
Conflict? Nope! Facing Conflict When You'd Rather Avoid It

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We experience conflict in our lives every day whether we are actively aware of it or not. Conflict isn't always an aggressive interaction. Conflict can take many forms. Typically, conflict presents itself in one of three ways: 1) passive, 2) aggressive, or 3) passive-aggressive. I bet you can think of an example of each type you've experienced in your life.

Conflict isn't always the classic verbal argument; conflict can also arise in choosing what flavor of La Croix you want with your lunch. But likely, more commonly, you deal with varying levels of conflict every day in at your job. This can be co-worker to co-worker conflict, manager to employee conflict, or manager to clinic owner conflict to name a few. Whichever form conflict shows itself to you, if you're like me, you might rather avoid it than deal with it head on.

But why is this?

Conflict can evoke many feelings and emotions from within in us. Feeling of avoidance, fear, stress, frustration, adrenaline, the works! But what if it also evokes feelings from deeper inside of us? Feelings that maybe we aren't as comfortable with, feelings that we may even try to avoid. Deep seated feelings stemming from our own sense of self-worth. Feelings that create anxiety and sometimes even catastrophic thinking.

Fear of conflict typically starts with a predisposition about conflict itself. If you grew up in a household like me where conflict was avoided, you likely have a natural avoidance mechanism for conflict. On the other hand, if you grew up in a household filled with conflict you might be well versed with handling conflict. But – you also have an avoidance mechanism for fears of repeating the past. With either scenario, when conflict becomes something to avoid, we typically avoid closeness and intimacy as well. You can't have one extreme without the other.

Based on our predispositions, we begin to form our beliefs about conflict. Mental scripts begin to form that say, "conflict is bad, therefore must be avoided at all costs." We start to believe that conflict is something to fear; something that makes us vulnerable and not perfect.

On top of all of this, we throw in the stress factor – which means that in addition to our predisposition and beliefs about conflict, we don't want to face adding additional stress or discomfort to our lives. Let's face it; we are stressed enough already!

So what can we do about it?

We first need to remember the benefits of conflict itself. Some of these benefits include: holding people accountable, improving processing, promoting innovation, eliminating poor behavior, making tough decisions, and even gaining confidence in ourselves. These are all important factors to consider. Remember these as your “why’s” when working on getting comfortable with conflict.

Being content with conflict is also heavily influenced by our level of comfort with being assertive. Assertiveness means being confident and not afraid of saying what you want or believe. This is obviously easier said than done for most of us, however I do believe assertiveness is the middle ground between passive and aggressive and something for us to all to strive for as leaders in our practices.

With assertive skills in mind, think of your “why’s” of why the conflict should not be avoided. Use this to give you that push to move forward. Challenge your anxiety and catastrophic thinking. Talk back to it! Is your fear of the conflict really worth you not getting what you want or need?

Remember, “You cannot change what you refuse to confront.”