

SEEKING HELP

Managing through conflict & confrontation

CASE STUDY

Here is an example of what someone may say to address the feelings they had about their experience with a friend.

"What happened for me was that I waited for 30 minutes past the time we agreed to catch up on Tuesday, when you said you'd only be 10 minutes late. **I felt** frustrated and a bit sad because I was really looking forward to seeing you. **The story I told myself** was that if you really cared about me, you would have made our meeting a priority and been on time. I understand that may not be true and I am open to hear your interpretation of the situation as well. Going forward, **what would be helpful for me** is if we only make plans that you feel confident you can keep, and if you can't, that you keep me updated and let me know in advance. I would also really appreciate it if you considered how important respecting plans is to me. It's something I really value. So, if you are going to be late or have to cancel, it would mean a lot to me if you could provide some reassurance that our relationship is still a priority to you".

PRACTICE

Think of a recent experience where you had conflict with someone and use the table below to construct a healthy way to address it with the person involved.

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Step	Purpose	What you might say:
<i>"What happened for me was..."</i>	State your recollection of events, actions, or conversations that transpired as factually as possible. Perhaps there are a few examples that you could bring.	
<i>"I felt..."</i>	Describe the emotional impact (note: try to avoid saying <i>"you made me feel"</i>).	
<i>"The story I told myself was..."</i>	What did that action represent to you and lead you to believe about yourself or the relationship e.g. <i>"The story I told myself was that I didn't matter to you as much and you didn't see me as a priority"</i> .	
<i>"What would be helpful for me is..."</i>	State your needs, desires or wishes moving forward. <i>What will help you not feel like this again? (note: we aren't mandating the behaviour as a threat, we are communicating the need and asking if it can be reciprocated).</i>	

Script to role play 'Managing conflict in relationships'

TANIA and PETER are a married couple in their mid 40s. TANIA has just come home from her parents' house where she and her sister, Heather, have been discussing what to do about their parents' ailing health and domestic capabilities.

The scene is their living room. PETER is sitting on the couch watching TV.

TANIA walks in the door and puts her bag down on the counter.

PETER: *(Barely looking up from the TV)* Hey love.

TANIA: *(Sounding tired)* Hey.

PETER: *(Still watching TV)* How was it?

TANIA: Not good. Heather is so unreasonable and selfish sometimes!

PETER: *Sweetheart, don't let her get to you.

TANIA: It's just that her first concern is always herself, when the thing I am most concerned about is mum and dad and what they want.

PETER: *(Briefly glancing at TANIA) She's always been like that though, I'm not sure why you would expect her to change at this point.

TANIA looks at PETER in frustration, as he continues to focus on the TV.

TANIA: So, we didn't come to any agreements tonight, about what kind of domestic help we can get for them. It's clear they can't do everything on their own at home any more, even though they'd like to.

PETER: *(He turns and looks at her)* *I keep saying, you should organise that community elder assistance service, it will take the pressure off of you to keep going over there.

TANIA: But mum and dad don't want strangers in their house, they want us!

PETER: *Come watch some telly with me. (He stands up)

*Peter means well, but this is invalidating as it dismissed Tania's real emotional response.

*Peter is not fully present with Tania. Furthermore, his comment is making Tania wrong.

*Peter goes into problem solving mode.

*Again, he means well, he wants to distract her and make her feel better, but Peter is showing that he is not willing to be curious and sit in the mud with Tania, he wants to 'fix' her.

Script to role play 'Managing conflict in relationships'

Do you want me to grab you a glass of wine?

TANIA: NO! I want you to listen!

*PETER stops and slowly reaches for the remote. *He turns off the TV.*

*He now shows presence.

PETER: (*genuinely*) I thought I was. I was just trying to be supportive.

TANIA goes and sits next to him on the couch.

TANIA: I know you're just trying to help. But I don't want wine or to watch telly. I want to talk to you about it.

PETER: I DO care.

TANIA: *I know that. But I just walked in the door and I was clearly frustrated. And when you told me not to let her get to me, and that I shouldn't have expected any different, I started to feel like you thought that my being upset was unreasonable, that it was my fault. And by giving me solutions like "get community assistance", to me I felt like you were trying to shut me up so that you can go back to your evening.

*Tania says what happened for her, how she felt and some of the meanings she made (the story she told herself).

PETER: I didn't mean it like that.

TANIA: I know.

PETER: It's just that I don't like it when you're upset.

TANIA: *But, I really am upset! And what would be most helpful for me when I am feeling frustrated and angry, like I was when I came home just now, is just being comforted and reassured that what I am feeling is ok.

*Tania goes on to say what would help her.

PETER: Ok... (*Tania watches him as he takes a moment to pause and think before he says*) What you're feeling IS ok.

TANIA: *I just feel sometimes like your preferred way of showing that, by spending quality time together, isn't always the way I'd like to receive it. Having a chance to talk and be heard is really important for me.

*How to give and receive support using love languages.

PETER: Ok, tell me some more about how you'd like me to show support.

Script to role play 'Managing conflict in relationships'

TANIA: I think what would help me is.... when I want to talk about things like what happened tonight at mum and dad's, that I'm heard for the way I feel. I know that Heather and I have always seen things differently, but sometimes, when it still upsets me, I want to feel like you're trying to understand how that affects me. I usually already know all the solutions and what I'm supposed to do. The most important thing for me is to feel like you've got my back.

PETER: I do have your back. Always. *(He takes her hand)* *So, do you want to start again? Pretend you've just walked in the door and I asked you how it was, and you said, "awful".

*Keep it light where it's right.

(Tania laughs)

PETER: *(Smiles)* No, go on, I want to know. I want to comfort you... in a helpful way.

TANIA: Ok, well it was not good. Within minutes of Heather arriving, she'd laid all these pamphlets on the table about nursing homes and immediately mum and dad start protesting about how they are not leaving the house they have been in for 52 years. *(she sighs)* And I get it, I grew up there. I love that they still live there and I am happy to visit them every few days and take care of the chores they can't handle any more.

PETER: *So when Heather talks about nursing homes, that must hurt you almost as much as it hurts your mum and dad.

*Demonstrating compassion.

TANIA: Yes... it does. She doesn't have the same connection as I do.

PETER: *It's hard seeing you upset like this, I think that's why I always try to make you feel better, but I can see how much it hurts you every time you have conflict with Heather.

*Reflecting.

TANIA: Because, she's still my sister, and I love her, and it's only times like this, when we're making plans or decisions that I get to this point of frustration with her.

PETER: *(Nods)* *Just before, you said that you didn't come to any agreements, how does that feel at the moment? Are you disappointed, or are you feeling like you need to make a decision quickly?

*Gentle curiosity.

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TANIA: Well, I'm mostly glad, because without any new agreements, things will just stay as they are, and that suits me just fine, because I like the arrangement...

PETER: *(Sensing there is more)* *But?

TANIA: But, I know that fairly soon, they are going to need more help than I can give them. So I have to think about what's right for them, but I also don't want to discount what they want for themselves. They shouldn't just lose all their personal agency once they get old. And also, as much as she annoys me, Heather has a right to express her needs as well. I know she hasn't got as much capability as me to look after them, she lives further away and is busier at work, and I know she feels guilty about that. So I just don't know what the right thing to do is.

*Sitting in the mud with her – prepared to talk about the hardest parts.

PETER: *It sounds like you are trying to think about what's best for everyone. It's no surprise that you're feeling a bit overwhelmed by all that responsibility.

*Linking her emotional response to the situation and showing that it makes sense.

TANIA: It is overwhelming. The whole thing! I hate the idea of mum and dad getting frail. *(She is close to tears)*

PETER: **(Shuffles next to her and puts his arm around her. Quietly he says)* Yeah, I know.

*Demonstrating love, safety and trust.

There is silence for a little while TANIA takes some deep breaths.

TANIA: I think the hardest part about all this is the role reversal. I'm now looking after the people who used to take care of me, and that really sucks!

PETER: It does. It's so hard to watch people you love change before your eyes. I can only imagine what it's going to be like when I have to start facing that challenge with my own parents. I never really stopped to think how much that part must've been impacting you.

(TANIA sits up and looks at him)

TANIA: Thank you. I really appreciate you talking this out with me.

Script to role play ‘Managing conflict in relationships’

PETER: *You and your family are making some really hard choices, and I'll do whatever I can to help.

TANIA: This is what helps. I feel so much better now. Even though we still have plans to make and everyone's needs to consider, I feel like you understand what I am going through.

PETER: *(Smiling)* I'm with you, all the way.

*Demonstrating consistency. Preparing to show up as a supporter for as long as it takes.

OBSERVATION

Looking at the script above, and the comments in the margin.

Note down the well-meaning mistakes that you are most likely to make when managing conflict.

If you are willing to dig a little deeper, also note down the things you may do that are not so well-meaning, or even destructive at times.

Remember, don't judge yourself on that. Self-awareness is the first step to creating positive change.