Developing Personal Relationships and Conflict Management

Inquire: Conflict Management in Action

Overview

Personal relationships can take on several forms. The way we communicate in a relationship can impact how that relationship grows or how it falls apart. The way we communicate also impacts how we handle conflicts and even what kinds of conflicts arise in a relationship. This lesson addresses what kinds of communication patterns can be used in a relationship, explains different forms of conflict management, provides tools to best handle conflict, and finally explains how relationships begin and end.

Big Question: How do you handle conflict in your relationship?

Watch: Making Friends and Solving Problems

Think about a close relationship in your life. Do you think of your best friend? Your parent? A significant other? In this lesson, you will learn more about the five steps of building a relationship. As you learn about the steps, think specifically about how they occurred in the close relationship you’re thinking of. Feel free to pause the video to really think about the answers to the questions.

First, you two became aware of each other. Think about when this happened. How old were you? Second, you got to know each other. When did this first start to happen? How long did this stage last? Third, you got close to this person. How did you feel you were getting closer? What did that closeness look like? Fourth, the relationship stabilized. The relationship started to feel normal. How did this feel? What made it normal? Fifth, and finally, you developed commitments with each other. Did this mean you titled the relationship: friend or best friend? Or, did it mean you had standing commitments, like a tradition?

All of these stages required a lot of communication with one another. It is necessary to communicate to keep the relationship close, regardless of the type of relationship it is. One of the most important parts of maintaining a relationship is successfully resolving conflict. There are three steps we discuss in this lesson to resolve a conflict. These are not perfect steps for every conflict, but they provide a starting point. As you did before, think of a conflict you had with a person you have a close relationship with. If you can’t think of a specific instance, make one up, and follow along.

First, identify the core problem. Thinking back to the conflict you have in mind, did you and your close relationship do this? If so, how long did it take to get to the core of the problem? If not, what prevented
you from finding the core of the problem? Second, acknowledge the feelings of all sides involved. Was everyone able to express their emotions about the conflict? If not, what was the reason? Third, identify steps to solve the problem. In the conflict you’re thinking of, were there steps identified to solve the conflict? Are those steps still being implemented today? If you were not able to do this, does the conflict still arise from time to time? What is stopping you from identifying steps now?

Read: Developing and Maintaining Relationships

Overview

Personal relationships are important to our everyday lives. These relationships have to be maintained in specific ways, and this lesson will cover what those ways are. It’s important to note that the concepts covered in this lesson are not isolated to committed, romantic relationships. These concepts also apply to platonic friendships as well.

What are the Different Types of Communication in Personal Relationships?

There are two broad categories of communication in a relationship: masculine and feminine. This has nothing to do with a person being male or female. A woman can use masculine communication patterns, and a man can use feminine communication patterns. These names come from traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity in American culture. **Masculine communication** is a style of communication that focuses on creating and maintaining rules, promoting self over a group, and asserting dominance over a group. **Feminine communication** is a style of communication that focuses on developing and maintaining relationships, supporting others, and working as a group.

The two kinds of communication each have different focuses in relationships. Feminine communication focuses on sharing emotions, developing empathy, and maintaining the relationship. Masculine communication focuses on problem solving, maintaining independence, and asserting control of situations.

Neither kind of communication is better or worse, and both serve valuable purposes in a relationship. Utilizing both kinds of communication in a relationship is vital to keeping the relationship intact. Feminine communication is better at identifying problems and explaining why those problems are hurtful; masculine communication is better at identifying steps that can be taken to fix the problems. Both styles are needed.

How do the Two Styles of Communication Handle Conflict?

**Conflict management** is the conscious decision made by participants in a conflict to resolve it in a way that all members find satisfactory. Both communication styles have different ways of handling conflict. This comes primarily from the values they hold in their style of communication. Masculine communication values creating rules and developing solutions to problems, so it also values direct confrontation as a way to handle conflict. Sometimes this seems aggressive, and it sometimes can be aggressive in the way that it develops solutions to problems. There are two reasons masculine communication can be used aggressively to resolve conflict: it values being the center of attention, and it asserts dominance over those in the conversation.

Conversely, feminine communication focuses on maintaining relationships, meaning direct conflict could jeopardize the relationship. Feminine communication favors indirect confrontation and conflict avoidance, so it helps to maintain a relationship and protect the emotions and feelings of those in a confrontation.
As with communication styles in general, there is no right or wrong way to manage a conflict. A balanced approach that values protecting members of a conflict while still offering concrete ways to address the problem is closer to the “correct” way to solve a problem. This approach combines both masculine and feminine conflict management solutions.

Conflict Management Best Practices
Managing conflict is a valuable skill in any relationship you will have in your life. As such, knowing how to handle conflict management is very important. There are three tips that can help best solve problems as they arise. First, you need to identify the real problem. Sometimes flashpoints can arise in a relationship. You might get mad at a friend for eating from your plate. Eating from your plate might not cause a real issue, but if they are mooching from you all the time, that might cause large problems. So, when conflict arises, it is important to identify the real problem at the root: your moochy friend, not this specific time they took your food.

Second, you need to acknowledge the feelings of all sides involved. Recognize that you are upset your friend is taking advantage of you, but also recognize what your friend is feeling that has caused them to do so. Maybe they do it because of how close they feel your friendship is. Maybe they do it because they think it is funny but don’t know how much it is bothering you. Letting both sides acknowledge how the problem makes them feel is important for ensuring that everyone is on the same page.

Finally, identify concrete steps to solve the problem. Come up with who needs to do what and a timeline of when those steps need to be taken. Having a plan of action will help to calm someone who relies on masculine communication patterns, and acknowledging emotions will soothe the feminine communication patterns of others. These three steps might not be able to solve every problem, but they will definitely help give you a starting point for resolving conflicts as they arise.

Stages of Relationship Building
As you develop a relationship with someone else, that development takes place in a specific order. The first thing that happens is you and the other person becoming aware of each other. Maybe one of your friends tells you about this person that you’d really like to hang out with. Maybe you hear them introduce themselves on the first day of school. The first step in a relationship is knowing the person exists.

The second step is getting to know each other. This can be done through small talk as you and the person begin to interact more and more. The third step is getting close to the person. This escalates from “Your favorite color is blue” to “I know I can rely on you when I need help.” After this comes the stabilization phase where your interactions and your reliance on each other stabilize. It becomes normal for the relationship to work the way it does. Finally, you and the person develop commitments. This can mean a title like “boyfriend” or “best friend,” or it can be expectations like having lunch together on certain days. This sense of regularity is important in developing a meaningful relationship.

Reflect Poll: Masculine or Feminine?
Do you use a more masculine or feminine form of communication in a relationship?
- Masculine
- Feminine
Expand: Ending a Relationship

Overview

Relationship building is all well and good, but not always do relationships stay strong. Conflicts can’t always be managed in a positive way. Sometimes, relationships end. This section will go over some of ways that relationships come to an end.

All Good Things Come to an End

Ending a relationship follows the same steps of building one, just in reverse. This means the first step is a failure of commitments. Plans falling through, someone not doing things they promised to do, or commitments to other relationships being prioritized over this one are all symptoms that a relationship might be in the beginning stages of the end.

Next is the destabilization phase. Things that were once normal become irregular, and this is the first stage that can be noticed in big ways. After this comes the falling apart phase. You grow relationships with others at the same time this relationship is falling. You might be growing new traits as a person, life events that don’t get shared back and forth, or you just don’t check in with the other person to know what is happening in their life. The final stage is the official end of the relationship. Both sides become aware that the relationship is ending, and both sides acknowledge what has happened. This acknowledgement can be internal and does not require the two members of the former relationship to actually talk about the state of the relationship.

It can be sad when relationships end. But, it can also be a good thing. Not all relationships need to continue on. If they begin to fall apart, it might be for the best to let the relationship go. If the relationship is important enough to maintain, then usually it won’t get to the later stages of falling apart. Some of the leading reasons that relationships fall apart include annoyances that have built up over time and are no longer manageable or a large fight that was not properly managed. Learning the stages of conflict management can help to avoid relationships falling apart. If both sides are willing to maintain a relationship, it is possible to avoid a separation. But, if only one person in a relationship is trying to maintain the relationship, it often will not be able to survive. It might slow the process of reaching the later stages of falling apart, but the end of the relationship is inevitable if both sides are not willing to work on its maintenance.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

An article explaining how the two styles differ in conflict resolution and how to find a middle ground

- Link to resource:
An article explaining the benefit to a balanced communication approach, and providing tips on how to do so

- Link to resource:

An article providing an in-depth look at masculine and feminine conflict resolution

- Link to resource:

Lesson Glossary

**masculine communication**: a style of communication that focuses on creating and maintaining rules, promoting self over a group, and asserting dominance over a group

**feminine communication**: a style of communication that focuses on developing and maintaining relationships, supporting others, and working as a group

**conflict management**: the conscious decisions made by participants in a conflict to resolve the conflict in a way that all members find satisfactory

Check Your Knowledge

1. Only men use masculine communication patterns.
   - a. True
   - b. False

2. Feminine communication patterns are better for conflict resolution.
   - a. True
   - b. False

3. The first step to conflict resolution is identifying the real problem.
   - a. True
   - b. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A

Citations

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