

conflict: not too much, not too little **and how to make it constructive**

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 21.05.11

I wrote yesterday about conflict and the costs of over- and under-assertiveness. Today's post adds further thoughts about making conflict constructive.

working for low levels of persistent interpersonal stress & conflict: Relationships are the source of much of humanity's greatest joys and greatest sorrows. They have profound effects on our wellbeing, our stress resilience and on how long we live. See, for example, relevant earlier posts on "*Strong relationships improve survival as much as quitting smoking*", "*Self-determination*", "*Meeting at relational depth*", and on "*Relationships in general*". As a helpful overview, I like Sheldon Cohen's paper "*Relationships and health*". Its abstract reads "*The author discusses 3 variables that assess different aspects of social relationships – social support, social integration, and negative interaction. The author argues that all 3 are associated with health outcomes, that these variables each influence health through different mechanisms ... This argument suggests a broader view of how to intervene in social networks to improve health. This includes facilitating both social integration and social support by creating and nurturing both close (strong) and peripheral (weak) ties within natural social networks and reducing opportunities for negative social interaction.*" Good stuff. In my work, I assess these three variables either very quickly & simply with a three item "*Personal community activities scale*" or with the more extended sequence of "*Personal community map, instructions & questions*". High scores on the third variable – negative interaction – are worryingly common.

This is certainly true in the work place – see, for example, De Raeye & colleagues' recent paper "*Interpersonal conflicts at work as a predictor of self-reported health outcomes and occupational mobility*" or last year's BMJ article on "*Rudeness at work*" with its comments that "*In a poll of 800 employees in North American organisations, 10% reported witnessing workplace rudeness daily*" & that the Joint Commission (which accredits healthcare organisations in the United States) issued an alert in 2008 warning that "*rude language and hostile behaviour among healthcare professionals pose a serious threat to patient safety and the quality of care*". But potentially the most toxic environment for our health is typically in our closest relationships, as demonstrated by research like Renshaw's paper "*Perceived criticism only matters when it comes from those you live with*".

suggestions for negotiating conflict: So here are a cluster of suggestions on negotiating conflict in close relationships – for example in couples, between friends (Demir et al, 2007) & to an extent in individual & group psychotherapy. I'm assuming here that one is looking for win-win solutions where everyone involved potentially learns and benefits through the conflict resolution.

even-handedness & respecting needs: It's often helpful to assume that everyone involved in the conflict has – to an extent – contributed to the difficulty. The positive side of this assumption is that everyone probably has useful things they can learn from looking at what has happened – both for potential increased understanding about themselves and potential increased understanding about the currently conflicted relationship. A second assumption that may be helpful is that the conflict is partly about the people involved not getting valid underlying needs met (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). How these needs have been expressed may well not have been ideal, but the needs themselves are likely to be understandable and worth treating with respect.

cooling the situation: It's possible to be in a heated argument and talk things through constructively – it's likely to be very hard though. Often it's better to interrupt the conflict and return to it later (and this could be a couple's pre-agreed initial conflict management **[Cont.]**

strategy). We're more likely to be able to speak things through constructively when we're not too worked up – what I call *"Striking when the iron is cold"*. It's also worth acknowledging that, in part, the conflict may have flared because one or other of the people involved is on a short fuse due to other stresses in their lives (Neff & Karney, 2009).

perspective & good intention: How we approach conflict resolution can make a big difference. Being able to look at the big picture often helps – viewing the wood rather than getting lost in the trees (Giacomantonio et al, 2010). Calmness & mindfulness are likely to be useful too (Barnes et al, 2007). When people have relationships over longer time periods, occasional conflicts are pretty much inevitable. The issue isn't whether or not we have occasional interpersonal conflicts, the issue is how well and productively we learn to work with the conflict. It's absolutely the case that interpersonal difficulties can often be resolved – in fact ideally everyone has learned and is better off after the conflict than they were before it. This problem-solving, caring, optimistic approach is a major factor in producing positive win-win solutions (Srivastava et al, 2007; Sevier et al, 2008; Liberman et al, 2010). If it fits for you, consider using quiet time to nourish mindfulness and goodwill (Lambert et al, 2010) before returning to conflict discussion.

affirmation & support: When our sense of ourselves is threatened, it's hard to see things clearly. Validation of everyone involved may well help people discuss things less defensively (Busby & Holman, 2009; Quiamzade & Mugny 2009). If someone has felt "attacked" or treated unfairly, it may be particularly helpful to underline their value as a person & their absolute right to be treated respectfully. If someone has been the "aggressor", it may be particularly helpful to underline how they can so often act in kind, honest and fair ways (Shnabel et al, 2009). Similarly reminders of "good times" together can be useful (Twenge et al, 2007) and ways of going into the discussion feeling generally lighter & happier (Yuan et al, 2010). It may, at times, be helpful to get support from mutual friends & other caring "third parties" (Wittig & Boesch, 2010).

normalising, empathy, compassion: It's normal for people to have interpreted (Allik et al, 2010) and remembered what happened in rather different ways (Dykas et al, 2010; Simpson & Rholes, 2010). Trying to understand each other's positions and get "into each other's shoes" may well be useful (Galinsky et al, 2008) – even to the extent of possibly mirroring the specific words that the other is using to describe how they experienced what happened (Swaab et al, 2011). All this needs to be done with goodwill for the other person and oneself. Warmth, generosity (Klapwijk & Van Lange, 2009) and a wish for things to be less distanced and oppositional makes positive outcomes much more likely. As the Beatles put it *"The love you take is equal to the love you make"*. In intimate relationships between couples, family, friends, if one of you "wins" in a conflict then the relationship – and in fact both of you in the longer term – is likely to lose.

overall: Understanding and helping with stresses people are experiencing, exploring and respecting underlying needs, apologies and forgiveness (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010), learning and personal growth – these outcomes are likely to benefit everyone involved. In the next post on conflict, I'll talk about *"Conflict: not too much, not too little - the importance of assertiveness in close relationships"*.
