

Stress Bytes Newsletter

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 6

JULY 2007

"WHEN STRESS BITES, BITE BACK!"

THE NEWSLETTER OF ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.
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Effective Conflict Resolution: Part 1

Most of us stress out when faced with an interpersonal conflict, whether it's at work or at home. Unfortunately, without guidance for effective conflict resolutions, we can act like...well, 2 year olds. We pout, whine, scream, blame call names, walk out or tune out, or worse...hit. As Confucius said, "He who strikes the first blow admits he has run out of ideas." Plus, nothing is resolved this way.

So, I'd like to give you some ideas about effective conflict resolution, or what I like to call "interpersonal negotiation." First of all, if you are ambushed by an emotional reaction in the face of conflict, it is best to walk away, calm down, get some clarity, and figure out exactly what's upsetting you before talking to the other person(s) involved. You are much more likely to get what you want when you respond, not react. You are also much more likely to get what you want when you can define a "win-win" position, such that everyone comes away

feeling good about the plan and decision.

I want to be clear that I'm not talking about compromise, but collaboration. Compromises don't really resolve anything permanently. They are a "win-lose" proposition. The best possible outcome for a conflict is when everyone feels like they came out the winner.

The first step to getting to that "win-win" position is to define the issue and the stakeholders in the issue. In other words, what's bugging you

and who needs to be part of the resolution? This will allow you to gather the right people together for a discussion and to focus on one issue at a time.

The second step to getting an issue resolved is to get agreement to discuss it when all parties are free of distractions, rested, sober, and have set aside a defined block of time.

I highly recommend setting a time limit on the

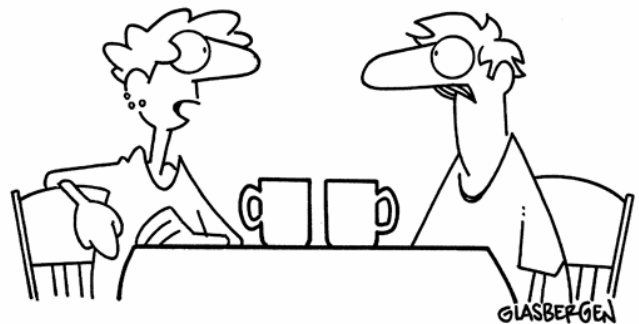
discussion so that it doesn't become the interminable "talk" that goes on until 3am. If the issue isn't resolved within the time period, agree to set aside another block of time to continue or finish the discussion.

Third, if you are the person bringing up the concern or issue, break it down into its component

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**"Let's compromise. You do everything I say
and I'll say everything you do."**

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Effective Conflict Resolution: Part 1 —cont'd

parts for clarity. This will be helpful to you and to the person listening to your concern. It is much easier for someone to listen and stay calm when you are describing the various parts of an issue instead of screaming and name calling.

I find the categories used by Sheron Miller, Ph.D. in his Couple's Communication workshops to be very helpful. He says, any issue contains 5 component parts and that taking time to break it down makes it easier to communicate. He calls this part "Taking Care of Yourself" because you are owning up to all the aspects of the issue and defining what you want.

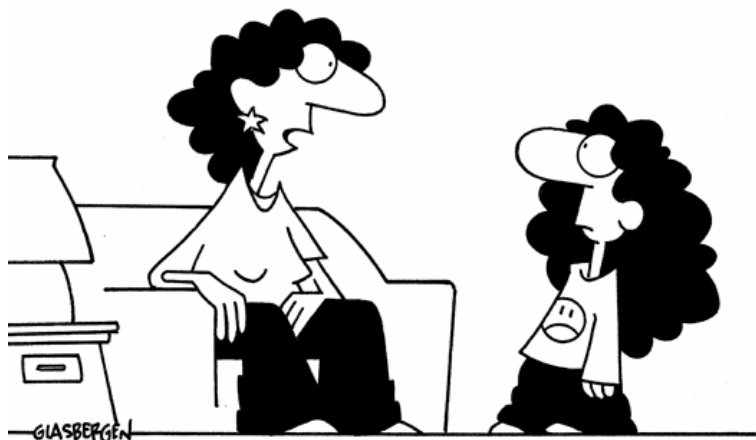
The five aspects or steps in clarifying an issue are:

1. Describe the sensory data - what you saw, heard and took in through your senses that relate to the issue
2. Identify the thoughts, interpretations, assumptions, or beliefs you formed as a result of what you saw and heard in #1
3. Share the feelings that you're having as a result of #2. Use feeling words, which are some variation of "sad, mad, glad, bad or scared."
4. Identify your wants about the issue, including what you want for yourself, for the other person and for all involved
5. Describe your past, present and possible future actions you've taken or could take to resolve the issue. Invite the other person(s) directly

involved in the issue to brainstorm with you about actions you could take to obtain the "win-win" or desired outcome. This creates shared ownership of the solution.

Hint: Once you get to the part where you communicate clearly what you want for all involved, you've usually defined the "win-win" position. It might be "I want us to have a clear way to communicate our wants, needs and boundaries about affection to each other" or "I want us to have time together to keep our relationship vital and the spark alive" or "I want us to hone a way of making decisions about money that we both can live with."

In the second part of this article I will discuss the other half of the equation for effective conflict resolution or what Sheron Miller, Ph.D. called "Taking Care of the Other." That part is the use of active listening skills. I know of nothing more effective in diffusing upset in a difficult negotiation than being an excellent listener. It takes some skill and alot of practice, but it is certainly a skill worth honing.



"Sometimes it's smooth sailing and sometimes they sink. That's why they're called relationships!"

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Effective Conflict Resolution: Part 2

In Part 1 of this article, I talked about setting aside time to discuss a concern and ways to break it down into its component parts. The goal of that was to have your concern better received and understood by the other person with whom you were in conflict. This month, I will review the use of active listening skills, which is what the person receiving the concern can best do to help resolve the conflict.

Nothing makes a conflict worse than when the other person is not actively listening or engaged. Here are 5 steps to not only demonstrate that you are listening, but to demonstrate that you understand what the other person is saying and feeling.

The 5 steps of active listening are:

1. **Attending** - This is mostly non-verbal. It means you are in the same room, with no distractions interfering (turn off the TV or computer) and in comfortable proximity to each other. It is demonstrated by an open and receptive body posture (no arms folded over your chest), making comfortable eye contact, and nodding to indicate you are listening.
2. **Acknowledging** - This includes both non-verbal and verbal behaviors, such as leaning slightly forward, some affectionate contact like patting the other person or holding their hand, and saying things like, "I see," "yes," "okay," "Uh hmmm," or "Oh, I get it." Such statements are made in a warm or matter-of-fact tone.
3. **Inviting** - When the person expressing their concern seems lost for words or vague, you can say things to encourage them to go deeper or into more detail. Inviting statements sound like, "tell me more," "please go on," "what else?" or a simple "and?" Even simple silence can invite a person to go deeper into their thoughts or feelings. Learning to invite conversation is a great skill to have because it makes the other person feel safe and encouraged that their thoughts and feelings are important to you. Too many times, in conflict, I see where one person shuts the other one down and then complains that "he doesn't talk to me anymore!"
4. **Summarizing** - I call this one the "money piece" because when you learn to summarize accurately and effectively, the fight is more than half over. First of all, it isn't rude to interrupt someone who is long winded to summarize. If you are confused, this is also a good time to interrupt to summarize. It demonstrates like no other skill that you are listening, actively engaged and what your current level of understanding of their concern is. It's infinitely better to summarize than to simply (and defensively) say, "I understand!" To summarize simply means to paraphrase or put into your own words the essence of what the other person is thinking and/or feeling. You condense it down and reflect it back to them to demonstrate your understanding. Be careful not to add your own assumptions or interpretations into the mix. You can tell that you did, if the person gets angry or annoyed with you. You'll know when you hit the nail on the head with an accurate and effective summarization when the other person visibly relaxes and they say something like, "YES! That's it exactly. Now you know how I feel!"
5. **Asking Open Questions** - I leave this to the last because it is to be used minimally, not liberally. If you pepper someone with 20 questions, they will respond defensively or shut down. If you ask a question that only requires a "yes" or "no" response, you've lost a lot of information. Better to invite them to say more about a detail than to ask a "yes/no" question. The appropriate use of open ended questions is to clarify a detail you didn't understand. Then ask, who? what? where? when and NEVER why? Why questions put people on the defensive and if it's an emotionally charged issue, they may answer in a way that you won't believe anyway.

In closing, these 5 steps of active listening can be used in any order. Often times after giving a summarization, for instance, you return to an inviting response to get the person talking again. The point of active listening is to communicate caring and understanding to the other person while they are expressing a concern. Once they feel that you fully and clearly understand their concern and feelings, it is much easier to move to the stage of brainstorming possible solutions. Plus, sometimes for the person expressing the concern, being heard and understood is enough. You don't need to agree with someone's perspective in order to understand and validate it for them.

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The Stress Doctor is IN!!!

“NO MAN EVER LISTENED
HIMSELF OUT OF A JOB.”
CALVIN COOLIDGE

“LISTENING, NOT
IMITATION, MAY BE THE
SINCEREST FORM OF
FLATTERY.”
DR. JOYCE BROTHERS

“THE OPPOSITE OF
TALKING ISN'T LISTENING.
THE OPPOSITE OF TALKING
IS WAITING_”
FRAN LEBOWITZ

“THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO,
INSTEAD OF LISTENING TO
WHAT IS BEING SAID TO
THEM, ARE ALREADY
LISTENING TO WHAT THEY
ARE GOING TO SAY
THEMSELVES.”
ALBERT GUINON



“I tried to write a poem to tell you how I feel about our relationship, but I couldn't find a word that rhymes with AAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUURRRRRRGGGGGHHHHH!”

ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.

LICENSED CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

- 17 years experience gently helping individuals, couples and groups resolve personal problems, manage stress, and reach their full potential.
- Specializing in Women's Issues and Stress Management
- Emotional Freedom Technique for Peak Performance

Call (618) 549-5935 to set up an appointment

Talking and Listening Together: Couple Communication I

by Sherod Miller, Ph.D.

This is the handbook for the well researched Couple Communication workshops that I use when teaching people how to manage conflict. What I like about it is its simplicity of instruction and the focus on a collaborative (win-win) outcome.

It contains many self-assessments and goal setting exercises for couples to improve their communication and conflict resolution skills.

Guidelines for effective communication include:

1. Describe what you see and hear—rather than label the other person
2. Identify and own your assumptions—rather than put them on the other person
3. State your feelings clearly—instead of acting them out
4. Define your wants for yourself, the other and the two of you.
5. Brainstorm possible solutions that you've tried, are trying or could try

Once you have defined and shared what you want for the 2 of you and your partner agrees, then you have the WIN-WIN position. That's more than half the battle!