Interpersonal Communication
THE WHOLE STORY

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Interpersonal Conflict

What is interpersonal conflict?

What role does power play in conflict management?

How can we handle conflict to reach our interpersonal goals?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. What Is Interpersonal Conflict?
2. Conflict in Personal Relationships
3. Power and Conflict
4. Managing Interpersonal Conflict
Laila and Annika

Laila and her six-year-old son, Olin, have been living with Laila’s mother, Annika, for the past three months. During that time, Annika has come to feel that Laila is too permissive in the way she raises Olin. She lets him stay up late, she doesn’t require him to do any chores, and she allows him to wear almost anything he wants to school, whether it’s appropriate or not. These observations have bothered Annika ever since Laila and Olin arrived, but she has been hesitant to say anything.

One day, however, she can no longer hold her opinions in. “I just don’t understand how you can raise my grandson this way!” she blurts out. “This is not the way I raised you!” Laila reacts to these words defensively, telling her mother to mind her own business. Her grandson is her business, Annika replies, and she’s only looking out for him. “This has nothing to do with him! You just want to tell me how to run my life!” Laila responds. Annika is so upset by the conflict with her daughter that she leaves the house fuming and is gone all afternoon.

Almost every relationship experiences conflict from time to time. Even though Annika and Laila may have a close relationship, they still have different ideas about how Olin should be raised, and these gave rise to the conflict episode described here. Managing conflict can be productive, but it is also very challenging. As you’ll see in this chapter, though, it’s a normal part of the way we interact with other people. You can learn to manage conflict more constructively if you have the appropriate skills. Several features of this chapter will help you develop those skills.

This chapter focuses on the communication and the negotiation of conflict. Specifically, we’ll discuss:

1. What interpersonal conflict is and how people think about it
2. How conflict operates in personal relationships and what commonly leads to conflict
3. How conflict is related to power and how we exercise power in relationships
4. What strategies we can use to manage conflict, and which conflict behaviors we should avoid
WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT?

Conflict may not be pleasant, but it’s largely inevitable. All personal relationships experience conflict now and then. What exactly is conflict, and what are those experiences like? In this section, we will examine the definition of conflict, and we will identify the characteristics all conflicts have in common. Then, we will take a look at some of the many ways people think about conflict in their relationships.

Defining Interpersonal Conflict

What does it mean to experience conflict? Communication scholars William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker define interpersonal conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.” According to Wilmot and Hocker, an interaction must have all these elements to qualify as interpersonal conflict. Let’s take a closer look at the key elements in this definition.

Conflict is an expressed struggle. Having a conflict means more than just disagreeing. You may disagree with the president’s foreign policies or your children’s taste in music, but you don’t really have a conflict until you’ve made the other person aware of your feelings. Conflict, therefore, is a behavior. Sometimes we express our disagreements verbally, but we can also express them through nonverbal behaviors such as a mean look or a harsh tone of voice.

Conflict occurs between interdependent parties. Although all conflicts involve disagreements, a disagreement becomes a conflict only if the parties depend on each other in some way—that is, if the actions of each party affect the well-being of the other. You may have noticed that conflict is particularly common in relationships with high degrees of interdependence, such as those you have with your parents, your children, your professors, your bosses, and your close friends. If two parties are completely independent of each other, then even though they may disagree, that disagreement isn’t considered to be an interpersonal conflict.

It’s possible to have conflicts within yourself, as well. For example, you might occasionally feel conflicted about how you spend your time. Perhaps part of you thinks you should spend more time with your friends and family, but another part of you thinks you should spend more time on your schoolwork. This is conflict, but it isn’t interpersonal conflict. Rather, it’s intrapersonal, because it is occurring within yourself. Therefore, it operates outside the realm of interpersonal conflict.

Conflict is about goals the parties see as incompatible. Conflict stems from perceiving that our goals are incompatible with another person’s goals. Labeling goals as “incompatible” doesn’t simply mean that they are different. Rather, two goals are incompatible when it’s impossible to satisfy both of them. You want to change lanes on the freeway, but the driver next to you won’t let you
in. You want to spend your tax refund on a new flat-screen television, but your spouse wants to spend it on a family vacation.

Note that the first sentence in the previous paragraph explicitly refers to our perceptions that our goals are incompatible. In reality, it may be possible to resolve the conflict in a manner that allows both parties to achieve their goals. (See the discussion of conflict strategies later in the chapter.) The point here is that parties in a conflict perceive that their goals are mutually exclusive, even if that perception is not objectively true.

**Conflict arises over perceived scarce resources.** There’s little sense in fighting over something that you have in abundance. People tend to have conflict over resources that they perceive to be limited. Many relational partners have conflict over money, for instance. When people feel they don’t have enough money for everything they need and want, they can easily have conflict over how to spend the money they do have.

Time is another resource that people often perceive to be scarce. Therefore, people frequently engage in conflicts over how they should spend their time. Perhaps your romantic partner wants you to split your vacation time between hiking and being with his or her family. If you perceive that you don’t have adequate time for both activities, then you can experience conflict over how you will spend your time.

In the chapter-opening story, the resource at the center of Annika and Laila’s conflict was power—specifically, who had the power to make decisions affecting Olin. Annika and Laila both perceived this resource to be limited because the more power one of them had, the less the other felt she had.

**Conflict includes interference.** Two parties might have opposing goals with respect to some issue, but they won’t have genuine conflict until they act in ways that prevent each other from achieving their goals. You might disapprove of your roommate’s smoking habit, for instance, but you won’t have true conflict until you behave in ways that interfere with his habit. Complaining about his smoking, for instance, might diminish the enjoyment he derives from it. Hiding his cigarettes or throwing them out would make it more difficult for him to smoke. In either case, you are interfering with your roommate’s ability to achieve his goal.

**Thinking About Interpersonal Conflict**

When you think about your own experiences with interpersonal conflict, what words or images come to mind? It turns out that people often think about conflict using figurative language, such as metaphors. Researchers have identified a number of metaphors people use to describe conflict. Some of the most common ones are listed next. How well does each of these metaphors reflect the way you think about your conflict experiences?
WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT?

- Conflict is a war: Conflict is a series of battles, with winners and losers.
- Conflict is an explosion: Conflict is like hearing a time bomb ticking and then watching something blow up.
- Conflict is a trial: Each side presents its arguments and evidence, and whoever argues best wins the conflict.
- Conflict is a struggle: Conflict is a difficult and ongoing part of life.
- Conflict is an act of nature: Conflict simply happens to people; it cannot be prevented or controlled.
- Conflict is an animal behavior: Only the strong survive; conflict is a natural part of all creatures’ lives.
- Conflict is a mess: Conflict is messy, and it contaminates other aspects of life.
- Conflict is miscommunication: Conflict is the result of misunderstanding and breakdowns in communication.
- Conflict is a game: Conflict is a fun competition wherein participants test their skills against each other.
- Conflict is a heroic adventure: Conflict is about taking risks and conquering new territory.
- Conflict is a balancing act: Engaging in conflict is like juggling or walking a tightrope; one wrong move can spell disaster.
- Conflict is a bargaining table: Conflict brings people together for a collective purpose.
- Conflict is a tide: Conflict ebbs and flows; on the basis of experience, we can predict when it is likely to occur.
- Conflict is a dance: Partners learn how to “move” with each other through their conflict episodes.
- Conflict is a garden: Experiences of conflict represent seeds for the future; if cared for, they will result in a worthwhile harvest.

Those are just some of the ways people describe conflict. As you can see, those metaphors represent a wide variety of ideas. Some images are inherently negative, but others could be considered neutral or even positive. Can you imagine how the way you think about conflict might affect your experience of it? For instance, if you think of conflict as a game, a dance, or a garden, might you experience it differently than if you think of it as a war, a struggle, or a mess?

Researchers have found that the way we interpret or “frame” a conflict can greatly affect the way we experience it and the communication choices we make to manage it. While arguing with his co-worker Madison over use of the company car, for instance, Russell suddenly realized that Madison was smiling in the midst of their heated discussion. Her smiling made him even angrier, because he felt she wasn’t taking him seriously. The angrier he got, however, the more she smiled. Only during a conversation weeks later did they learn that they frame conflict quite differently: Russell frames conflict as a war, but Madison frames it as a game.

Two parties can be engaged in the same conflict but might frame the conflict quite differently. Do you think of conflict as a trial? As an animal behavior? As a dance? As a balancing act? As a war? As a game?
One result of this difference is that Madison probably experienced less stress over the conflict than Russell did. Because Madison sees conflict as a fun competition rather than as a battle between winners and losers, she doesn’t necessarily feel threatened or distressed by what Russell said. Instead, she interprets his comments as challenges that test her interpersonal skills. In contrast, because Russell frames conflict as a war, he interprets every statement from Madison as an attempt to defeat him. As a result, he finds interpersonal conflict to be stressful and threatening in a way that Madison does not.

Because the way we frame a conflict can influence our experience of it, many therapists encourage people to “reframe” their conflicts. Reframing means changing the way you think about an interpersonal situation so that you adopt a more useful frame. For instance, a therapist or a counselor could help Russell reframe his conflicts with his co-workers so that he sees them as an adventure, a balancing act, or a dance instead of as a war.

**Learn It:** What are the necessary elements of interpersonal conflict? What does it mean to reframe a conflict?

**Try It:** For a period of time (say, three to five days), make note of every conflict you observe, whether it includes you or not. Note what each conflict was about, who was involved in it, and how (if at all) it was resolved. For each conflict, identify the expressed struggle, the interdependent parties, the incompatible goals, the scarce resources, and the interference that made it an interpersonal conflict.

**Reflect on It:** With whom do you have conflict most frequently? Which metaphors for conflict seem the most accurate to you?

**Conflict in Personal Relationships**

Conflict occurs at many social levels. Communities, organizations, and certainly nations have conflict with one another. Interpersonal conflict, however, often affects our lives in more direct and more intimate ways than conflicts at those broader levels.

In this section, we will examine several characteristics of interpersonal conflict and identify those topics most likely to spur conflict in our personal relationships. Next, we will address the ways that gender and culture influence conflict. We will conclude by considering why conflict seems to be especially common when we’re communicating online.

**Characteristics of Interpersonal Conflict**

Although we have conflicts over different issues with different people, we can make some general observations that apply to all interpersonal conflict. In this section, we’ll look at five basic characteristics of conflict in personal relationships:
1. It’s natural.
2. It has content, relational, and procedural dimensions.
3. It can be direct or indirect.
4. It can be harmful.
5. It can be beneficial.

**Conflict is natural.** Most of us would be hard-pressed to think of a single important relationship in which we don’t have conflict from time to time. Conflict is a normal, natural part of relating to others. Maybe you enjoy listening to music at night, whereas your housemates prefer quiet. Perhaps you feel you’ve earned a raise at work, but your boss disagrees. Almost every significant relationship—especially those with close friends, relatives, and romantic partners—is bound to experience conflict once in a while.

Having conflict with someone doesn’t necessarily mean your relationship is unhealthy or distressed. Indeed, the presence of conflict indicates you have an interdependent relationship. It means you affect each other; if you didn’t, you’d have no need for conflict in the first place. So, conflict itself isn’t a bad thing. In fact, as we’ll see later in this chapter, if we handle conflict productively, it can actually produce some positive outcomes. What matters is how people handle their conflicts. Later in this chapter, we’ll learn about useful strategies for managing conflict.

**Conflict has content, relational, and procedural dimensions.** In personal relationships, conflicts often focus on a specific point of contention, but on a deeper level they also have broader implications for the relationship itself. To illustrate this point, let’s suppose Marc finds out his teenage daughter, Amber, has been stealing his credit card out of his wallet to participate in online gambling. When Marc confronts her about it, they argue about the dishonesty of stealing and the risks of gambling. These are the content dimensions of the conflict, the specific topics from which the conflict arose.

Even when Amber promises to change her behaviors, however, Marc doesn’t feel completely satisfied with the outcome of their argument. The reason is that there are also relational dimensions to the conflict, which are the implications the conflict has for the relationship. Marc feels that Amber has shown disrespect by stealing from him and that he can no longer trust her. This dimension of the conflict is not so much about the content of their argument (Amber shouldn’t steal or gamble) as it is about the nature of their relationship. Although Marc may be successful in changing Amber’s behavior, repairing the damage to their mutual respect and trust may require much more time and a much greater effort.
Conflict also has *procedural dimensions*, which are the rules or expectations we follow for how to engage in conflict. Suppose Marc believes conflict should be dealt with straightforwardly through open and honest discussion, whereas Amber prefers to avoid conflict, hoping disagreements will resolve themselves. Marc and Amber may have a difficult time managing their conflict if they adopt such different procedures. In essence, they are attempting to play the same game by completely different rules.

When people adopt dramatically different procedures for managing conflict, they often wind up engaging in *meta-conflict*, which is conflict about conflict itself. “You always run away from disagreements,” Marc might say to Amber. She might respond, “Well, you want to have a fight about every little issue—sometimes you just have to let things go!” Notice here that Marc and Amber are no longer arguing about Amber’s stealing and gambling but about how they *engage in conflict in the first place*. Their meta-conflict is the result of approaching conflict with dramatically different expectations or rules. An illustration of the content, relational, and procedural dimensions of conflict appears in Figure 10.1.

**FIGURE 10.1** Interpersonal conflict has three distinct dimensions

Conflict can be direct or indirect. In many instances, people deal with their conflicts directly and openly. When Maria and Sofie disagree on where to spend the holidays, for example, they have a series of arguments in which each one tries to persuade the other to adopt her point of view. When Rosemary grounds her son for using drugs, they argue openly about the seriousness of his behavior and the severity of his punishment.

People can also express conflict indirectly. Instead of dealing with their conflicts openly, for instance, people may behave in ways that are hurtful or vengeful toward others. Jade is upset with her boyfriend, so she deliberately flirts with other men in front of him. Tamir is angry at his wife for inviting her parents to dinner, so he spends the whole evening playing solitaire on his computer. These behaviors express conflict, but in an indirect way that prevents the conflict from being resolved.

Which is better: to deal with conflict openly and directly, or to deal with it indirectly? That’s a complex question, and the answer is that neither approach is better in every situation. Handling conflict directly can lead to quicker resolution, but it may also cause the conflict to escalate and become even more serious. Conversely, dealing with conflict indirectly may be easier and more comfortable, but it can also leave the conflict unresolved for a longer period of time. Which approach is better depends on the situation, what your goals are, whom you’re having the conflict with, and how important the outcome of the conflict is to you. Later in this chapter, we’ll discuss several strategies for engaging in conflict when you experience it.

Conflict can be harmful. Experiencing conflict doesn’t usually feel good, so it may not surprise you to learn that conflict can actually be harmful to your well-being when you don’t manage it properly. In one study, for instance, psychologists videotaped 150 healthy married couples discussing a contentious topic for six minutes. Two days later, they took a CT scan of each spouse’s chest. They found that husbands who had been overly controlling and wives who had been overly hostile during marital conflict experienced more hardening of the arteries than spouses who didn’t engage in these conflict behaviors.
ing the conflict episode exhibited a greater degree of hardening of the arteries than husbands and wives who didn’t display these behaviors.\(^5\)

Other studies have demonstrated that engaging in conflict often causes the body to produce a stress response by increasing the level of stress hormones\(^6\) and natural killer cells\(^7\) in the bloodstream. As one experiment illustrated, the stress created by conflict can even cause wounds to heal more slowly than they otherwise would, especially if the people in conflict behave in a negative, hostile way toward each other.\(^8\) As these and other investigations show, the ways that people handle conflicts, particularly in their romantic relationships, have far-reaching implications for their health.\(^9\)

Conflict is particularly harmful to personal well-being when it escalates into aggression and violence.\(^10\) Researchers estimate that, over the past two decades, as many as half of all marital, cohabiting, and dating relationships have involved some combination of verbal, physical, and/or sexual aggression.\(^11\) One study found that 12% of women and 11% of men had committed at least one violent act—such as slapping, kicking, or punching—against their romantic partner during a conflict episode within the previous year.\(^12\)

In these relationships, aggression is often the result of one person’s attempts to dominate an argument—and, by extension, to dominate the partner.\(^13\) Although the victims of relational aggression are most likely to be women, men are also victimized, by both male and female romantic partners.\(^14\) Research shows that violence during conflict is approximately as common in gay and lesbian relationships as in heterosexual ones.\(^15\) Certain situations appear to give rise to aggression more often than others, such as when one partner is intoxicated. (See the “Dark Side” box on page 382.)
Managing conflict can be challenging under the best of circumstances, but it appears to be even more problematic when one partner is under the influence of alcohol. Research has shown that excessive alcohol use leads to more aggressive behaviors and elevates the chances of violence within close relationships. It is also a major public health risk. In fact, excessive use of alcohol is the third-leading preventable cause of death in the United States, after tobacco use and malnutrition. Alcohol consumption, then, not only can make conflict more likely but also can intensify existing conflicts. Can it also affect how people respond to conflict?

To answer that question, researchers in one study had participants recall a recent conflict from one of their personal relationships. They then served alcohol to half of the participants until they reached a point of legal intoxication. Finally, they asked all the participants to reflect on the conflict they had described and to indicate the following: (1) how negative their own feelings were, (2) how negative they thought their partners’ feelings were, and (3) how much they blamed their partners for the conflict. Compared with their sober counterparts, the intoxicated participants rated their feelings and their perceptions of their partners’ feelings as more negative. In addition, intoxicated participants who had low self-esteem were more likely than others to blame their partners for the conflict. These findings don’t imply that drinking causes conflict. They do, however, suggest that alcohol use makes existing conflicts more negative and perhaps more difficult to deal with.

Ask Yourself:
- Why do you think alcohol affects people’s experiences with conflict?
- If you’ve ever been engaged in a conflict with an intoxicated person, how did you handle it?
  Which strategies for handling the conflict were more successful or less successful?

From Me to You:
- If you use alcohol, consider how it affects the way you think or feel about conflicts you’re involved in. Like the participants in the study just described, you may find that conflicts seem more intense or more negative when you’re under the influence of alcohol. If that’s the case, then when you use alcohol, you may find it helpful to avoid people with whom you are likely to have conflict.

Conflict can be beneficial. It’s relatively easy to identify the negative features of conflict: It’s stressful, it can damage our health, it can lead to aggression and violence. When conflict is managed well, however, it can actually have some benefits. Working through a conflict in a positive, constructive manner can help people learn more about each other and their relationship. It may also lead them to a more satisfactory solution to the problem than either could have come up with alone. These benefits may depend on whether only one party in an interpersonal conflict—or both parties—has the skills to manage it well.

Managing conflict constructively can also help to prevent small problems from escalating into larger ones. Let’s say your co-worker complains to you constantly about his girlfriend while you’re trying to get your work done. Instead of addressing the problem, however, you just let it annoy you day after day until you finally explode at him, yelling, causing a scene, and eventually being reprimanded by your boss. Simply addressing the situation when it first arose would likely have alleviated much of your frustration and prevented this small annoyance from turning into a conflict with your co-worker.

Over time, the ability to handle conflicts positively may give people more confidence in their communication skills and in the strength of their interpersonal relationships. Research on married couples has shown that spouses who engage in constructive conflict behaviors, such as avoiding criticizing their spouses and being responsive to each other’s concerns, are happier with their relationships and more satisfied with the outcomes of their conflicts than spouses who don’t. It may be that handling conflict constructively makes couples satisfied, or that satisfied couples handle conflict in a constructive manner. In either case, relationship satisfaction and constructive conflict management are strongly connected.

Successful resolution of conflicts can be very beneficial, but can every conflict be resolved? Take a look at the “Fact or Fiction?” box on page 384 to find out.

The Most Common Sources of Conflict

Like relationships themselves, conflicts come in all shapes and sizes. What are some of the most common issues people fight about? In one study, communication scholar Larry Erbert asked spouses to report the most common sources of conflict in their marriages. You might be surprised to learn that men and women identified the same three leading sources of conflict. The most common was personal criticisms, or spouses’ complaints or criticisms of each other’s undesirable behaviors or bad habits (such as smoking or excessive drinking). Almost 20% of the couples Erbert interviewed mentioned personal criticisms as a common source of conflict.

The second-most-frequent answer, at 13%, was finances, or conflicts about money. It’s not uncommon for spouses to disagree about how their money should be spent,
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saved, or invested. Further, because money is a scarce resource for many people, conflicts over finances can be particularly difficult. Third on the list was household chores, or conflicts over the division of labor. Spouses have to negotiate how to divide up tasks such as cleaning, cooking, gardening, and car maintenance, and many couples find it easy to disagree about who should take on which responsibilities. Conflict can also emerge when spouses fail to meet their responsibilities, because both spouses suffer when the laundry doesn’t get washed or the lawn doesn’t get mowed.

In his study, Erbert found that personal criticisms, finances, and household chores together accounted for approximately 42% of all the conflict topics mentioned. Other common sources of conflict for married couples were their children, employment, in-laws, sex, how to spend holidays and vacations, how they should spend their time in general, and how they communicate with each other. Studies have also shown that the major topics of conflict are nearly identical for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples.

Many studies have focused on conflict in romantic relationships because of the high degree of interdependence that characterizes these relationships. We experience conflict in a host of relationships, however. Many of us routinely have conflict with superiors or subordinates, neighbors, parents or children, co-workers, professors, and people with whom we are interdependent. Like conflicts

Fact or Fiction?
If You Try Hard Enough, You Can Resolve Any Conflict

We’ve seen that conflict is a natural part of relationships and that there are multiple ways to manage it. This observation might lead you to believe that if you have the right skills and try hard enough, you can eventually resolve any conflict you encounter. It would be great if that were true, but it isn’t.

The truth is that some conflicts are simply unsolvable. Let’s say, for instance, that Juna and her brother Tom are arguing about abortion. As a conservative with strong religious beliefs, Juna cannot support a woman’s right to choose abortion under any circumstances. Tom, whose political orientation is more liberal, feels that every woman has the right to choose whether to have a child or to terminate the pregnancy. In other words, Juna’s and Tom’s positions are diametrically opposed, meaning they share no common ground. As long as they hold those positions, Juna and Tom can argue forever, but they will never resolve their conflict.

When two positions are diametrically opposed, and when the people or groups holding those positions are unwilling or unable to change their positions in any way, the only real options are to avoid the conflict, to agree to disagree, and to try to minimize the effects of the conflict on other aspects of the relationship.

Ask Yourself:

- Which conflicts have you had that seemed impossible to resolve?
- Why do people believe that any conflict can be resolved, if only the participants try hard enough?
with romantic partners, many of these conflicts center on issues of power, respect, and the distribution of resources such as money and time.  

We will look specifically at the central role of power in the next section.

**How Sex and Gender Affect Conflict**

It’s almost cliché to say that sex and gender play an important role in conflict. Indeed, many popular books, movies, television shows, poems, and songs have been based on the idea that women and men have difficulty understanding each other, thus creating situations after situations that is ripe for conflict. Although differences in their behaviors and ways of thinking can certainly be sources of conflict, women and men often have the added challenge of dealing with conflict in systematically different ways.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, “Culture and Gender,” traditional gender socialization conflates sex and gender by teaching men to adopt masculine traits and behaviors and women to adopt feminine traits and behaviors. At least in North American societies, traditional gender socialization has encouraged women to “play nice” by avoiding conflict and sacrificing their own goals in order to accommodate the goals of others. Conversely, men are often encouraged to engage in conflict directly, using competitive or even aggressive behaviors to achieve victory. At the same time, however, men are often taught not to hurt women.

These messages about gender can create challenges for both women and men when it comes to managing conflict. Some women may feel that engaging in conflict overtly is contrary to the feminine gender role, so they adopt more indirect tactics to achieve their goals. One such tactic is **passive aggression**, in which women “hide” their aggression in seemingly innocent behaviors.

Consider the case of Chelsea, who becomes irritated when her boyfriend answers his cell phone whenever it rings, even while they’re out to dinner. Instead of telling him how she feels, Chelsea expresses her irritation passively by sometimes failing to answer the phone when he calls. She then calls him back later and claims she hadn’t heard the phone ring. In this way, Chelsea avoids overt conflict by behaving aggressively (ignoring her boyfriend’s calls) but in a seemingly innocent manner (claiming she didn’t hear the phone). As we’ll see later in the chapter, however, women may also believe that they must fight for whatever resources are available to them, particularly when they feel they are in a less-powerful position than men.

*How you handle conflict may depend partly on your sex. Research shows that men are more likely than women to engage in direct conflict behaviors, which sometimes include being physically aggressive. Women are more likely than men to engage in passive-aggressive behaviors, such as running up the balance on a family member’s credit card.*

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*Passive aggression*

A pattern of behaving vengefully while denying that one has aggressive feelings.
Society’s messages to men about conflict may encourage them to engage in conflict overtly—possibly aggressively—even in situations when a subtler, more indirect approach could be just as effective. Because men are taught to engage in conflict directly but also not to hurt women, they may feel particularly conflicted about how to act during conflict episodes with women. Men often resolve this quandary by disengaging, thereby leaving the conflict unresolved. Psychologist John Gottman uses the term “stonewalling” to describe this pattern of withdrawal. As we’ll learn later in this chapter, stonewalling can be a particularly problematic behavior for couples.

In opposite-sex romantic relationships, traditional gender messages often encourage partners to adopt a demand-withdraw pattern wherein one partner (typically the woman) makes demands (“We need to talk about the problems in our relationship”) and the other partner (usually the man) responds by withdrawing (“I don’t want to talk about it”). Even though this pattern of behavior largely conforms to typical North American gender roles, research indicates that these gender-related behavior differences are especially common in distressed relationships. One possible reason demand-withdrawal is particularly common in distressed relationships is that if one partner usually withdraws from the conversation, then the conflict is unlikely to be resolved. Over time unresolved conflict can lead to dissatisfaction.

Women and men appear to deal with conflict in much the same ways, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual. Research has found that lesbian and gay couples use strategies similar to those used by heterosexuals to deal with conflict. As family communication researchers John Caughlin and Anita Vangelisti have suggested, however, gay and lesbian couples are also likely to experience potential sources of conflict that seldom afflict straight couples. For one, lesbian and gay partners may have conflict over whom to tell, and how much to tell, about their sexual orientation. If one partner is “out” to family and friends while the other partner conceals his or her sexual orientation, this discrepancy can lead to conflicts related to a couple’s social relationships and their long-term plans. Gay and lesbian adults may also encounter discrimination and prejudice from their families, co-workers, or neighbors, which can cause considerable distress and make routine conflicts about other matters seem more substantial than they are.

How Culture Affects Conflict

Just as gender messages encourage people to handle conflicts in particular ways, so do cultural messages. That is, the values and norms we learn from our culture can shape the way we respond to conflict with members of our own culture. Some scholars believe the most important cultural factor is whether your culture is individualistic or collectivistic. As you’ll recall from Chapter 2, people raised in individualistic cultures are taught to value the rights, needs, and goals of the individual. They learn it’s acceptable to disagree with others, and they are encouraged to “stand up for yourself” in the face of conflict.
By contrast, people raised in collectivistic cultures are taught that the group’s priorities take precedence over the individual’s and that maintaining group harmony takes precedence over pursuing individual success. Thus, they are more likely to manage conflict through avoiding the disagreement, yielding to the other person’s wishes, or asking a neutral party to mediate the conflict, because these strategies can help preserve harmony. They would probably consider the direct, overt behaviors that people in individualistic cultures often use to manage conflict to be insensitive or rude.

A second cultural dimension that influences how people manage conflict is whether the culture is low context or high context. People in low-context cultures (such as the United States) value communication that is explicit, direct, and literal. When they engage in conflict with one another, therefore, they expect all parties to be clear about the source of the disagreement and up front about their suggestions for resolution.

By comparison, people in high-context cultures (such as Japan) value subtlety, deriving much of the meaning in their conversations from social conventions and nonverbal expressions. When they experience conflict with one another, they place a premium on “saving face” and not embarrassing the other party. As a result, they tend to discuss disagreements indirectly, without direct accusations or direct requests for action.

Clearly, then, these cultural dimensions—individualism versus collectivism and high context versus low context—lead people to resolve conflicts in different ways. These differences are often magnified when conflicts arise between people from different cultures. Suppose that Gerry, who was raised in an individualistic culture, is having conflict with Kenan, who was raised in a collectivistic culture. Kenan will likely try to manage the conflict in a way that preserves harmony in the relationships and avoids offending or embarrassing Gerry. He may be distraught, therefore, if Gerry approaches the conflict in the direct, adversarial way that is common in his culture. Conversely, Gerry may feel that Kenan’s more indirect way of engaging in conflict implies that Kenan doesn’t care about the conflict or its outcome.

When two people approach a conflict with dramatically different values and norms, they are likely to misunderstand each other’s behaviors, which can easily exacerbate the conflict. By learning about the norms and behaviors of other cultures and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, however, we can improve our abilities to handle intercultural conflict in constructive ways.

Conflict Online

Conflict is common in face-to-face settings, but it can seem especially frequent when people communicate online. One reason is that computer-mediated communication has a disinhibition effect, meaning that it removes constraints and thus invites people to say or do things that they wouldn’t in person. Let’s suppose Saika gets an e-mail from her supervisor saying he is rejecting her vacation request for next month. Saika feels angry, particularly because she worked overtime last month while her supervisor was on vacation. Because Saika reads her supervisor’s words online instead of hearing them in person, she feels less inhibited about expressing her anger. As a result of her disinhibition, she sends her supervisor an e-mail reply filled with angry, inflammatory statements that she would never make to him in person. This causes her supervisor great distress and thus intensifies their conflict.

Researchers suggest several strategies for handling potential conflicts in online contexts. First, don’t respond right away. Instead, give yourself several hours to calm down and collect your thoughts. Of course, this advice often applies to conflicts that occur in person as well. Because e-mail puts a person’s words in print right in front
of us, however, we may feel compelled to reply immediately when we really should give ourselves time to cool down first.

Second, clarify anything that might be misunderstood, instead of assuming you know what the other person meant by his or her statements. Third, put yourself in the other person’s shoes, and think about how he or she would react to your response. Finally, use emoticons to express your tone, if it’s appropriate, so that your reader knows when you’re upset, when you’re surprised, and when you’re kidding.41

Learn It: In what ways can conflict be harmful? In what ways can it be beneficial? What are the most common topics of conflict in marital relationships? How do messages about gender affect us when we engage in conflict? Which cultural dimensions influence conflict behavior? What is the disinhibition effect?

Try It: The next time you receive an e-mail that’s negative or aggressive, write a response right away, but then save it instead of sending it. Write a second response 24 hours later, and then compare it with the first response. Do you notice differences in your tone? Is your second response less aggressive and inflammatory? Which response would you choose to send? If it’s the second one, then remember this lesson when you receive similar e-mails in the future.

Reflect on It: Why might you choose to engage in conflict indirectly, rather than directly? When are you most likely to have conflict online?

Power and Conflict

We have defined conflict as an expressed struggle between interdependent parties who perceive their goals as incompatible. Just because two parties are interdependent, however, doesn’t mean they are equally powerful. Indeed, conflict often occurs in relationships in which one person—say, a parent or a supervisor—has more power than the other—say, a child or an employee. Conflict often involves a struggle for power between two parties, with each party trying to exercise as much influence or control over the situation as possible. Power and conflict are thus inextricably linked.

In this section, we will define power and then examine some of its characteristics, particularly as they relate to the experience of conflict. We will also consider various forms of power, and we’ll discuss how gender and culture influence the expression of power in personal relationships.

Some Characteristics of Power

Power is the ability to manipulate, influence, or control other people or events.42 Certain people have more power than others. Nevertheless, we all possess some power, and we exercise it whenever we find ourselves in conflict with others. In this section, we’ll take a quick look at five characteristics of power that will help us understand its relationship to conflict.
Power is context-specific. Most forms of power are relevant only in specific situations. Your boss has power over you at work, for instance, but he doesn’t have the right to tell you what to do when you’re at home. His influence over you is confined to the work environment. Similarly, your doctor has the power to give you medical advice and prescribe medical treatments, but she doesn’t have the right to advise you on your finances, your education, or your religious beliefs. These areas are outside her sphere of influence. As these examples illustrate, power is almost always confined to certain realms or contexts.

Power is always present. Even though power is context-specific, some form of power is relevant to every interpersonal interaction. When two people have roughly equal power in their relationship, such as friends, they have a symmetrical relationship. Conversely, when one person has more power than the other, such as a teacher and a student, the parties have a complementary relationship. The way people interact with each other depends, in part, on whether their relationship is symmetrical or complementary. For instance, you might say or do things with your friends that you wouldn’t say or do with your teachers. Keep in mind, though, that the power balance of a relationship can change over time. Parents and children usually have complementary relationships when the children are young, for example, but as the children become adults, these relationships often become more symmetrical.

Power influences communication. The symmetrical or complementary nature of relationships often influences the way people communicate. Many years ago, communication researchers Philip Ericson and L. Edna Rogers proposed that relational power is reflected in three specific types of verbal messages people use. A one-up message expresses dominance and an attempt to control the relationship. One-up messages often take the form of commands, such as “Do the dishes,” “E-mail me your report,” or “Stop making so much noise.” A one-down message communicates submission or acceptance of another person’s decision-making ability. Examples include questions such as “Where would you like to go for dinner?” and statements of assent, such as “Whatever you’d like is fine with me.” Finally, a one-across message, which is neither dominant nor submissive, conveys a desire to neutralize relational control. One-across messages often take the form of statements of fact, such as “Dad needs a new lawnmower” and “There are many brands to choose from.”

People in symmetrical relationships often communicate using the same types of messages. They might both use one-up messages (“Put away the groceries,” “I’ll put them away when I feel like it”). They might both use one-down messages (“Do you have any suggestions for what to wear tonight?” “I’m sure whatever you choose will look great”). Finally, they might both use one-across messages (“There are so many good movies showing in town right now.” “And several good plays as well”). In each case, their communication reflects the fact that neither party exercises power over the other.

In contrast, people in complementary relationships frequently communicate using different types of statements. One person might use a one-up message (“Try searching for airfares online”), and the other might re-
spond with a one-down message (“That’s a great idea; thanks for the suggestion”). Alternatively, one partner might express a one-down message (“What should we get Grandma for her birthday?”), and the other might reply with a one-up message (“Let’s get her some new DVDs”). In complementary relationships, one-up or one-down messages can also precede one-across messages. In response to a one-up message, for instance (“I think we should have pasta for dinner”), a partner might respond with a one-across message (“That’s one option”). This move can signal that the partner doesn’t wish to be dominated or controlled.

**Power can be positive or negative.** There’s nothing inherently good or bad about power. Rather, as with conflict, the way people handle power makes it positive or negative. Even complementary relationships in which there is a large difference in power can be highly satisfying if they meet two conditions. First, the two parties must agree on the power arrangement. If the less-powerful person begins to question or challenge the other person’s power (such as adolescents asserting their independence from their parents), the relationship can become dissatisfying. Second, the powerful person should exercise his or her power ethically and responsibly, in ways that benefit both parties. When people abuse their power by serving only their own needs or desires or improving their situation at the other person’s expense, their actions can easily lead to resentment and dissatisfaction within the relationship.

**Power and conflict influence each other.** At their core, many conflicts are struggles for power. Annika and Laila’s conflict, described at the beginning of this chapter, was about how Olin should be raised. On another level, however, it was also a disagreement about who has the power to decide how Olin is raised. Siblings who fight over control of the television remote, neighbors who fight over their property boundaries, and drivers fighting for the few remaining spaces in a parking lot are all clashing over power: Who has the right to control resources? Just as power influences conflict, conflict can also influence the balance and exercise of power. Let’s say that after Shawn turns 15, he has conflict with his parents over household rules. As a result, his parents give him a later curfew and greater flexibility in deciding where he goes and with whom. This development—which was the direct result of Shawn’s conflict with his parents—changed the balance of power in the parent-child relationship, with Shawn acquiring more control over his own life.

So far, we’ve talked about power as if it were a singular thing. In fact, power comes in many forms, as we’ll see next.

**Forms of Power**

People exercise influence or control over others in many ways. In a now-classic study, social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven classified power into five specific forms: reward, coercive, referent, legitimate, and expert power. As we take a closer look at these forms, remember that they aren’t mutually exclusive; rather, one person may exercise multiple forms of power in a given situation.

**Reward power.** As its name implies, reward power operates when one party has the ability to reward the other in some way. Your supervisor has power over you, for instance, because she pays you and can promote you for doing what she says. In this case, your
pay and the possibility for advancement are the rewards. If your supervisor loses the ability to pay or promote you (if the company goes bankrupt or she leaves her job, for instance), then she loses her power over you.

**Coercive power.** The opposite of reward power is coercive power, or power that derives from the ability to punish. When you go to court, for example, the judge has power over you because he can punish you with fines or imprisonment for not doing as he says. Significantly, parents and employers often have both reward power and coercive power over their children or their employees; they can provide rewards for good behavior and issue punishments for bad behavior.

**Referent power.** French and Raven used the term referent power to refer to the power of attraction: We tend to comply with requests made by people we like, admire, or find attractive. For instance, you might find that you work harder for professors you like than for professors you dislike. Similarly, many of us are persuaded to buy products if they are endorsed by celebrities we admire. These examples involve complementary relationships. Referent power can also operate in symmetrical relationships, however. For instance, we might comply with requests from our friends because we like them and want to please them.

**Legitimate power.** People exercise legitimate power when their status or position gives them the right to make requests with which others must comply. If a police officer signals you to pull your car over, you comply because you perceive that the officer has a legitimate right to make you do so. When you travel by air, you follow the instructions of the airport screeners, flight attendants, and pilots because you perceive that their positions give them certain authorities over you in that context.

**Expert power.** The last form on French and Raven's list is expert power, which operates when we comply with the directions of people we perceive to be experts in a particular area. We follow the advice of a doctor, a professor, a stockbroker, a fashion expert, or an electrician because we recognize that their training and experience give them expertise we ourselves don't have. Like other forms of power, expert power is context-specific. You consult your stockbroker for financial advice, for example, but you wouldn't ask him how to fix your sink, because that goes beyond his expertise.

As we explained earlier, different forms of power often operate together. We've seen that parents have both reward and coercive power over their children, for instance, but they often have other forms as well. They have referent power if their children obey them out of respect or admiration. They have legitimate power when they exercise control on the basis of their position. (“Because I'm your mother, that's why!”) Finally, they have expert power when they teach their children how to drive or balance a checkbook. The “At a Glance” box on page 392 provides a quick reference to help you...
remember French and Raven’s five forms of power.

**Sex, Gender, and Power**

Few factors influence the experience of power more than sex and gender. Across cultures and time periods, societies have defined male-female relationships largely in terms of men’s power over women. The virtually universal practice of patriarchy, which structures social units such as families and communities so that men control the resources, has allowed men throughout history to exercise political, religious, and economic power over women.46 As a result, women historically have experienced more limited access to education, lower-quality health care, fewer economic opportunities, and more limited political involvement than men have.47

These inequities persist in many parts of the world, including the United States. According to the United Nations, only 12% of elected political representatives in the United States are women. Worldwide, the number is only slightly higher: 14%.45 Women and men have equal employment rates in fewer than half the world’s countries, and they have equal literacy rates in only a third of the countries. Finally, in a large majority of countries, women earn less than 70% of what men in comparable jobs earn.49

Traditional gender roles reinforce the inequitable division of power between women and men. As we saw in Chapter 2, stereotypical femininity emphasizes characteristics such as passiveness, submissiveness, and accommodation, whereas stereotypical masculinity prizes strength, control, and dominance. To the extent that men and women identify strongly with masculine and feminine gender roles, the inequitable distribution of power may be reflected in their interpersonal behavior. For instance, men may take for granted that what they say at work or in the home will matter to those around them. They may also express dominance through verbal aggression, using words to attack or demean those around them.50

By contrast, if women have or perceive they have less power than men, they may be less likely to assume that other people will take their words or ideas seriously.51 They may also be inclined to exercise power in more covert ways, such as through passive-aggressive behavior.

As women gain positions of power and influence, gender inequities in power may be eroded. As of 2008, several nations had a female head of state, including Ireland, New Zealand, South Korea, Mozambique, Finland, Latvia, and the Philippines. (See Table 10.1.) In the U.S. government, women have assumed unprecedented positions of power in the past three decades, including Attorney General (Janet Reno), Secretary of State (Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice), and Speaker of the House of Representatives (Nancy Pelosi).

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**At a Glance: Forms of Power**

According to French and Raven, these are the five principal types of power that people exercise in their relationships with others:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>Power based on the ability to reward for compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
<td>Power based on the ability to punish for noncompliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referent</td>
<td>Power based on liking, admiring, and being attracted to the powerful party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Power based on rightfully granted status or position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Power based on special knowledge, training, experience, and/or expertise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Patriarchial social units are structured so that men control the most important resources. Patriarchy is common around the world.
People who have studied the association between conflict and health have concluded that power affects women and men differently. In one study, a team of researchers led by human ecology professor Timothy Loving took a novel approach to measuring power relations in married couples. The researchers selected 72 couples and instructed each spouse to complete measures indicating how much he or she loved the other. They then checked how closely each person's response matched that of his or her spouse. To determine the spouses' relative power, the researchers applied the principle of least interest. This principle states that the partner who is less invested in the relationship is the more powerful partner, because he or she has less to lose by leaving the relationship.

In this study, the researchers used love as the measure of investment. If the wife and husband reported relatively equal love scores, the researchers considered them to have equal power. When the husband's love score was significantly higher than his wife's, the researchers concluded that the wife had more power. Conversely, when the wife's love score was significantly higher than her husband's, then the husband was more powerful.

The researchers then instructed each couple to engage in a conflict conversation while they monitored the stress hormone levels of all the participants. The results indicated that being in a power-balanced marriage benefited women and men by protecting them against an increase in the stress hormone ACTH. The same pattern was observed in marriages in which the wife was deemed more powerful. In marriages in which the husband was deemed more powerful, however, women's ACTH levels rose significantly, indicating increased stress. Among this same group, however, men's ACTH levels dropped significantly, indicating reduced stress.

In sum, then, men experienced no increase in stress as a result of marital conflict under any circumstances. Moreover, when men argued with less-powerful wives, their stress actually decreased. One possible explanation for these results is that because men historically have enjoyed power in social affairs and relationships, they may subconsciously not perceive marital conflict to be threatening and stressful, even when they have less power in the relationship.

Like men, women didn't experience increased stress as a result of conflict when they had equal power with or more power than their spouse. Unlike men, however, they did react stressfully to conflict when they had less power than their spouse.

Table 10.1: Countries with Female Heads of State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Head of State</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Michelle Bachelet</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Helen Clark</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Luisa Diogo</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Tarja Halonen</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Myeong Sook Han</td>
<td>Prime Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Philippines</td>
<td>Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Mary McAleesse</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>Chancellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Vaira Vike-Freiberga</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table includes elected or appointed heads of state but excludes monarchs. Information current as of March 2008.

According to one study, spouses' stress hormones were not elevated during conflict if the spouses had a power-balanced marriage or one in which the wife was deemed more powerful. In marriages in which the husband was deemed more powerful, conflict elevated women's stress hormones but reduced men's.
power. Because of their less-powerful position, the wives in the study may have felt more threatened and insecure as a result of conflict, causing their stress to elevate. ACTH is only one hormone that reacts to stress, however, so the results might have been different had the researchers utilized other indicators of stress.

**Culture and Power**

Cultural practices and beliefs also affect the ways in which people exercise power in personal relationships. As you learned in Chapter 2, one dimension along which cultures differ is their **power distance**. High-power-distance cultures are characterized by an uneven distribution of power. In these cultures, certain social groups (royalty, the aristocracy or “upper class,” the ruling political party) have considerably more power than the average citizen. Moreover, people in high-power-distance cultures are socialized to view the unequal distribution of power as normal or even desirable. Upper-class citizens are treated with respect and privilege, whereas citizens of lesser status are taught to behave humbly. In particular, lower-status citizens are not expected to question or challenge the decisions, opinions, or directions of the ruling class. When all social groups accept this arrangement, then the society can avoid many potential conflicts. One example of this type of power division is India’s caste system, wherein people are born into social groups, or castes, that largely dictate with whom they can associate.

By contrast, low-power-distance cultures exhibit a more equal distribution of power among social groups. Although some social groups may have somewhat more power than others, the prevailing belief among citizens is that all people are inherently equal and that power differences between groups should be small. One result of this cultural belief is that people from low-power-distance cultures are more likely to question authority and to engage in conflict with teachers, supervisors, politicians, and other people who exercise power over them.

Another difference is that people in low-power-distance cultures often believe they have greater control over the course of their lives. Whereas people in high-power-distance cultures are often raised to believe their life course is determined by their social class, many people in low-power-distance cultures are socialized to believe they can achieve whatever they set their minds to. In the United States, for instance, there are many examples of people, such as Bill Clinton and Oprah Winfrey, who have risen from humble beginnings into positions of great power and influence. As politician Adlai Stevenson, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, once noted, “In America, anyone can become president.” To the extent they believe their social class doesn’t
dictate their lives, people in low-power-distance cultures may be more likely than their counterparts in high-power-distance cultures to engage in conflict with anyone they perceive to be oppressive.

**Learn It:** What is the difference between a symmetrical relationship and a complementary one? What are French and Raven’s five forms of power? What is patriarchy? How do cultural messages influence the exercise of power?

**Try It:** Conflicts that seem to be about one thing, such as what to watch on TV, are often really about power, as in who gets to decide what we watch on TV. The next time you’re in conflict with someone, analyze the conflict to identify the power struggle, if any, it involves. As you make decisions about how to communicate during the conflict, try to recognize the underlying power struggle and not just the obvious topic of the disagreement. Also, notice how the power struggle may be different in a symmetrical relationship as opposed to a complementary one.

**Reflect on It:** When do you view the exercise of power as positive? Who has referent power over you?

### Managing Interpersonal Conflict

There are almost as many ways to handle conflict as there are things to disagree about. When we experience conflicts in our personal relationships, we need to make choices about how to manage and resolve them. Sometimes we choose our behaviors wisely and sometimes we choose poorly, but our choices almost always have an effect on our relationships. We’ll begin this section by looking at some particularly problematic conflict behaviors. We’ll then examine five general strategies we can use to manage conflict successfully.

### Problematic Behaviors During Conflict

Earlier in this chapter, we learned that it isn’t the presence of conflict itself that is necessarily damaging to our relationships; rather, it’s the way we handle conflict that matters. Whereas some relational partners manage conflict in a mature, constructive way, others deal with it so poorly that it jeopardizes the relationship itself. Which behaviors are the problematic ones?

To find out, psychologist John Gottman has spent years studying how spouses and partners interact with each other during conflict episodes. Conventional wisdom might suggest that couples who fight frequently are most likely to split up. In fact, Gottman’s research has found otherwise. According to Gottman, how couples argue, and not how frequently they argue, predicts their chances for staying together. Gottman’s work has identified four specific behaviors that are warning signs for separation or divorce: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Gottman refers to these behaviors as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” to indicate that they signal distress. Let’s take a closer look at each of these problematic behaviors.
**Criticism.** According to Gottman, the first warning sign occurs when partners engage in criticism or complaints about each other. Criticism isn’t always bad, but it becomes counterproductive when it focuses on people’s personality or character rather than on their behavior. Statements such as “You always have to be right” or “You never listen” focus on attacking the person and assigning blame.

Criticisms also tend to be global statements about a person’s value or virtue instead of specific critiques about the topic of the conflict. Instead of saying “You should be more attentive when I describe my feelings to you,” for instance, a distressed partner might say “You never think of anyone but yourself.” Because criticisms so often come across as personal attacks instead of as accurate descriptions of the sources of conflict, they tend to inflame conflict situations. At that point, criticism becomes a sign of a distressed relationship.

Criticism can also be counterproductive when partners engage in gunnysacking—that is, privately “saving up” their past grievances and then bringing them up all at once. When Enrique criticized his wife, Sonja, for spending too much money on their children’s school clothes, for example, Sonja responded by criticizing Enrique for past offenses she had not previously discussed with him. “You think I’m wasteful?” she replied. “What about all the money you wasted on that stupid fishing trip last year? And while we’re on the subject, don’t think I didn’t notice that money you transferred out of our savings account last month without asking me. What’d you waste that on? Another piece of overpriced art for your office? You expect me to be careful with money while you’ve been wasting it ever since we got married!”

Each of Sonja’s grievances may have merit. Nevertheless, her response to Enrique’s criticism is unproductive. By bringing up all her criticisms at once, Sonja is deflecting attention from their current conflict, which is likely to leave that conflict unresolved.

**Contempt.** A second warning sign occurs when partners show contempt for each other by insulting each other and attacking each other’s self-worth. This behavior can include calling each other names (“you stupid idiot”), using sarcasm or mockery to make fun of the other person, and using non-verbal behaviors that suggest a low opinion of the other person, such as rolling your eyes or sneering. It can also include ridiculing the person in front of others and encouraging others to do the same.

Regardless of its form, however, contempt functions to put down and degrade the other person. Research indicates that responding to conflict with this type of hostile behavior often increases physical stress in the partners, which can impair their health.
Defensiveness. A third danger sign is that partners become defensive during their conflict. **Defensiveness** means seeing yourself as a victim and denying responsibility for your behaviors. Instead of listening to their partners’ concerns and acknowledging that they need to change certain behaviors, defensive people whine (“It’s not fair”), make excuses (“It’s not my fault”), and respond to complaints with complaints (“Maybe I spend too much money, but you never make time for the kids and me”). People are particularly prone to feel defensive about criticisms when they recognize that the criticisms have merit but they don’t want to accept the responsibility for changing their behaviors.

Stonewalling. The last of Gottman’s “Four Horsemen” is **stonewalling**, or withdrawing from the conversation. As we discussed earlier, people who engage in stonewalling will often act as though they are “shutting down”; that is, they stop looking at their partners, they stop speaking, and they stop responding to what their partners are saying. In some cases, they even physically leave the room to end the conversation. The reason for this departure isn’t to calm down, which might be an effective strategy. Rather, it is to shut off the conversation entirely.

Gottman’s research has suggested that people stonewall when they feel emotionally and psychologically “flooded,” or incapable of engaging in the conversation any longer. Unfortunately, when one partner stonewalls, it becomes almost impossible for the couple to resolve their disagreements. Research has also shown that when husbands stonewall during a conflict, their wives often experience significant increases in the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine.60

Why does Gottman assert that these four conflict behaviors can predict the collapse of a relationship? The “How Do We Know?” box on page 398 addresses this question.

**Strategies for Managing Conflict Successfully**

We know from Gottman’s work that criticizing, showing contempt, becoming defensive, and engaging in stonewalling aren’t productive ways of handling conflict. Because we can’t escape conflict, what alternatives do we have for managing it properly? According to researchers Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, our options for dealing with conflict are based on two underlying dimensions: our concern for our own needs and desires, and our concern for the other party’s needs and desires.61

When plotted on a graph (see Figure 10.2), these dimensions give rise to five major strategies for engaging in conflict: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.

In this section, we take a quick look at each strategy in this section. As we do so, recall from earlier in the chapter that conflict itself is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative. Rather, it is neutral. What determines whether it good or bad is the strategy we adopt for handling it. Some of the strategies we discuss in this section might seem more constructive to you than others, but none of them is the right choice in every situation. Instead, each strategy can be the best option in particular circumstances.
Competing. The competing style represents a high concern for your own needs and desires and a low concern for those of the other party. Your goal is to win the conflict while the other person loses. Engaging conflict in this style is much like playing football. There are no “tie games”—one team’s win is the other team’s loss. This style might be appropriate in situations when there is a concrete outcome that cannot be shared, such as when two people are competing for the same job. Ongoing competition can also enhance relationships, as long as relational partners view competition as a positive aspect of their relationships rather than a negative one.\(^62\) Competition becomes problematic when it starts leading to feelings of resentment or desires to get even with the other person.\(^63\)

How Do We Know? Gottman’s “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”

In his research on couples in conflict, John Gottman has identified four particular behaviors—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling—that indicate that a couple is at increased risk of separating or divorcing. How did he arrive at this conclusion?

In a typical study, Gottman invites spouses to his laboratory and seats them across from each other in specially designed chairs that are equipped to record their movements and measure basic physiological processes such as heart rate and blood pressure. In addition, he uses video cameras to record each partner’s words and facial expressions. In this setting, Gottman asks the couple to discuss a point of contention in their relationship, such as money, parenting styles, and the division of household labor. Before long, the discussion itself becomes a conflict episode, which enables Gottman to observe how each partner behaves in the conflict.

After the discussion has been concluded, Gottman examines the words, facial expressions, and tone of voice of each participant to look for signs of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He also contacts the couple at regular intervals to see whether the partners are still together. Using this method, Gottman has determined that couples who use criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and/or stonewalling when they fight are more likely to separate or divorce than are couples who stay away from these behaviors.

Ask Yourself:

- How easily would you recognize criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling if someone used these behaviors with you? if you used these behaviors with someone else?
- Do you think the most problematic conflict behaviors would be different for nonromantic relationships than for romantic ones? if so, which behaviors would you predict are most problematic for nonromantic relationships?

From Me to You:

- Even if you know which behaviors to avoid during conflict, it’s difficult to avoid them when you are physiologically aroused, as we often are during conflict episodes. The next time you’re in conflict with someone, try your best to remain calm and stay composed. If you can avoid excessive physiological arousal, you’ll be better able to think clearly and respond to the conflict in constructive ways.

Avoiding. A very different approach to conflict is the avoiding style, which involves a low concern for both the self and the other. Adopting this style means ignoring the conflict and hoping it will go away on its own. Whereas stonewalling means withdrawing from the conversation in the middle of a conflict episode, avoiding means failing to engage the conflict in the first place. Often, however, conflicts that are avoided simply become worse. Some people choose avoidance because they are uncomfortable engaging in conflict; others choose it because they don’t care enough about the outcome of the conflict to bother. Avoiding conflict isn’t always the wrong choice; many people in satisfying relationships choose to ignore or avoid certain points of contention in order to maintain harmony.64 When avoidance becomes the primary way of managing conflict, however, it often leaves important conflicts unresolved, leading to dissatisfying relationships.65

Accommodating. Accommodating is the opposite of competing. This style involves demonstrating a high concern for the other party but a low concern for the self. In the accommodating style, your goal is to sacrifice so that the other party wins and you lose. Sometimes people accommodate to “keep the peace” in their relationships. This strategy may work well in the short term. In the long term, continually accommodating the other party can make you feel resentful.

Culture plays an important role in the use of accommodation. In collectivistic societies (such as many Asian societies), accommodating in response to conflict is often expected and is viewed as respectful or noble.66 By contrast, people in individualistic societies (such as the United States) may be seen as weak or “spineless” if they consistently accommodate others.

Compromising. Compromising involves a moderate concern for everyone’s needs and desires. In this strategy, both parties give up something in order to gain something. Neither party gets exactly what he or she wants, but all parties leave the conflict having gained something valuable.

Let’s say you’re negotiating a job offer and you want a higher salary than the employer wants to pay. Through your negotiation, you agree to accept a lower salary than you originally wanted, and the employer agrees to give you an extra week of vacation in return. Neither of you got exactly what you wanted, but you each got something you valued in return for giving up something else. Compromising takes time and patience, but it often leads to better outcomes than competing, avoiding, or accommodating.

Collaborating. The collaborating style represents a high concern for both your partner’s needs and your own. The goal is to arrive at a win-win situation that maximizes both parties’ gains. After they had their first child,

Avoiding confl ict isn’t always a poor strategy, but it can lead to dissatisfying relationships when it becomes the primary means of managing confl ict.

Amateur golfers usually don’t require opponents to putt again when the ball is close to the hole. By accommodating their opponents in this way, many golfers demonstrate more concern for the relationship than for winning.

MANAGING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT
for instance, Mick and Laura felt the strain of paying for
day care while Mick worked and Laura went to school.
Their collaborative solution was for Mick to reduce his
work hours and for Laura to enroll in online courses
so at least one of them would be home every day. The
money they saved in day care more than made up for
the income they lost because of Mick’s reduced hours.
Moreover, both Laura and Mick felt better because they
were able to care for their child themselves.

Collaborating probably sounds like the ideal way
to handle conflict—and in many situations, it is. It can
also require a great deal of energy, patience, and imagi-
nation. Although it might seem like the best approach,
it can also be the most difficult.

How might each of these strategies operate in real life? “At a Glance” above high-
lights one conflict—two siblings fighting over who is going to get a new car—and illus-
trates how each of these approaches can be employed when engaging in the conflict.

| Competing | Carla tries to get her parents to give all their saved-up money to her and none of it to Ben. |
| Avoiding | Carla doesn’t bring up the conflict, hoping her parents will figure out a way to resolve it on their own. |
| Accommodating | Carla encourages her parents to give their saved-up money to Ben instead of to her. |
| Compromising | Carla suggests that she and Ben pool their money with their parents’ money and buy one car that they will share. |
| Collaborating | Carla works with Ben and their parents to try to figure out how she and Ben can each get a car. |

**Learn It:** How are criticism and contempt different? When might avoidance be a better conflict management strategy than accommodating?

**Try It:** Many people manage conflicts using a preferred set of tactics and skills. To find out what your preferred strategy is, fill out the short questionnaire in the “Getting to Know You” box on the next page.

**Reflect on It:** How do you feel when someone stonewalls during a conflict with you? When do you find collaborating a challenge?
{Getting to Know You
What's My Conflict Style?}

Although every conflict episode is unique, many of us have a preferred style for dealing with all conflicts. What’s your style? To find out, take a look at the statements below, and put a check mark next to the ones you agree with. The style with the most check marks is the style you prefer when handling conflict. If your score results in a tie between two or more styles, then you have more than one preference.

**Competing**
1. ____ In a conflict, I usually focus on my side of the issue.
2. ____ I use whatever means I have to win.
3. ____ I use my resources to make sure I get what I want.
4. ____ My focus is on winning the argument.

**Avoiding**
1. ____ I try to stay away from topics of disagreement.
2. ____ When I disagree with others, I usually keep it to myself.
3. ____ My tendency is to avoid situations that will lead to conflict.
4. ____ I try to avoid conflicts whenever I can.

**Accommodating**
1. ____ In a conflict, my goal is to make the other person happy.
2. ____ I usually give in to what the other person wants.
3. ____ It’s important to me that the other person is satisfied.
4. ____ I usually do whatever the other person suggests.

**Compromising**
1. ____ I think everyone in the conflict has to give up something to find an acceptable solution.
2. ____ I try to find a solution that will be close to what everyone wants, but not exactly what anyone wants.
3. ____ I believe compromising is essential to managing conflict.
4. ____ I don’t expect to get exactly what I want in a conflict but something that is close to what I want.

**Collaborating**
1. ____ My goal in a conflict is to find a solution that everyone likes.
2. ____ I usually try to find a “win-win” solution to the conflict.
3. ____ I share information and ideas so an acceptable solution can be found.
4. ____ I prefer to come up with a resolution that everyone is pleased with.

Section 1] What is Interpersonal Conflict? (p. 375)

I. What is Interpersonal Conflict?
   A. Defining interpersonal conflict
      1. Conflict is an expressed struggle
      2. Conflict occurs between interdependent parties
      3. Conflict is about goals the parties see as incompatible
      4. Conflict arises over perceived scarce resources
      5. Conflict includes interference
   B. Thinking about interpersonal conflict
      • People often think about conflict using a variety of metaphors such as a trial, a game, a balancing act, and a garden.

Section 2] Conflict in Personal Relationships (p. 378)

II. Conflict in Personal Relationships
   A. Characteristics of interpersonal conflict
      1. Conflict is natural
      2. Conflict has content, relational, and procedural dimensions
      3. Conflict can be direct or indirect
      4. Conflict can be harmful
      5. Conflict can be beneficial
   B. The most common sources of conflict
      • People have conflict about a range of issues. Some issues, such as personal criticism, finances, and household chores, are especially common in personal relationships.
   C. How sex and gender affect conflict
      • Conflict is influenced by sex and gender role orientations, encouraging men to be competitive and women to be accommodating.
   D. How culture affects conflict
      • How people manage conflict is affected by whether their culture is individualistic or collectivistic, and also by whether it is high-context or low-context.
   E. Conflict online
      • Conflict is especially prevalent in online settings, because of the disinhibition effect.
Section 3} Power and Conflict  (p. 388)

III. Power and Conflict

A. Some characteristics of power
   1. Power is context-specific
   2. Power is always present
   3. Power influences communication
   4. Power can be positive or negative
   5. Power and conflict influence each other

B. Forms of power
   1. Reward power
   2. Coercive power
   3. Referent power
   4. Legitimate power
   5. Expert power

C. Sex, gender, and power

D. Culture and power

Section 4} Managing Interpersonal Conflict  (p. 395)

IV. Managing Interpersonal Conflict

A. Problematic behaviors during conflict
   1. Criticism
   2. Contempt
   3. Defensiveness
   4. Stonewalling

B. Strategies for managing conflict successfully
   1. Competing
   2. Avoiding
   3. Accommodating
   4. Compromising
   5. Collaborating

Key Terms
Accommodating
Avoiding
Coercive power
Collaborating
Competing
Complementary relationship
Compromising
Conflict
Contempt
Criticism
Defensiveness
Demand-withdraw pattern
Disinhibition effect
Expert power
Legitimate power
Meta-conflict
One-across message
One-down message
One-up message
Passive aggression
Power
Referent power
Reward power
Stonewalling
Symmetrical relationship

Power is the ability to manipulate, influence, or control other people or events.

Power is context-specific but always present. It can be positive or negative, depending on how it is exercised. Power and conflict influence each other.

People exercise five general forms of power: reward, coercive, referent, legitimate, and expert.

Power is influenced by sex and gender roles.

The way people think about power is affected by whether they come from a high-power-distance culture or a low-power-distance one.

In romantic relationships, four conflict behaviors are reliable predictors of relationship dissolution: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

People use five general strategies for managing conflict: competing, avoiding, accommodating, collaborating, and compromising. Which conflict management strategy is best depends on the situation and on the goals of the participants.
Discussion Questions
1. With whom do you have the most troublesome conflicts? What are your conflicts with these parties about?
2. How might the particular metaphor you use to think about conflict affect how you approach conflict?
3. Why does conflict usually make people so uncomfortable?
4. What have you noticed about the different ways in which men and women engage in conflict?
5. What are some examples of the positive use of power? The negative use?

Practice Quiz
Multiple Choice
1. Which of the following is not one of the defining characteristics of interpersonal conflict?
   a. Conflict is an expressed struggle.
   b. Conflict occurs between independent parties.
   c. Conflict is about goals that are perceived as incompatible.
   d. Conflict arises over scarce resources.
2. Which of the following metaphors is best described by the statement "Conflict is a fun competition wherein participants test their skills against one another"?
   a. Conflict is a war.
   b. Conflict is a heroic adventure.
   c. Conflict is a bargaining table.
   d. Conflict is a game.
3. The "Dark Side" box described a study of the conflict experiences of intoxicated and sober participants. Which of the following was not one of its findings?
   a. Intoxicated individuals rated their feelings as more negative.
   b. Intoxicated individuals rated their partners' feelings as more negative.
   c. Intoxicated individuals with low self-esteem were more likely to blame their partners for the conflict.
   d. Intoxicated individuals with low self-esteem were more likely to blame themselves for the conflict.
4. According to research by Larry Erbert, the three most common sources of marital conflict, in order, are:
   a. finances, household chores, personal criticism
   b. household chores, personal criticism, finances
   c. personal criticism, finances, household chores
   d. money, sex, in-laws
5. An imbalance of power, wherein one person in a relationship has more power than the other, is known as:
   a. symmetrical relationship
   b. complementary relationship
   c. equitable relationship
   d. none of the above
6. Which of the following refers to the power of attraction, wherein people tend to comply with requests made by those they like, admire, or find attractive?
   a. reward
   b. coercive
   c. referent
   d. legitimate
7. According to Gottman, the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" are:
   a. conflict, criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling
   b. defensiveness, contempt, complaining, conflict
   c. criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling
   d. stonewalling, debate, criticism, contempt
8. Seeing yourself as victim and denying responsibility for your own behavior are characteristics of:
   a. defensiveness
   b. stonewalling
   c. contempt
   d. complaining
9. Which approach to conflict is characterized by a moderate concern for others' needs?
   a. competing
   b. avoiding
   c. collaborating
   d. compromising
10. Which of the following is not one of the approaches to managing conflict?
    a. competing
    b. compromising
    c. avoiding
    d. circumventing

True/False
11. It is not natural for individuals to experience conflict within the context of a relationship.
12. It is always best to deal with conflict directly.
13. If you have the right skills and try hard enough, you can resolve any conflict.
14. People raised in low-context cultures value communication that is explicit, direct, and literal.
15. Low-power-distance cultures display a more equal distribution of power among social groups than do high-power-distance cultures.
Fill in the Blank
16. The ______ dimension of conflict relates to the specific topics that the conflict is about.
17. The ______ pattern is characterized by one partner making requests and the other partner pulling away.
18. People raised in ______ cultures are taught to consider the group's priorities and maintain group harmony, making them likely to manage conflict through avoidance.
19. In computer-mediated communication, the ______ effect invites people to say or do things they would not do in person.
20. Because of their status or position, individuals with ______ power have the right to make requests with which others must comply.

Research Library
Movies
American Beauty (Drama; 1999; R)
This drama stars Kevin Spacey as Lester, whose life is a series of tensions and disappointments. He feels increasingly estranged from his career-obsessed wife (played by Annette Bening) and his angry, confused teenage daughter. In response to these tensions, Lester quits his job, buys a sports car, and begins lifting weights to attract the attention of his daughter's attractive friend. The movie includes many scenes of conflict, both enacted and avoided, including one climactic scene at the family dinner table. This film won the Academy Award for best picture in 1999.

The Brothers McMullen (Drama; 1995; R)
This film begins with three Irish Catholic brothers dealing with their father's recent death. The story then fast-forwards several years to portray the brothers dealing with the dramas in their own lives. One brother, Jack, is carrying on an affair that is discovered by his wife, Molly. Another brother, Pat, is dumped by his fiancée, Susan, whose Jewish background raises her concerns about entering into an interfaith marriage. Several examples of relational conflict are depicted in this drama.

Ordinary People (Drama; 1980; R)
This classic film focuses on communication in an upper-middle-class family in the wake of the older son's tragic death. Younger son Conrad (played by Timothy Hutton) has recently been released from a psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide. His older brother, Buck, had excelled at athletics and academics and was clearly his parents’ favorite child. Now, with his brother gone, Conrad struggles to connect with his father, Calvin (played by Donald Sutherland), and his mother, Beth (played by Mary Tyler Moore), both of whom are emotionally distant and resentful that Conrad was partially responsible for his brother's death. The film, which won the Academy Award for best picture, includes many excellent scenes of family conflict.

Books

Journal Articles

Web Sites
www.drnadig.com/conflict.htm
This Web site is sponsored by Dr. Larry Nadig, a clinical psychologist and marriage and family therapist. It focuses on healthy conflict resolution and details some of the common mistakes couples and families make when dealing with conflict.
www.iacm-conflict.org/links/
This page, sponsored by the International Association for Conflict Management, offers links to several online resources relevant to conflict and conflict management.