear stuff like that these days. But lately it has started to bug me because I think she does it just to impress people. It does definitely not impressing me but I don't know whether to say something or not. I don't want her to think I'm a wimp. What would you do?

14. Dear advice team:

I have a big problem with my mom. She doesn't like the boy I'm going out with and I'm afraid she's going to forbid me to see him. If that happens I don't know what I'll do because I'm in love with him. What do you suggest?

15. Dear advice team:

I've been going with a girl and now I want to break up with her. The problem is my folks really like her a lot and want me to take her to the prom. (I think it's because her dad is my dad's boss.) I don't really like this girl that much and want to go to the prom with someone else. What would you do if you were me?

Dating Questions

Difficult Situations:

1. Dear advice team:

I've been going out with someone for a couple of months and all of sudden he's acting like he owns me. He's really possessive and jealous and has started saying things that sound threatening-like "You better not let me catch you talking to anybody else or you'll be sorry." I like him a lot, but I have a funny feeling about this. What should I do?

2. Dear advice team:

I have a good relationship with my parents and try to keep it that way. But the boy I've been going out with has started hassling me about some of the rules I have to follow. For example I'm not allowed to go to R-rated movies and he says I should just go ahead and do it anyway. I'm afraid if I follow my parents' rules my boyfriend will get mad. But if I break the rules I'll be in trouble with my parents. What should I do?

3. Dear advice team:

There's a boy in our school who isn't at all interested in going out with girls. He's a really nice person, but some of the other guys have started saying cruel things about him and picking on him. I think it's terrible the way they're treating him and would like to get your opinion on this. Any suggestions?

4. Dear advice team:

I'm a 16 year old guy and the oldest child in our family. I think my parents are being too strict with me. For example, I have to be in by 11:00 on the weekends. My girlfriend doesn't have a curfew at all and she has started giving me a hard time because I can't stay out later. What should I do?

5. Dear advice team:

I'm going out with a really cool boy. He's cute and very popular and knows how to treat me well. But there's just one problem. He uses chewing tobacco. I honestly think he thinks it's cool, otherwise why would he do it? But I think it's disgusting. Do you think I should say something-if so what? Or should I just put up with it.

6. Dear advice team:

I've noticed lately that my boyfriend is a very bigoted person. I never know what to say when he starts making racist jokes or says hateful and insulting things about gay people. I know everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I personally do not feel the same way he does and it makes me uncomfortable when he starts talking that way. Do you think I should say something to him-and if so, what? I'm afraid if I do say something, he'll start making fun of me, too.

7. Dear advice team:

If a boy has spent a lot of money on a girl, is it okay for him to try to persuade her to go further than she might want to go sexually?

8. Dear advice team:

The boy I've been going out with has a really bad temper. I used to think it was kind of cool, but now I'm beginning to wonder what might happen if he ever got really mad at me. Do you think this is something I need to worry about? Is there something I should be doing about this?

9. Dear advice team:

I come from a family where people yell and shout a lot when they get mad. The person I'm dating isn't like that at all. He says people ought to talk about things when they get upset. I like him, but am wondering why he's so wimpy. Who's right—him or me?

10. Dear advice team:

My girlfriend broke up with me because she said she didn't like the way I treated her. I'll admit I sometimes raised my voice and swore when I got mad at her. But, I never hit her because I don't think it's right to hit a woman. Don't you think I have a right to yell as long as I don't hurt her physically?

11. Dear advice team:

My best friend is dating someone who seems pretty abusive. She says he has never hit her but I'm wondering if maybe she's not telling me the truth. I've heard him say some pretty threatening things to her and I know he can be really mean when he doesn't get his way. I don't want to interfere with things that aren't any of my business. But I don't want to see my friend get hurt either. What should I do?

12. Dear advice team:

The other night my boyfriend got mad at me and slapped me across the face. He'd been drinking and so he probably didn't know any better. In fact, he felt so bad that he started to cry. He's really a sweet guy and I know he wouldn't deliberately hurt me because I think he honestly does love me. I want to let him know that I was hurt by what he did, but I don't want to make him feel guilty about it either. Should I just drop it and hope it doesn't happen again? What would you do?

13. Dear advice team:

I'm getting tired of the way my boyfriend keeps hassling me about sex. I like him, but I'm honestly not as interested in sex as he is. I've heard men think when a woman says "no" she really means "yes." My boyfriend is like that and it's really starting to bother me. How can girls get their boyfriends to understand that some of us just don't want to have sex yet?

14. Dear advice team:

My girlfriend and I have been invited to a party where there's going to be lots of drinking. She thinks it sounds cool and really wants to go. I'm on the wrestling team and they're pretty serious about enforcing the no-alcohol rule so I don't want to take the chance. But I'm afraid if I don't take my girlfriend to the party that she'll go with somebody else. What should I do?

15. Dear advice team:

I've got a terrible problem with my boyfriend. I really want to break up with him because of some stuff he has done to me in the past. But he says if I leave him he'll kill himself. Even though I want to get out of this relationship I could never live with myself if this guy committed suicide because of me. Please help me.

16. Dear advice team:

A boy at school sits real close to me. Sometimes he rubs his arms against mine and one time when I got up, he grabbed my butt. I don't like being touched that way. What should I do?

17. Dear advice team:

Prom is coming up and a bunch of kids are renting motel rooms for a party afterwards. I think my boyfriend expects that we'll be spending the night there, but I'm afraid my parents will have a problem with it. I don't know what to do about this. What would you do?

Resolving Conflicts

What about Conflict?

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of relationships. It can occur any time that two or more people discover there are differences in the way they think about or respond to things. Of course, not all differences lead to conflict, but when they do it's helpful to understand what's going on and, more importantly, what can be done to deal with the situation.

The resources in this section will provide you with background information about various styles of responding to conflict, as well as steps and guidelines for resolving problems that arise between people. Also included is a self-assessment tool intended to provide a non-threatening procedure for examining attitudes and behaviors about interpersonal conflict.

Hint:

These materials will be most effective when used with older youth or adults to reinforce or supplement teaching presentations that deal with helping people learn positive strategies for dealing with conflict.

Fractured Fairy Tales

Age

All ages

Teaching context

It works well in groups with both adults and youth present. It can be used for club visits or any time you want to introduce an “educational” component into an event.

Time needed

20–30 minutes

Description

This activity is an entertaining way to introduce basic principles of conflict resolution.

Advance preparation

1. Print the following on a large piece of posterboard, flip chart or chalkboard:
 - T – Talk it over.
 - L – Listen to what the other person suggests.
 - C – Choose a solution that works for both people.
2. Consider assembling a box of props that relate to the various fairy tales that will be acted out. For example:
 - The Three Bears* – bowls, spoons, a blond wig, etc.
 - Jack and the Beanstalk* – seeds, harp Christmas ornament, etc.
 - Three Little Pigs* – brick, straw, twigs, etc.
 - Little Red Riding Hood* – red cloak, basket, granny wig, etc.
3. Make copies of the “Got a Problem with Someone?” handout on page 73.

Directions

1. Ask for four or five volunteers to act out a fairy tale. Ask them to choose which of the following stories they want to dramatize: *The Three Bears*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Three Little Pigs*, or *Little Red Riding Hood*. Have them leave the room to get ready and give them five to 10 minutes to practice their presentation.
2. While the volunteers are rehearsing, go over the following information with the rest of the group:
 - a. Explain that when the fairy tale is presented they are to observe what the characters do and say when conflict arises.
 - b. Point out that there are positive and negative ways of reacting to conflict. One way is to argue and fight about it. A better way is to work together to find a reasonable solution.
 - c. Use the poster to describe how TLC works:
 - T – *Talk* it over. Tell each other your side of the story without blaming, criticizing or accusing one another.
 - L – *Listen* to the other person and pay attention to his or her suggestions for solving the problem. Using your own words, repeat what he or she said to make sure you heard it correctly.
 - C – *Choose* a solution that works for both people. Work together to negotiate a plan that both of you are happy with.

3. Ask the actors to come in and make their presentation. When they've finished give them a big round of applause, then explain that while they were rehearsing the rest of the group was learning a process for handling conflict. Have someone volunteer to review the TLC process.
4. Have everyone brainstorm ideas for how the fairy tale could be acted out all over again using the TLC process to come up with a different ending. (Consider writing down ideas on a flip chart.)
5. Give the fairy tale actors a few minutes to go over plans. While they're getting ready, distribute the "Got a Problem with Someone?" handout. Then have the actors replay the fairy tale using the ideas the group proposed.

Sum it up.

1. Remind everyone that in order to resolve a conflict it's important to pay attention to what's upsetting people. That's where good communication skills count.
2. Resolving conflict means taking the time to talk things over, listen carefully to one another's point of view and work together to find a solution that works for both people.

Got a problem with someone?

Don't fight about it!

Use the 4 H's to figure out a better way

1. Use your **H**ead

Figure out why you are angry or frustrated with the other person.

Think about what you are going to say to that person without starting a fight.

Decide what you want to suggest as a possible solution.

Say what you have to say without yelling at or insulting the other person.

2. Use your **H**ear

Listen to what the other person has to say without arguing about it.

Pay attention to how he or she is feeling.

Repeat in your own words what you think he or she has said.

3. Use your **H**ands

Work with the other person to suggest ideas about what needs to happen next.

Help find solutions that will be fair for everyone involved and write them down.

Try your best to make the solutions work.

4. Keep a **H**ealthy attitude

Cooperate with other people.

Be optimistic.

Respect the rights of others.

Smile and enjoy life!

Different Approaches to Conflict

Most people dislike conflict, and as result they don't handle it very well when it occurs. Since some strategies for dealing with conflict are more effective than others, it's important to be able to tell the difference between what helps and what doesn't help to manage and resolve a problem.

Less helpful responses to conflict situations:

1. Competing

This style asserts one individual's needs over the needs of others. Persons who use this approach often respond in an aggressive or domineering fashion when they sense that someone disagrees with them. They tend to have little regard for the other person's feelings or needs, and don't seem to care about what happens to the relationship in the future. Their priority in a conflict situation usually is to do whatever they can to get their own way regardless of how much it may end up hurting the other person.

2. Accommodation

This style is just the opposite of competition. Persons who use this approach often neglect their own needs in order to be "diplomatic" or because they don't want to "rock the boat." Their priority in a conflict situation is to preserve the relationship they have with the other person at all costs. Rather than stating their own needs or expectations, they "agree" with the other person even though they may be feeling overwhelmed, resentful or upset about his/her demands and expectations.

3. Avoidance

This is a fairly common way of responding to conflict. People who use this approach talk themselves into believing that it's best to ignore the problem rather than deal with it. "Maybe if I don't say anything, it will just blow over," they tell themselves. Perhaps it will, but people who get in the habit of ignoring the conflict tend to get in trouble after awhile. When feelings get pent up and needs go unexpressed, a conflict can fester until it becomes too big to ignore. It can grow and spread, and eventually it can destroy a relationship.

Conflict Resolution Guidelines

1

Treat the other person with respect.

- Allow the other person to fully express him or herself.
- Be willing to risk confrontation.
- Be direct, listen and pay attention to what he or she tells you.
- Avoid talking “at” the person—talk “with” him or her instead.

2

Listen until you experience the other side.

- Remember that in conflict situations people are prone to misunderstand each other.
- Listen carefully in order to avoid making assumptions based on inaccurate information.
- Try to accurately understand and summarize the other person’s point of view.
- Before expressing your own opinions and needs, repeat in your own words what the other person has said and appears to be feeling.

Say what you need to say.

3

- State your views, feelings, interests and needs briefly and concisely.
- Refrain from using emotionally charged or loaded words.
- Share your feelings without blaming them on the other person.
- Be specific about describing what you mean.
- Avoid name-calling, labeling or demeaning the other person.

Helpful responses to conflict situations:

Compromise

This can be a fairly effective way of handling conflict because it allows both persons a chance to gain a little and give a little. If they haven’t been able to work out more cooperative solutions to the problem, they agree to a series of tradeoffs that seem “better than nothing.” The problem with a compromise is that it often leaves people wishing there could have been a better way of solving the problem.

Collaboration

This is the most satisfying way to resolve conflict—but it’s also the most work because it requires a lot of communication and cooperation. It involves going to the trouble of pooling individual needs and goals in order to come up with a better solution than either person could have achieved alone. This approach is often called a “win-win solution” because it works for both people. Collaboration calls for trust and the willingness for both persons to take each other’s needs and ideas into consideration.

Adapted from: *People Skills*, Robert Bolton, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979.

There’s nothing wrong with conflict—as long as it’s handled constructively.

What's Your Conflict Style?

The following statements reflect different ways of handling conflict that arise between yourself and someone close to you, e.g., friend, family member, girlfriend or boyfriend.

Directions: Read the statements carefully and try to answer each one as honestly as possible by responding True (T) or False (F).

- 1. I try to avoid conflict situations by walking away when I'm feeling upset.
- 2. I try to state my feelings and thoughts as honestly as possible without trying to hide what's really bothering me.
- 3. Sometimes I try to force the other person to agree with me by using threats and/or physical strength.
- 4. Instead of blaming the other person for how I feel, I try to use I-Messages to express thoughts and feelings. ("I *feel hurt*" rather than "You *hurt me*.")
- 5. I tend to joke around when there's a conflict by using humor and sarcasm as a way of getting the other person to lighten up.
- 6. I make an effort to look at the situation from the other person's point of view in order to understand what he or she might be feeling or thinking.
- 7. I don't usually try to solve a problem until it's clear who caused it in the first place.
- 8. I honestly listen to the other person's point of view so I can let him or her know it's okay to feel or think that way.
- 9. Sometimes I cry and pretend to be much more upset than I really am in order to get the other person to give in.
- 10. Instead of complaining about the situation, I usually try to concentrate on simply describing why it upsets me.
- 11. I often give examples of other things a person has done to upset me in the past as further evidence of his or her mistakes.
- 12. Instead of needing to have "the last word" I am willing to be flexible and admit that I was mistaken.
- 13. When I believe I'm right, I'll do whatever I can to convince the other person to see things my way—even if it means hurting his or her feelings.
- 14. I try to get the other person to look at the things we agree upon instead of just concentrating on the disagreement.
- 15. Sometimes I try hard to win an argument by being nice to the other person so he or she will agree with me.
- 16. Even when I'm arguing with someone, I try to let the other person know that I care about him or her and our relationship.
- 17. When I can't win an argument any other way, I sometimes try to get the other person to give in by keeping my distance and refusing to express my love or affection.
- 18. No matter who I'm arguing with, I usually try to treat that person as an equal.
- 19. When I know I'm right, I sometimes refuse to discuss the situation or listen to what the other person has to say because it doesn't make any difference anyway.
- 20. I try to do as much listening as talking when I'm having a problem with someone.

Scoring: The *even* numbered statements are examples of positive ways of responding to problems and indicate a constructive approach to conflict. The odd numbered statements describe behaviors that are much less productive and more likely to make matters worse. Following is some more information about each of the statements you’ve just reviewed:

1. It makes sense to walk away from an argument that could lead to physical abuse or violence in order to avoid the possibility of being hurt. On the other hand, it’s a mistake to walk away from someone who wants to talk to you about resolving a conflict situation.
2. Rather than “beating around the bush” it’s better to come right out and say what’s on your mind so the other person doesn’t have to keep trying to guess what’s bothering you.
3. People who use physical force to frighten others into agreeing with them end up losing in the long run because nobody likes a bully.
4. There’s nothing to be gained by blaming someone else for the way you feel. It’s much more helpful to use an I-Message to describe what you are thinking, feeling or needing without making the other person feel attacked, criticized or threatened.
5. A little light-hearted humor can ease the tension in a conflict situation. However, using sarcasm, making fun of, or ridiculing another person isn’t really very funny.
6. It’s difficult to be understanding, especially if you’re upset. Still, there are always two sides to every conflict. It’s easier to resolve a problem if both parties understand what it’s about.
7. It’s very difficult for two people to handle a conflict situation when one of them is more interested in blaming the other one for the problem than in finding a solution to it.
8. It takes effort to respect another person’s right to his or her feelings when you’re upset with that person. It’s worth it, though, because people who think they’re being criticized for the way they feel often end up needing to defend those feelings rather than trying to solve the conflict.
9. Using tears and phony emotional outbursts to get the other person to pay attention to you is a childish and self-centered way of reacting to conflict. It shows the other person that you’re more interested in gaining his or her sympathy than in trying to resolve the problem.
10. It’s much more productive to describe the behavior than to blame the person for what he or she has done to upset you. That way you can focus on the problem itself instead of getting caught up in an argument about who was right and who was wrong.
11. Bringing up things that have happened in the past won’t get you anywhere when a conflict arises that needs to be resolved immediately. Storing up grievances and refusing to forgive people for mistakes they’ve made can be a real stumbling block to resolving the conflict.
12. Resolving a conflict means being less concerned with having the last word and more willing to take into consideration what the other person has to say. That can’t happen if both parties have already made up their minds that they’re right and the other person is wrong.
13. Sometimes people use intellectual arguments that the other person can’t understand, or they say things that are mean and hurtful. People who use these kinds of tactics usually are more interested in winning the argument than in resolving the conflict.
14. It’s often easier for people to deal with something that upsets them if they’re able to recognize things about that situation that are not problems for them.
15. Pretending to be nice to someone just to trick him or her into letting you win an argument is manipulative and dishonest. On the other hand, people who are genuinely concerned about resolving conflict without hurting one another try to treat each other with courtesy and respect.
16. Just because you disagree with someone doesn’t mean you no longer care about him or her. That’s why it’s important to let the other person know that even though you’re upset at the moment it’s not going to change the relationship you have with that person.
17. Trying to win an argument by giving someone the “silent treatment” or the “cold shoulder” gets you nowhere. It’s childish to act as if you’ll stop loving or caring for someone just because you can’t have things go your way.
18. It’s a sign of maturity to be able to treat the person with whom you disagree as someone whose thoughts and feelings are just as important as your own.
19. It’s impossible to resolve conflict constructively if one of the parties makes it clear that he or she doesn’t want to discuss it. The problem can’t really be solved if people are refusing to communicate about it.
20. In order for two people to deal constructively with a conflict they must be willing to interact with one another. That means that each of them must be prepared to speak honestly and respectfully about their concerns and to listen patiently and attentively to what the other person has to say about his or her concerns.

Conflict Resolution: Are You Ready to Give It a Try?

1. Consider the skills you need to communicate.

Trying to force the other person to agree with you or insist that he or she give in to your demands is coercion and not conflict resolution. Instead of arguing and debating about who caused the problem, your goal is to find a constructive way to manage and resolve it. Strong communication skills will enable you to tell the other person about your feelings and concerns and listen in order to understand his or her feelings and concerns as well.

2. Consider your personal conflict management style.

Conflict is not an easy thing to handle because it involves emotions that can leave people feeling extremely uncomfortable. Rather than face the distress of having to confront a conflict situation, people come up with all sorts of ineffective ways to try making it easier for themselves. For example, some people become competitive and domineering. Others try to avoid the situation entirely. It's important to recognize the kinds of things you usually tend to do in conflict situations in order to determine what is helpful and what isn't.

3. Consider whether or not the timing is right.

Conflict resolution takes time because the parties involved need to be able to communicate about the issue and decide what to do about it. It means paying attention to what is being said—and that's hard to do when you're in a hurry. If you don't have enough time to adequately discuss the issue, you probably won't get very far. Instead of using that as an excuse for avoiding the problem, agree to get together at a specific time and place to do something positive about it.

4. Consider whether or not you're in the right place.

When there's a conflict to be resolved, both parties need to concentrate on communicating with each other. That's why it's important to find a safe and comfortable environment where you can talk without worrying about being interrupted by other people or distracted by the telephone, television or other things that could compete for your attention.

5. Consider the emotions that are involved.

In order to handle conflict productively people need to listen to each other. That can be hard to do when there are strong emotions involved. People often get defensive when they feel threatened or misunderstood. When that happens they may be more interested in protecting themselves than in discussing how to resolve the conflict. If someone is in a bad mood or feeling especially angry, hostile or depressed it might be best to agree to discuss the problem later—at a time when he or she is in a better frame of mind. Just make sure this doesn't turn into an excuse to avoid the problem entirely.

6. Consider safety issues.

Conflict can result in deadly consequences if strong emotions aren't held in check. When a person's temper gets the best of him or her, uncontrolled anger may quickly turn to rage which often gets expressed in the form of physical, emotional or verbal abuse. It's never a good idea to try reasoning with a violent person. The best course of action when threatened with personal harm is to get out of the situation as quickly as possible.

7. Consider when to declare a cease-fire.

There may be times when regardless of how hard people have been trying to resolve a conflict, nothing appears to be working. At times like this it's pointless to continue going over and over the same discussion. One approach is to agree to disagree for the time being in order to cool down and step back from the situation for awhile. If the problem persists, ignoring it won't make it go away. An option would be to enlist the help of a neutral third party—someone both parties trust. Or, you might consider discussing the problem with a professional who is trained in dealing with conflict situations.

Five-Step Approach to Resolving Conflict

Conflict between people can be beneficial. When handled positively, conflict provides an opportunity for the parties involved to release built-up tension and allows important issues to be discussed. Conflict can cause people to take a closer look at their beliefs, values, goals and relationships in order to express them to one another. It can result in the exchange of new and creative ideas for working together and relating to one another in a more meaningful way.

Conflict doesn't have to be a scary thing; in fact it can be just the opposite. When you take some steps to manage and resolve conflict positively, it can lead to constructive solutions. Here are five basic steps to follow:

- Step 1** Identify the problem, as well as any needs or concerns that are not being met because of it.
- Step 2** Describe the problem, and provide examples of any needs or concerns that are not being met because of it.
- Step 3** Listen carefully to the other person's description of the problem and his or her needs and concerns. (Try not to judge, criticize or become defensive about what you hear.)
- Step 4** Work together to negotiate a solution.
- Brainstorm a list of possible solutions.
 - Discuss the options on the list by asking:
 - How well do they address each party's needs and concerns?
 - What would be the consequences?
 - What would be the chances for success?
 - Have you tried anything similar in the past that has worked?
 - What kind of support would you both need to be successful?
 - Agree on which solution makes the most sense.
 - Decide how to put the plan into action. (Consider putting it in writing.)
- Step 5** Decide on a strategy for monitoring how things are going. Make sure to agree on what to do in case one or both parties aren't satisfied with the way the plan is working.

Mental Checklist for Managing Conflict

When it comes to managing conflict it's always a good idea to clarify the issues being disputed in order to better understand your role. Before sitting down to discuss these things with the other person, it helps to spend some time thinking about them by yourself first.

The next time you find yourself fretting over a conflict situation, ask yourself the following questions before you try talking about it with the other person. The more you have been able to figure out about the nature of the problem, the better chance you will have for working with the other person to find a successful solution.

1. How did the problem start?
2. What issues are involved?
3. How am I contributing to the problem?
4. How have I been interacting with the other person so far?
5. What consequences (if any) have I experienced as a result of this problem?
6. What kinds of things need to happen in order to solve this problem fairly?

