FROM CONFLICT TO COMMUNITY

GWENDOLYN OLTON

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Transforming Conflicts Without Authorities

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From Conflict to Community: Transforming Conflicts without Authorities

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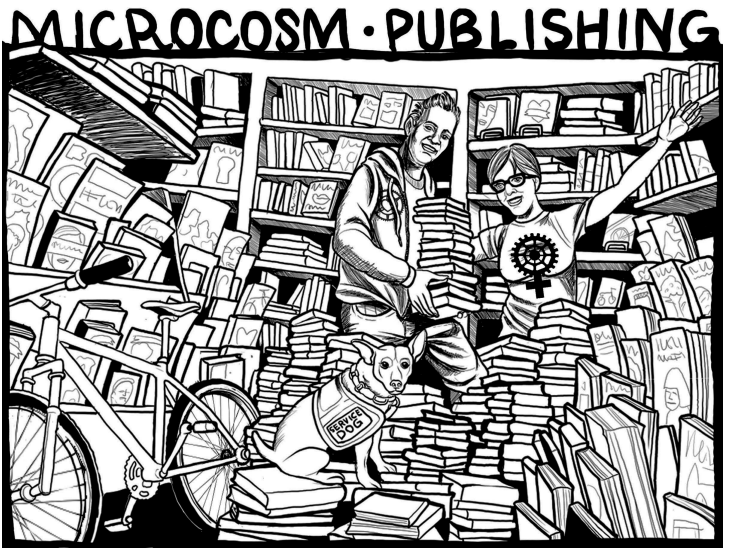

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Global labor conditions are bad, and our roots in industrial Cleveland in the 70s and 80s made us appreciate the need to treat workers right. Therefore, our books are MADE IN THE USA

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Introduction

GRATITUDE

I'm writing this book on the land of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.[1] This group of nations, made up of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas, is thought to be one of the oldest and longest lasting democracies in the world.[2] And it was created by a peacemaker. The Peacemaker, or the Great Peacemaker, gathered together nations that had been in conflict, introduced practices for nonviolent decision making, and brought forth the Great Law of Peace. It was no easy task, and the Peacemaker had help in peacefully building this coalition. The Great Law of Peace contained principles and guidance for the governance of the Confederacy and also for guiding the actions and decisions of the Haudenosaunee people. Some of the principles include acting with fairness and respect to people and life, being in good health and good mind, and the seventh generation principle, which states that decisions should be made while considering future generations. This consideration of future inhabitants of the Earth stretches beyond our children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren out to the seventh generation of people who will reside after us. I'm grateful to the Haudenosaunee for sharing so many of their gifts across so many generations even when my ancestors, and the ancestors of others from Europe, have broken every treaty they've ever entered into with them (over five hundred). It's probably impossible for me to know the extent to which this book is influenced by the Haudenosaunee since the formal and informal education of descendants of colonizers is apt to discount the history of those whose land and culture they targeted. For instance, much of the USA's constitution was based on the Great Law of Peace and few folks of European descent that I know of grew up learning this fact. I'd like to thank those original to this land for sharing their peace, their deep understanding

1 Haudenosaunee Confederacy, "Haudenosaunee Confederacy" and Tree Media, "Digital Wampum"

2 Four other nations, the Tuscarora, Wyendot, Delaware, and Tutela, are also part of the Haudenosaunee League of Nations (Haudenosaunee Confederacy, "Haudenosaunee Confederacy")

and teachings on peace and peacemaking, and the messages of the Peacemaker. Thank you for all that you've given that I don't even know of (yet) that continues to go unnamed. May this book honor the lessons I've learned and serve to create more peace in the land I inhabit and in any lands it may reach.

WHY THIS BOOK?

I've been working, paid and unpaid (mostly unpaid) as a conflict transformer and mediator for most of my life.[3] Conflict transformation is my life's passion, and I genuinely love this work. At the same time, I'm often deeply saddened and troubled at how few resources are out there for folks who are struggling with normal, day-to-day conflicts. Simply put, most of the folks I talk to in conflict work are lacking the following:

- Training or education in conflict skills, including time and space to practice them.
- Role models and examples for how to get through conflict peaceably, even artfully.
- Community (including friends and family) support in dealing with conflict in a way that doesn't escalate things.

Given how few resources we are provided with to help with conflicts, I think it's a beautiful testament to how naturally prosocial, peaceful, and collaborative humans are that we mostly live and get along together without the use of violence. On top of our lack of training, models, and community support, here in the United States most of us are deeply impacted by the dominant culture of patriarchy and white supremacy which operates through tools of shame, oppression, and hierarchy, all of which make working on conflicts even more challenging.[4]

Despite these challenges, I'm intensely hopeful about the possibilities for transforming conflict. And it's a hope that, to me, seems really pragmatic because, even though we aren't taught or given many of them, there are *a lot* of tools out there.

3 For now, let's take "mediator" to mean anyone who works as a third-party intervener in conflicts without the use of force or punishment.

4 Much of my understanding of these systems comes from the work of Miki Kashtan, who has written at length about systemic structures. Please see the resources section for references to some of these materials.

There is so much that we all individually and collectively can do to work on our conflicts and differences. The discovery of all these tools is a bit like growing up with three channels on a tv and then one day getting basic cable; suddenly, there are way more options.

I wanted to write this book to help synthesize some of what I have found to be really useful in everyday sorts of conflicts because I want to contribute to creating a more nonviolent world where fewer conflicts end in calling the cops, or going to Human Resources, or campaigning to shun someone. I want folks to feel more ready, willing, and able to work on conflicts in their communities, families, friend groups, work-places, and all other spaces, so punishment is finally seen for what it is—the most ineffective and least creative tool at our disposal. Put more simply, the purpose of this book is three-fold in terms of resolving and transforming conflicts:

1. To increase our collective competence
2. To increase our confidence
3. To increase our motivation to act as third party interveners, therefore reducing appeals to authority.[5]

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is for folks who want to do more to help with conflict but don't have, or are not interested in getting, formal training in conflict transformation. I've been troubled with the professionalization of peace practices over the last twenty years or so, many of which are very old human technologies. The number of organizations that will "certify" you to hold a peace circle, facilitate a restorative justice process, or mediate a conflict are growing every year. We don't need a special certification to practice peace and to help de-escalate challenging situations. Conflict transformation in its many forms is older than our not-for-profit systems[6]. Instead of these barriers to entry, I want

5 Here, I mean "authority" to indicate any person(s) with power over the people in conflict. Anytime someone has power over someone else, they have the capacity to cause harm to those with less power. So we may, unintentionally or intentionally, cause harm by seeking authority-based interventions in our conflicts. In general, when there isn't a large or structural difference in power between folks who are in conflict, I posit that it's most constructive, and safe, to handle conflicts outside of the use of power and force.

6 I don't mean this as a dig on any specific organizations that provide certification or specialized training. In many instances, seeing that someone

more and more people to feel confident and competent that they can, and already do, impact the conflicts around them.[7]

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I've organized this book into three main parts:

1. Conflict Basics: understanding definitions, types and styles of conflicts, and some reflections on our socialization to conflict.
2. Informal Third-Party Intervention: how to help other people who are in conflict.
3. Our Own Conflicts: skills and tools to help us navigate our own conflicts

I wrote them in this order, so I imagine they read best that way, but feel free to do what you want. If you want to dive into the last section first, go for it! Many of the practices I cover in Third-Party Intervention come up again in the last section and vice versa.

WHY ME?

Years ago, a dear friend asked what I felt most "called to do" in my life. After a few weeks of sitting with the question, an answer emerged: I feel most called to help facilitate understanding between people and to help people feel understood. An

has a particular certification might help people quickly find the support they need, or have some assurance that the support will meet certain standards of care, confidentiality, etc. However, I do want us to think critically about meeting all conflict needs through "certified" or "professional" support. For instance, not everyone who would be, or already is, skilled at conflict work, will have access to enough financial resources to obtain a certification. And I don't know about you, but I've known plenty of folks who have been certified to do something because they're skilled at sitting through lectures and/or passing tests and not necessarily great at performing the task they're certified to do

7 I've written this book with the intention of having it work for as many people as possible so I'd love to say, "This book is for everyone!" But just because I want it to be for everyone doesn't mean that everyone will find it useful. I can guess that lots of things I suggest won't work for everyone or in all situations. I come from a specific context and social location and this informs how I think, talk, and work on conflict. I'm of European descent, with access to white privilege in the global north, I'm queer and married to a man, am neurotypical, and went to college and grad school, to name a few of these identities. I hope knowing some of these identities will help you decide what to keep and what to set aside and I hope this book is of use to you!

assumption I carry related to this calling is that the more folks understand one another, and feel understood by someone, the less likely they are to cause harm and the more likely they are to have compassion towards others. I've been writing this book through the months of February through September of 2020. I'm really hoping that by the time someone reads this, the world and all its inhabitants are in a better state than we currently are and that you look at the dates and think, "Oh, things got better after that." My time writing this book has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as significant social unrest and reckoning, especially with respect to the long and deep impact of racism and white supremacy in the United States. I found myself writing about supporting our friends and colleagues through minor disagreements in the midst of calls for decarceration and defunding police departments. Going to a rally or a socially distanced meeting in masks, then going home to write for a few hours and eat one of the stay-at-home meals that I'm sick of making. I've wondered and worried about the place for this little book amidst all the huge systemic changes that need to happen. I want so much for a world free of cops, bosses, prisons, and unchecked and abusive authorities in general.[8] A world where everyone gets their needs met and there are systems of support, accountability, and healing in place for those suffering from violence and harm. The need for this world isn't new and neither is the work to get there. So many amazing visionaries, healers, writers, and activists have been doing the work to create this world for a very long time, almost all of them BIPOC women and femmes and folks with disabilities.[9] However, the need has never felt more acute or the work as important, in my life, as it does at this moment in history. While I don't fully know how my work fits in with all that needs doing, I feel called to bring it forth nonetheless.

In working with individuals and small groups in conflict for most of my teenage and adult life, it's been clear to me how well our systems of socialization prepare us to perpetuate systems

8 I want to be clear that when I say a "world free of ___," I don't mean that the people inhabiting those positions cease to exist, but that they are instead occupying other positions within the Beloved Community, positions that don't give them, or anyone, power to do harm to others.

9 To name a few of my favorites: adrienne maree brown, Mariame Kaba, Ejeris Dixon, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Fania E. Davis.

of oppression. Over and over, many of us, especially white folks, call on authority when we lack the skills to negotiate a tough situation. We struggle to support ourselves and those in our circles through conflict without appeals to authority—or applying tired, ineffective, and inhumane carceral logic. I believe it will take many of us to undo these systems and many of us to create new ones. Some of the work may seem small in comparison to the bigger call to change the system, but two thoughts propel me forward when thinking about our individual conflict work:

1. Interpersonal conflict transformation and systems change are not mutually exclusive, we can do the work simultaneously.
2. Doing some change work at a small scale will help us at bigger levels. We can see the inherent problems of some of our big, macro-systems at the micro scale. If we can't face a conflict with a coworker without calling HR, how will we face a conflict with someone in our neighborhood without calling the cops?

This book does not rely on any singular model of conflict transformation or communication but is a combination of multiple models and practices from both within and outside of the conflict resolution field. There are, to be certain, many books on conflict work out there, and I encourage you to check others out as well. I don't think any of us have all the answers, but I do think each of us holds a little bit of the truth and I feel called to share the things that have been useful for me. My intention is to contribute to peaceful and nonviolent practices in the world and aid in understanding between people. If I've written something that impacts you differently or negatively and you're open to telling me, I really welcome that feedback. If there are practices that don't work for you or don't land well for you, please leave them behind. And if you find anything I say to be useful here, I encourage you to check out other works in the Resources section of this book.

Part One: Conflict Basics

Chapter One: TYPES OF CONFLICT

The word "conflict" can elicit some pretty strong feelings, especially if we're the ones in a conflict. For example, here's a not unusual yet imaginary exchange I might have while doing a mediation:

Me: Hi Jenny, would you like to talk a little bit about your conflict with Kim?

Jenny: I'll talk with you about what's going on, but it's not like that—it's not a conflict. She just needs to understand that what she did was messed up.

Me (inside my own head)**:** I need to stop saying the word "conflict" to people.

I've found that folks just don't want their interactions with others to be labeled as a "conflict," even if no one means it as an accusation of wrongdoing. I think this is in part because of the label's implications. To say we have a conflict puts us into a space where maybe both parties are a little wrong and/or a little right. It might feel like we have to give up some of our narrative about our rightness, righteousness, and superior position in the disagreement. It can be easier to describe the problem that's causing the discomfort as being located somewhere outside of ourselves, outside of our locus of control.[10]

We've internalized conflict in such a distorted way that we think we're being accused of failing or not being able to handle our business or some other judgment if we have a disagreement with someone. I suggest we reclaim this word because the reality is we all engage in conflicts. Conflict is normal and the more we're able to name it and talk about it, the more possibility we have for transforming it. It's tough to work on something if you won't admit it's there.

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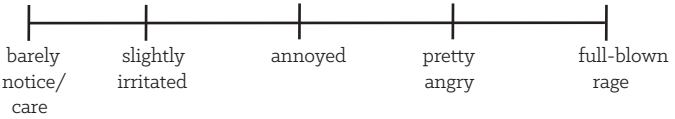
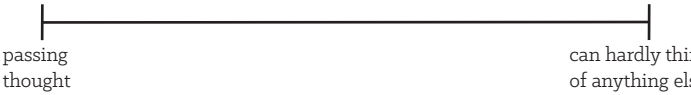
10 "Locus of control" just means where we think power or control over a situation comes from. So if we think something is happening due to outside forces or influences, then we think it's outside of our ability to control, or outside our locus of control.

For the purposes of this book, my definition of conflict is any misalignment of views, opinions, practices, and/or strategies that cause some kind of discomfort between one or more of the parties involved.

This definition gives us a large tent to party under. For example, I'm in a conflict with my dog as I write this because her preference is to be outside but have the door open so she can come and go as she pleases, while my preference is to keep the door closed because I'm cold. We've got a misalignment of strategies that's causing discomfort for her because I've chosen to keep the door closed. This definition also captures what we might typically think of as a conflict. For example, the heated political debates between friends and family in real life or online. We can categorize some of these conflicts based on how intense the discomfort is for one or more of the parties. Here's a diagram showing a range of emotions someone might feel in a conflict, from barely noticing a problem to fiery, hot, flip-a-table kind of rage.



For the conflict with my dog, I'm on the left hand side of the diagram, close to "barely care." For certain political debates, I would be closer to "pretty angry." We might also use this spectrum approach when thinking about how much the conflict is impacting our thinking or attention:



And we might be impacted in other ways as well, such as spiritually and physically.

How much a conflict is impacting us will vary depending on our relationship with the person involved. For instance, if I perceive some grumpiness in tone from someone I don't know, I might not feel as impacted as I would were I to perceive grumpiness in an exchange with a sibling. Similarly, if I sense

misalignment from someone in a position of power over me, it will impact me differently than if we share power equally.

It is my hope that the strategies in this book will be useful to folks in conflict no matter where on a spectrum of discomfort they are.

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Most of the time, when we're talking about conflict in our day-to-day lives, we're talking about conflict between a couple of individuals. But we can have other kinds of conflict too. A misalignment of views could happen at any of the following levels:

- Intergroup: Conflict between groups (e.g., a police officer's union and a police accountability organization).
- Intragroup: Conflict within a group (e.g., between two teachers in the same school).
- Interpersonal: Conflict between individuals (e.g., two neighbors).
- Intrapersonal: Conflict within an individual (e.g., feeling torn or conflicted about a decision you are making).

Note that certain conflicts can overlap, like intragroup and interpersonal. For most of this book I'll be discussing interpersonal conflicts, but I'll remind us to pay attention to how the interpersonal conflicts are related to larger systemic and structural issues, as well as how they might relate to other levels of conflict.[11]

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11 It can also be useful to describe the levels of intensity we experience within conflict. In Kingian Nonviolence, there are three levels described. "Normal" refers to the everyday sorts of conflict we might experience. For instance, an argument over dirty dishes with a roommate. "Pervasive" describes the sort of conflict we experience when things have been bad for a while between parties (including groups) and there's an ongoing sense of tension. Finally, "Overt" conflict is the name for conflict that is active and visible, and usually involves some intentional harm. For a deep dive into this, and other aspects of Kingian Nonviolence, check out the excellent Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm by Kazu Haga.

Chapter Two: CONFLICT STYLES

It can sometimes be helpful to think of ourselves as having a "style" in conflict. These are the ways, conscious and unconscious, that we show up for conflict. Our style can change depending on who we have a conflict with, what the conflict is about, and any number of environmental factors. One popular description of conflict styles was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in the 1970s. They created an assessment tool called the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI) to allow respondents to assess and reflect on their ways of showing up for conflict.[12] They described five conflict styles:

- **Competitive**: approaches conflict as an argument or debate to be won, might feel energized or even enthusiastic about conflict.
- **Collaborative:** looks to find solutions that benefit all parties, might view conflict as an opportunity to positively transform situations or relationships
- **Compromising**: looks to find solutions in which parties are equally impacted by a solution, the harm and benefit are shared equally.
- **Avoidant**: steers clear of a conflict once it's known, might view conflict as something that will pass or take care of itself if left alone.
- **Accommodating:** Works to assuage the other conflicted party in order to ease tensions or resolve the issue.

Each of these styles has some benefits and downsides and times when they are most and least effective at solving an issue. For instance, avoiding can be a highly effective strategy when dealing with someone who is intoxicated; whereas, a competitive style may serve well in certain emergency situations.

12 Kilmann and Thomas, "An Overview of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)".

Exercise: Imagine yourself in each of the scenarios below. Which of the TKI conflict styles do you think you would apply?

1. You're a parent and you have a family gathering planned at your parents' house. Your 16-year-old son has told you he's not going to go, that he's going to his friend Dylan's house instead.
2. You're getting in line at a grocery store and someone moves in front of you saying, "I'm just gonna go in front of you because I don't have as much stuff."
3. You're a supervisor and you've told one of your employees to let you know when she is going to leave early so that you can approve the time. You look for her at her desk and notice she's gone, and her cube mate tells you she's left early. She did not let you know.
4. You and your significant other have had many conversations about household chores. You made an agreement a few weeks ago that you would do most of the cooking and your partner would do the dishes. Four days have gone by and they haven't done the dishes, and you're running out of space to cook.
5. Your boss comes to you and wants you to take the lead on managing a project with an important customer. Over the next few weeks you get multiple emails a day from your boss asking for updates and directing you on what pieces of the project you ought to be working on. You're starting to think you're spending more time answering your boss's questions than actually working on the project
6. You and your co-worker both love French vanilla creamer in your coffee. You've arranged to take turns buying the creamer, however, you've bought the last three bottles. You go to pour creamer in your coffee and realize you're out.

Most people find that they use different conflict styles depending on all sorts of factors, such as the content of the disagreement, who is around, how invested they are in the solution, and even

how tired they feel in that moment. There is no singular right way to approach a conflict. It can be helpful to be aware of the styles we typically use, though, and how they may be impacting other people and our collective outcomes. Let's take a look at these conflict styles again while weighing out some pros and cons.

COMPETITIVE STYLE

Pros: This style is useful when someone is operating within a competitive environment, such as a debate or game. This style is also associated with a directive approach to communicating and that approach can be particularly useful in emergency situations.

Example A: An off-duty doctor assuming control/ authority when someone next to them suffers a heart attack. They attend to the patient and tell folks nearby what to do, such as "call 911."

Example B: Two presidential candidates participating in a political debate.

Cons: If you're in a discussion or disagreement with someone who is not using a competitive style, you may inadvertently increase the discord as the other person might feel dismissed, not understood, unheard, etc. Additionally, if a solution is reached by using a competitive style, the chances of it working long term can be lowered if other parties feel forced into the solution because they "lost" an argument.

Example A: You use what you think is a logical argument to convince everyone on your work team to finish a project in a week. Others on the team mention they don't think the time frame is a good idea, but they aren't as good as you at arguing and the team acquiesces to your proposed deadline. Eventually, the project isn't completed on time because your team members didn't share your goal and weren't motivated to work on it.

Example B: You're a doctor and you have a long conversation with a patient about their smoking habit and believe you've convinced them with logical arguments to quit smoking. The patient agrees

quitting makes the most sense. Afterwards, however, they continue to smoke and don't tell you why because they don't think they'll win an argument explaining why they don't want to quit.

COLLABORATIVE STYLE

I, like most conflict wonks, am partial to a collaborative style and am confident it can be fast and efficient, but that it's gotten a bad rep for being too slow. A collaborative style can be aspirational, even in emergency situations, because you can have collaborative agreements beforehand about who will decide what.

Pros: This method is useful when more than one person wants to be involved in deciding how a conflict resolves. Also useful when a sustainable or long-lasting resolution is needed.

Example A: A divorcing couple working to decide how their shared resources will be divided up while sharing a kind understanding of the other person's needs and preferences.

Example B: A group of four business co-owners deciding how and what their business will focus on two years in the future.

Cons: This style can appear slower at resolving conflicts than the other styles and is sometimes seen as inefficient. Because this style works to consider the needs of all parties involved, if people are unfamiliar with it, they may misunderstand people who have this style as being overly-sympathetic to problematic behaviors or people who have caused harm.

Example A: Your work team needs to submit a proposal to do some work for a grant and the project would require each individual member of your team's contribution. The proposal is due by the end of the week and even though everyone on the team wants the project, a proposal is not submitted because you couldn't gather enough input and agreement for the decision to pass.

Example B: You are in a social justice group and one of the members is accusing another of using abusive

language that goes against the values of the group. You are in disagreement with the leader of the group as to how to deal with the harm that was done. They would like to remove the offending member from the group entirely and you would like the group to consider other factors first, such as context and where the language was stemming from. You are accused of victim blaming and siding with the "abuser."

COMPROMISING STYLE

Pros: This style can work well when there's a high need for fairness and not a lot of time.

Example A: You're arguing with a roommate about the division of some household chores, namely doing the dishes and cleaning the bathroom. You come up with a plan to take turns doing the dishes every other day and take turns cleaning the bathroom every other weekend.

Example B: You play for a roller derby team that travels for games. There's some disagreement about who will drive the carpool to which games and you come up with a plan to divide the driving evenly and create a spreadsheet to help track everyone's turns.

Cons: This style works less well when there isn't a clear cut way to divide resources, tasks, etc. evenly. Another downside is that things that look "fair" on paper can still feel unfair or just generally bad to the folks involved in the conflict. This style has sometimes been called the "lose-lose" style because neither party to a conflict actually gets what they want.

Example A: Your group creates a website with a link for questions, concerns, and requests related to the work you do. Your group is happy that the site is well-trafficked but slightly overwhelmed at the number of emails they're getting through the link. The group comes up with a plan to divide the task of responding to the emails so that each staff member takes a turn each week. The solution is quick and seems fair at first. However, several staff members have lower technical literacy and struggle to set up their spam

filters to catch the emails, they're also slower to respond to the emails than other staff. Even so, other staff members don't have reliable internet access and have to go out of their way to reply to the emails. Yet, others care a lot about getting back to site visitors quickly and are irritated when other staff can't "pull their weight."

Example B: You and your partner have a disagreement over who will do dishes and who will make the meals. To resolve the issue quickly, you both decide you'll just split the task evenly. You'll take turns, so the weeks you cook, your partner will do the dishes, and vice versa. The compromise seems fair on paper but devolves into further conflict when several issues come up: you don't like your partner's cooking and don't eat the meals they make, so feel it's unfair to do the dishes related to their meal. Your partner takes issue with your practice of letting certain dishes soak and not completing the task the night it's assigned to be done. Depending on the gender dynamics of your relationship, on top of everything, you both may also have unspoken irritation around culturally loaded gender roles concerning household division of labor that the compromise isn't addressing.

AVOIDANT STYLE

Pros: This style can be useful when dealing with a conflict where someone has significant power over you and is uninterested in resolving conflict.[13] It can also be useful in dealing with a conflict with someone who is intoxicated or dangerous.

Example A: You're leaving a bar with a friend and she becomes angry with you for missing her birthday party last year. You realize she is intoxicated and

13 I want to be careful here that we don't make assumptions about whether or not someone is interested in working on a conflict. I've seen a lot of instances where folks in conflict decide on someone's behalf, without ever actually consulting with the person, that they're "not willing" to work on the conflict. If we do this, we deprive ourselves of finding a solution that might work for everyone as well as depriving the person we're in conflict with of learning valuable information and working through challenges.

you change the subject, distracting her with a conversation about a chat you'd both been in at another bar earlier that night.

Example B: You work as an administrative assistant in a busy corporate office, one of your bosses walks in and begins to berate you about a shipment they want you to follow up on. You realize they are in a terrible mood and you decide to be really busy managing the inventory in the basement for most of the day, thereby avoiding this boss.

Cons: This style can cause problems for someone when used in situations where the power is relatively evenly shared and there's no risk of harm to either party. By avoiding discussing or dealing with the conflict, the person with whom you've taken issue may never know the impact their behavior has had on you and you may never get what you want out of the conflict. This style is very compelling because the fact of the matter is, many conflicts do in fact blow over in the short term. This can reinforce the desire to avoid confronting something when it takes so much work to do so skillfully and may not be presently necessary.

Example A: When you talk with your friend about challenging situations in your life, he frequently compares your situation to an example in his own life, usually saying something like, "Oh well that's not as bad as when . . ." Even though you're guessing he's bringing up his own stories to help you feel some companionship, you find it really irritating. You eventually just avoid telling him when something is bugging you or causing you some upset because it just feels too annoying when he makes it all about him. As a result, your friend doesn't learn how his behavior is impacting you (and possibly others) and distance grows between you as he stops hearing about challenges in your life.

Example B: Your spouse frequently makes sarcastic and hurtful remarks to you when she's in a bad mood. You don't say anything to her about it as you don't want to make the problem worse and figure it will blow over

because she never stays in a bad mood forever. Each instance blows over, but you find yourself avoiding her altogether if you catch a whiff of grumpiness and she begins to feel that you are unwilling to support her when things are challenging. Meanwhile, your resentment of her communication style grows and you end up thirty years later, resenting her and divorced.

ACCOMMODATING STYLE

Pros: This style can look a bit like avoidance and can be useful in similar situations. Additionally, an accommodating style might be helpful when you don't care very much about the outcome or when you don't have power to impact the outcome.

Example A: You and your friend are trying to choose a dinner location and have gotten into many disagreements over the best Italian place in the city. She begins to launch into a monologue about the merits of one of these locations and because you're not very hungry, you decide you won't argue about how bad Vito's is and to go along and eat their breadsticks because they're serviceable.

Example B: You're working on a team presentation and you've created a draft of the materials in a slide deck, however one of your team members doesn't like the design of the deck you've chosen. You aren't particularly fond of the deck he would rather use but know he cares about these things much more than you, so you proceed with his preference.

Cons: Similar to Avoidant, this style can cause problems for both the person using the style and the person, group, or system they are in conflict with. Used consistently over time, it may build resentment in the person using that style while simultaneously blocking or stunting learning of the recipient.

Example A: Mik and Sandra are leading a committee for a not-for-profit. Sandra frequently cancels and reschedules meetings due to her busy work schedule. Mik also has a busy work schedule but tries to work

around Sandra because he doesn't want to rock the boat. Sandra believes Mik just isn't as busy as her because every time she reschedules or cancels he meets whenever she wants. Meanwhile, Mik is actually bending over backwards to make his calendar work and is getting more and more frustrated with what he is perceiving as her total lack of organization.

Example B: John grew up with his alcoholic father, Tim, and used an accommodating style to negotiate the many challenging situations that came up for him at home. Tim has been sober for several years and John is now an adult and no longer in physical danger. However, John still uses this style whenever it seems like a disagreement is coming up with his dad. His partner wonders why John is always walking on eggshells and getting upset with his dad when it looks like he could just talk with him about the conflicts that come up. Tim is simultaneously pretty clueless that his son is at all upset with him.

As you probably picked up while reading these examples, there are many different ways these styles can come into play and it's rare that we stick with just one. Still, many of us have habits in our approach to conflict and it can be helpful to begin to notice what those are. The more we're able to notice and name them, the more we'll be able to actually choose what we want to do. Without awareness, there's no choice, just the continuation of old patterns. Some of those old patterns might be great, but if you're anything like me, you picked up a few along the way that you'd be better off without.

So what else is there to our conflict style besides these five neat categories? Our family of origin, the dominant culture we live in, any sub-culture we grew up in or belong to, and how we were socialized as kids (outside of the home) all play a huge role in how we manage, negotiate, and transform conflicts.

There are some lessons here to be learned from the fields of Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility. First, while there may be some generalizations people make about cultures they belong to, and our culture informs our worldview, we still vary in how we respond to any particular situation as individuals. To use a bananas example, let's say there's a generalization that

exists that when Sicilians are approached in anger by another person, they stand on one foot while discussing the issue at hand in order to signal to the person that the conflict has thrown them off balance and they're taking it seriously. If I'm Sicilian and this is part of the broader culture I belong to, I might participate in this behavior, or maybe I'm familiar with the practice, but no one in my family does it, or my family does it but they think it's silly and they do it to fit in with the rest of the community, or they've done it for generations and will continue to do it and feel offended when others don't do it, etc. etc.

Now, let's say another Sicilian and I are in conflict and a non-Sicilian mediator comes to work with us. They are aware of the generalizations regarding Sicilians and set up the mediation space such that we can both stand on one foot the whole time, but never actually talk to either of us about how we view the practice. I might find the mediator's assumptions really annoying and feel like they just don't get it.

My point is, even if there were some non-offensive way for me to make big generalizations about which culture uses which strategies in a conflict, I think it would be pretty pointless to do so. It wouldn't do us much good to make assumptions about these strategies in any particular situation without talking to people first. There are certainly resources out there that discuss cultural conflict practices and strategies, but it's outside the scope of this book, and my expertise.

Where does this leave us? Our best bet is to:

1. Know ourselves and our own tendencies really well, first.
2. Work to understand the styles and default strategies of those closest to us or those that we're frequently in conflict with.
3. When we don't know the person or don't know their strategies and styles, bring a lot of attention and curiosity to any conflict with them (probably a good idea to do this no matter what).

Chapter Three: CONFLICT IN THE UNITED STATES

Now that I've said all that about not assuming and making big generalizations, I'm going to go through some generalizations about conflict socialization in the United States, which is where I'm writing and working.[14]

In this chapter, I hope to give us an opportunity to understand and assess how we each show up for the conflicts, disagreements, and arguments that happen in our lives, through the lens of cultural socialization. We each carry around our own invisible backpack of learned perspectives, assumptions, and behaviors about the world and I want to give us a chance to take a peek inside that backpack and see what we're working with. We don't necessarily need to change anything about ourselves, but knowing what we're carrying around with us will help us to make more skillful and wise choices in our interactions in the future.

For example, there was a lot of teaching in my family about rationality and logic being the best form of communication in an argument. I got really good at not only using reason but signaling to others that I was reasonable in a conflict. I could get through arguments with incredibly escalated people about some real hot-button issues while barely showing an emotion, let alone seeming upset or angry. And for a long time, I really thought that this meant I'd won something. Won the argument, won the higher ground. Eventually, I had an opportunity to look at how my training growing up prepared me really well for some kinds of debates and arguments but very poorly for other kinds of conflicts in which maintaining and strengthening the

14 This is bound to be a bit of a dubious endeavor since the United States is not a cultural monolith. As such, some of these generalizations may not match your experience or feel relevant. I invite you to take what works and leave aside the rest if it's not helpful or germane.

relationship was the goal (rather than winning a debate). I'm grateful that I have the rational, debate-style tool in my tool-belt, but I'm very grateful that it's not the only tool I have now; in fact, I barely pull it out.

CONFLICT AT HOME

Most of our socialization happens in our families, in our friend groups, and in our school systems. Human beings are extremely social creatures. We need one another in order to survive, and we won't thrive, or even live very long, on our own. A major task of childhood, both for the child and the caretaker, is learning the norms of the social groups the child is or will be a part of. Because not learning these norms can be dangerous. Someone who doesn't learn these explicit and implicit rules could wind up being socially isolated, which is incredibly risky for the health and well-being of anyone. These norms can be anything from basic practices around food (Do we eat from one central dish or individual dishes; do we burp while we eat or stay quiet? Do we eat certain kinds of foods at certain times and not at others?) to complex mating rituals (Do we see each other in groups, at what age do we engage in sex acts, how do interested potential mates primarily communicate and in what ways?). In the United States, where most families live in homes with limited extended family (or other community members) residing in the same place and where school is compulsory, we learn a lot of the norms from our family of origin and our schools.

There is huge variation of internal conflict styles within family groups. But chances are, you learned a lot about your own approach and default modes from these early experiences of conflict.

Exercise: Take a look at the following questions to get thinking about how you learned to deal with difference growing up:

- Did you ever see family members argue or disagree?
    - If yes, which strategies did you see them use while disagreeing? (Body language, body positioning, location of argument, public vs. private, volume and tone of voice, etc.)

- If no, did you have a sense that members were having disagreements secretly? Did you listen to them?[15]

- What did you learn is important in a disagreement? (Proving you're right, having the best come-back, talking louder than the other person, showing you're calm, etc.)
- Did you see people in your home bring up past arguments or conflicts or did they stick to a single topic?
- Did you see people in your home resolve or transform conflicts? If so, what did it look like?
- How did people end an argument or disagreement? What did the energy in the room feel like afterwards?
- What kinds of conflicts did you get into with your family growing up? Were they similar to other members in your family?
- What did your family explicitly teach you about conflict?

There are many more questions we could ask ourselves when considering how we saw conflict in our homes growing up. What's missing from this list? What did you witness about conflict and disagreement in your home that didn't make it to this list of questions?

After this exercise, take some time to reflect on how these different styles and strategies influence your own current approach to conflicts. It's really common to witness and take note of something growing up that we truly do not want to take with us into adulthood, but in the absence of another model for behavior or thinking, we can inadvertently default back to the strategies that we learned growing up. What did you take with you from your family? Are there practices, strategies, and ways of being in conflict that we learned and no longer want to continue using?

15 Secretly trying to listen to adults' arguments was one of my top three hobbies as a kid, right up there with climbing trees and reading.

CONFLICT AND SCHOOL

Schools and school systems are powerful forms of socialization. We learn a lot about what's expected of us, what people think of us, what kinds of behaviors will be rewarded, what will be punished, who gets recognized for what, and on and on. It's pretty common that whatever we learned about conflict at home does not directly translate to what the administrators, our teachers, or what our peers want us to learn about conflict, although it might be similar. When conflicts between students happen, we learn what the adults in the school want us to do and what our peers and peer groups think should happen. We'll learn similar lessons in student to adult conflicts along with lessons about how conflict plays out in a hierarchy.

Since most schools have a hierarchy with a command and control structure, we usually learn that we'll "lose" in conflicts with adults and, subsequently, with those who have power over us. We'll rarely see adult-to-adult conflicts in schools and when we do, they're quickly moved to private locations so we might learn that people in authority don't have conflicts, that conflicts undermine authority, that conflicts are shameful or meant to be hidden, etc.

Finally, we are likely to be taught some explicit lessons on conflict. We typically learn about wars in school and what sorts of global actions created and perpetuated violence and conflict. Usually, not much attention is given to peace practices or movements. The typical exception to that is some instruction on the work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Exercise: Do you recall some conflicts you witnessed or were involved in during grade school?

- What did you learn about how peers expected you to behave in conflict?
- What did adults explicitly say about the conflicts? Did what they say match their implied expectations?
- Did what the adults in school told you about the conflict match what adults at home told you?

- Did the expectations and instructions match your own sense of what to do about the conflict?
- Did you witness adults in conflict? If so, how was it resolved? What did you learn or pick up from these experiences?
- What did you learn about how conflicts are handled in large groups or on a global scale?

Of course, we all have different experiences and there's individuation to our socialization. Still, I think there are some generalizations we can make about what we learn in our standard school systems:

- You should try to figure out how to get out of a conflict with someone without violence, but if someone is using violence towards you or is threatening your social position, you should defend yourself and make sure people know not to mess with you.
- People in authority or with power over others will have final decision-making power over whether and how a conflict is resolved.
- Sometimes, people with less power can find ways to undermine or subvert the decisions of those in power.
- Most conflicts in the world can be divided into good guys and bad guys, and the good guys usually have to use war to protect themselves or innocent citizens.
- There are some cases of people using tactics other than violence and war to solve national or global problems but these are usually done by remarkable individuals who are special and different from the rest of us.

In schools and at home, we're also taught a lot about how we should and shouldn't feel about conflict as well as what's appropriate to express. These lessons are differentiated by the assumed gender of the person being socialized. And though there are plenty more than two genders, most of us are socialized on a binary of male/boy or female/girl. In general, people socialized as girls are given a little more flexibility

around emotional expressions of pain and distress, and people socialized as boys are given a little more flexibility around expressions of anger. Both genders (on this false binary) are explicitly taught to stifle the emotional range that the other is given flexibility on. Without diving too deeply into the rich soup of gender-based socialization, I'll summarize by saying that the gender we're socialized to conform to can impact how we work through conflict, both internally and externally.

EMOTIONALITY: IT'S A FEATURE, NOT A BUG

As I've mentioned, I can't speak for all cultures, but I can generalize a bit about my own experience and what I've heard resonates for many others in the United States. I'm certainly not the first person to mention that logic and rationality are prized as the best, and sometimes only, ways of approaching any problem. A great insult to a Western-European-descended white person in the United States is that they are being irrational, illogical, unreasonable, emotional, dramatic, and hysterical. So, not only is rationality prized, but emotionality is belittled as a subpar approach to problems and conflict. Ironically, the discounting of emotionality is a pretty unscientific approach. As the authors of *The Emotional Mind: The affective roots of culture and cognition*, write,[16]

> For at least 200 million years (and that is a conservative figure based on the rise of mammals), the emotional brain has been under construction. By comparison, the expansion of the "rational" neocortex (around 1.8 MYA), which is the focus of the cognitive approach, is a latecomer on the scene, and the development of our language-symbol system is younger still. In the suite of adaptive tools, the emotions have been at work eons longer than rational cognition, so it makes little biological sense to think about the mind as an idealized rational cost-benefit computer, projected into deep time . . ."

Since our Euro-centric culture favors the presentation of rationality over emotionality, most of the outcomes of conflicts

16 Asma, Stephen T, and Rami Gabriel. *The Emotional Mind: The Affective Roots of Culture and Cognition.*, 2019. Print. pg 7.

within the culture will favor those who do not reference emotions, make appeals to emotionality, or show emotions. And which folks in our culture are most likely to fit that criteria? People who have been socialized not to show much emotion and/or have been trained in methods of inquiry and epistemology that emphasize one, scientific, way of knowing things. So, if you were socialized as a boy, you're more likely to be able to display the low-emotion signals the culture is looking for in "rational" decision-making and conflict. And if you've had training and education in a STEM field, you'll be familiar with a focus on "objective" knowledge and, again, be well positioned to display low-emotionality in conflicts and decision-making. Notice here I'm discussing displays of emotion, however. Because as much as some of us may like to, we don't have the option of the whole-sale elimination of emotions. They drive a lot of what we do even while we go through Cirque du Soleil-like acrobatic maneuvers to avoid them or deny their existence.

It's important to recognize how the admiration of rationality and distaste for emotionality can show up because it impacts how we approach conflict and problem solving with others. In most of the conflicts I've mediated, both parties believe themselves to be highly rational and the other party irrational. In conflicts I've worked on where someone believes the other person is more rational than them, they usually note significant disempowerment and low self-esteem.

Let's make explicit some of these signals so we can examine their presence in our own conflicts and interactions. We might start by calling to mind a pop culture character, Spock, from the original *Star Trek* series. If you're not familiar, Spock is from the planet Vulcan where the humanoid beings have "evolved" to have little to no emotionality. They use only logic and rationality in decision-making, both individually and as a group. Spock's character, while a bit extreme, tracks pretty well with what we typically think of as a logical approach or person.

There may not be a single character that encapsulates emotionality as well as Spock encapsulates rationality. A close runner up might be Lucy from *I Love Lucy* and the trope of the hysterical woman; a character that just can't seem to calm down and work herself through a tough situation or conflict. Her emotions are out of control and she usually needs help from

someone else to de-escalate. These characters tend to display a relatively small emotional range however, with their feelings centering around anger, fear or panic, and despair. Still, we can summarize some assumptions about how an emotional person acts by describing this trope. Below is a side by side comparison of the signals displayed in these archetypes.

Typical Rationality Signals (Archetype: Spock from *Star Trek*)	**Typical Emotionality Signals (Archetype: the "Hysterical" Woman trope)**
Speech: ☐ Pacing: slow and measured ☐ Tone: Calm, matter of fact ☐ Volume: in the person's normal range, without much fluctuation ☐ Words: may explicitly state words like rational, reasonable, logical. Will attempt to persuade the person they're speaking to with arguments that follow, or at least sound like they follow formal logic such as "if ____, then ____."	Speech ☐ Pacing: rapid, sporadic, sometimes silent ☐ Tone: hysterical or dramatic, intense ☐ Volume: louder than normal, fluctuates ☐ Words: may reference assumed intentions and feelings of the person they're speaking with. May explicitly state their emotions/feelings
Body Language ☐ Gestures: usually reserved, not much movement ☐ Spacing: at a distance, not usually moving in or out of closeness with the person they're talking with ☐ Facial expressions: eye contact typical for person, raised eyebrows, sometimes disinterested looking	Body Language ☐ Gestures: usually many with hands and arms, lots of movement ☐ Spacing: distance and closeness used, sometimes pacing or other big movements with body will change distance with person they're communicating with. ☐ Facial expressions: eye contact also typical. May signal angry, sarcastic, or sad emotions with face

We are socialized to think of rationality and emotionality almost as polar opposites. Under this model of understanding, one can't be in an emotional state and also act rationally or think logically. Take, for example, the phenomenon of climate scientists describing an emotional response to their research and the conclusions they draw about the state of the world. Up until very recently, it was taboo for these scientists to speak of an emotional response, let alone display one. One could argue it's still pretty taboo to do so.[17] While there are some emotional states that make it challenging to access our cognitive processes, such as intense anger and fear, our emotional state is not separate from our thinking, rational mind. They're not even two sides of the same coin; they're an integrated whole. For example, when we're in a calm state that we normally associate with rationality, we're also more able to attune emotionally with others and have a sense of empathy and compassion. Denying these parts of ourselves doesn't make us any better at problem solving. In fact, it makes us quite a bit worse.

We know why it is important to be rational, reasonable, and logical. To think carefully, step by step, through problems and predict various outcomes requires focused attention and understanding of cause and effect. If I was a salesperson selling rationality in our culture, I wouldn't need to do much work; it sells like hot cakes. But what would my pitch be to sell folks on the need for accepting and integrating emotionality? What are the benefits of emotions? Answering this question could send us down a rabbit hole of philosophy or religion that's beyond the scope of this book, but we can take a sort of evolutionary approach here and make some guesses about how emotions keep us alive to continue our species. Simply put, we have sex, create babies, and keep them alive not because we've made a logical argument about doing so but because we feel something for and about our partners, children, and families. Babies make emotional appeals to their caretakers through crying and smiling; caretakers have an emotional response to these behaviors, which drives up their desire to want to hold, feed, and generally care for the little bundles of joy. We maintain

17 For example, check out the *On the Media* podcast episode on the Psychological Toll of Working as a Climate Scientist (Gladstone 2019)

friendships and kinships and in-groups not out of appeals to logic but out of feeling.

Despite the benefits of emotions, they tend to get dismissed as inadmissible in the court of public opinion, especially in conflict. But dismissing them doesn't make them go away. Instead, they might show up unexpectedly or in unwelcome ways. I'd like us to reintegrate these seemingly, but falsely, disparate parts of ourselves to bring more awareness to the emotional richness of our lives so that we can learn from what our own emotions and those of others are telling us. When we are aware of something, we're able to have more choice over our responses and therefore less habitual reactivity in conflict.

Exercise:

- How have you been trained or socialized growing up to think about logic and reason in arguments?
- Did your parents or other caretakers use logical approaches or signals in their discussions?
- What were you told about emotions in conflicts?
- Were you encouraged to express yourself, understand, and describe your feelings in a conflict?
- When others are expressing their feelings within a conflict, how are you thinking of them? Do you feel judgmental of their emotional expressions? Accepting of them? Do you use their expressions as information?

Chapter Four: CONFLICT AND JUSTICE

In the last section we explored the ways our family, culture, and personal conflict styles may impact our responses to, and behaviors within, conflict. In this chapter, we're going to look at another contextualizing factor: theories of justice. We can think of these theories as an organizing framework for understanding and addressing issues of fairness. These issues usually fall within one of the following categories[18]:

- Mutual social agreements
- Distribution of resources
- Responses to harm
- Prediction of consequences to actions

Justice models are important when talking about conflict because they deeply inform wh`at we think is right and wrong, what we think should happen to or with someone that's harmed us or a loved one, and what we expect to happen to/with us if we've done something that breaks a law or social contract.

We learn a lot about justice and fairness from the families and school systems that are tasked with socializing us. We also get a lot of this information from popular media. Imagine a "bad guy" from a favorite cartoon, movie, book, etc. when you were younger. What did you learn about justice from this story? What did the bad guy do? Who decided what was bad and good? What happened to the bad guy? What did we tell ourselves about this person? If you're anything like me, you didn't grow up learning about bad guys as being regular, fallible humans who made mistakes and then had to fix what was wrong or repair the harm that was the result of their actions. Even the term "bad guy" gives us a lot of information about the kind of

18 This is obviously a huge concept with multiple resources. A good starting place might be the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*'s article on Justice (Miller 2017).

justice model we subscribe to.[19] The "bad" label tells us what the person is, in a very black and white way. There aren't gray areas or spaces for redemption in this language. I recall a conversation I had a couple years ago while hanging out with my nephew, Andy,[20] who was about 5 years old at the time. Andy wanted to play with some figures he had and have them participate in an epic battle that spanned across three rooms within the house. Our conversation went something like this:

Andy: You're the bad guy and I'm the good guy and . . . (insert other instructions about how to use my weapons, etc.).

Me: Ok, what if my guy decides he wants to make some different choices and he helps the good guy out?

Andy: He tricks the good guy by helping him?

Me: No, he decides he wants to do good things and help him.

Andy: No, he can't, he's the bad guy.

I had several iterations of this conversation with my nephew that day, exploring whether there was some magical phrase that could help him see an alternate world in which this plastic toy was not evil—but nothing worked. If I did anything that day, it was to convince Andy that his aunt couldn't understand some necessary fundamentals for fun play dates. I don't blame Andy; I was socialized the same way. The logic seems so simple and irrefutable: bad things are done by bad people; bad people can't be good, because they're bad. And what do you do with bad people? Well, they have to go away to jails and prisons, or to their own bad communities that are far away from the good people. Or they have to die. And like the bad guys of our youth, there doesn't seem to be a clear path for becoming a good guy most of the time. Whether and how someone can become a "good guy," or just otherwise repair a harm and rejoin a community, has a lot to do with what kind of justice model you live within and what's dominant in your culture. Justice theories cover a lot of

19 Additionally, the gendered "guy" is almost always included with the "bad." Perhaps this is a carryover from using a male convention to refer to all people. However, I think the more likely explanation is that it has been predominantly men who have been the main characters in our pop cultural stories and primarily male characters who push the narratives and plot lines along in movies, books, television shows, etc.

20 Not his real name.

territory. For our purposes, we'll just be looking at what justice models have to tell us about how to respond to harm and what kinds of consequences one might expect from their actions. And to do this, we're just going to stick with examining three of these models: retributive, transformative, and restorative.

RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

We'll start with retributive justice because I think it might be easiest to examine what's most familiar. Our justice model in the United States is primarily a retributive model mixed with some deterrence and an inconsistent dash of rehabilitation.[21] Under this model, the main task of a justice system is to correct an imbalance that occurred due to a harm or an offense.

When we think about our official justice system, the image that often comes to mind is a statue of blind justice: a woman, blindfolded, and holding scales. These scales are meant to represent some universal balance that exists. If everything is equal and no one is doing any harm or committing any crime, then the scales are balanced. When a wrong is done, however, the scales are tipped, and it's the task of the justice system to correct that imbalance through punishment or retribution. A punishment, but a punishment with caveats: it should be proportional to the harm that occurred, limited in scope (e.g. the punishment doesn't go on forever or extend to family members of the person who commited a crime), and impersonal (e.g. the punishment isn't delivered by people who were directly impacted by a crime). These parameters around punishment are meant to create a safe container for dealing with harm and caution people operating within these systems against acting out of vengeance.

Even though this is the model of justice folks in the United States are most familiar with, let's walk through an example to get it out of the abstract.

> Karl and Jon are in a bowling club together. During bowling one night, and after many beers, they got into a heated argument. They were kicked out of the bowling alley but continued to argue in the parking

21 For example, if I go to court for driving while intoxicated, I'll likely be made to pay a fine (retribution: a fine is a punishment for my behavior), the fine is also steep enough that it's meant to keep me from doing the same action again (deterrence), and my fine may be lowered if I seek counseling or help for alcohol use (rehabilitation).

lot. At a certain point, Karl threw his bowling ball at Jon, who dodged out of the way, causing the ball to hit another person's car and cause some damage. The person whose car was hit became furious and called the police. For simplicity, in a retributive model we can imagine this would mean Karl will be punished for damaging someone's property and potentially for causing a disturbance and loss of resources (in terms of time and effort) on the part of the bowling alley owner. Probably, he'll end up paying fines, maybe he'll also spend time in jail. The fines would likely cover some repair costs for the person's car but would also be paying court fees. The punishment would be negotiated either through lawyers or through a court process.

Retributive justice is intended to appeal to our sense of fairness while also being a pretty big improvement from a system based only on revenge. It's also meant to be equitable by giving everyone access to the same information (laws) about what a punishment will be for certain behaviors and then applying them equally. This is part of the attitude behind the phrase, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime." Implied in this statement is that people know what the punishment will be (*X* amount of time) so if they commit a crime or cause harm, they are essentially choosing to be punished.

As you've likely witnessed first-hand in your own life or are guessing at based on this limited explanation of retributive justice, there are some pretty major flaws with this model. One such flaw has to do with the idea that retributive justice is less cruel and more humane than "the alternative." This line of thinking assumes that without a retributive system in place, folks will automatically seek revenge. Foregoing a retributive model doesn't have to mean vengeance or chaos all the time, but it would mean a system that's not based on punishment. Additionally, and unfortunately, there are plenty of statistics and studies documenting the cruel and inhumane treatment of people who are punished within the retributive system we've got currently.[22] It's also abundantly clear that our current

22 For more information about prison systems and their toll on the people in them and communities around them, check out the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, "Prison Conditions" and The Marshall Project listed in the resources

retributive systems are not actually transparent and equitable. There are huge disparities in the types of prison sentences given for the same or very similar crimes, disparities in the treatment of folks who are incarcerated, and the types of crimes receiving punishment at all. Furthermore, while state and federal laws regarding crime and punishment are certainly not hidden or secretive, accessing them is difficult for many people depending on their English reading comprehension level, access to the internet, or ability to seek out and pay for legal counsel, to name just a few.

Retributive justice is problematic in other ways as well. It requires people to first believe there is some universal balance that is thrown off by a harm, and that it must be restored. Where this balance actually exists is nebulous even in theory and downright confounding in practice. Take one of the simplest and oldest thought experiments around justice: Imagine someone steals a loaf of bread to feed their starving children. The stealing is wrong and the starving is wrong and in a retributive system both wrongs, theoretically, would need to be corrected. However, the scale metaphor fails to give us enough information or nuance to deal with multiple wrongs at one time. And once it's the standard, retributive justice only actually deals with crimes, often at the interpersonal level. It rarely supports a framework for addressing larger social injustices. The system can tell us who should be punished for stealing the bread, but it doesn't know who should be punished for children starving due to poverty.

This last point leaves us with the biggest of all problems with retributive models. Punishment does not make things tangibly better for any stakeholder. Even if this system had an answer for who should be punished for the starving children, how would the punishment materially help the children? It is true that in many instances the punishments for crimes under this system are meant to materially help the individuals that have been harmed. But since the main task of this sort of system is to rebalance rather than repair, it does not consistently help any of the individuals impacted by a harm.

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section.

Deterrence

While not strictly part of retributive justice, deterrence (or beliefs about deterrence) play an important role in the way we think of justice systems working in the United States. Deterrence is the notion that performing, or promising to perform, a particular action by one party (this could be an individual or a state) will directly stop or pause the actions of another party. Usually the deterrence strategy is based on the idea that the second party will be fearful of the first party's action. Here are some examples:

Example A: Inside some convenience stores there are signs that read, "Shoplifters will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law." One party, the convenience store owner, is promising to perform a particular action, prosecution and punishment, to a second party, potential shoplifters. The convenience store owners are hoping that fear of prosecution and punishment will prevent shoplifting at their stores.

Example B: Another popular example is on the global political conflict scale with respect to nuclear weapons. A nuclear deterrence plan typically involves one state actor demonstrating in some way that they have nuclear weapons and can greatly harm huge portions of a country, thus hoping to incur enough fear in other state actors to deter them from harming the first state.

Deterrence strategies are also used with actual shows of force through punishment, not just threats of force. The purpose of the punishment in these instances is to prevent future offenses or harms from both the individual that is being punished for causing harm as well as community members or others witnessing the punishment in some way. The phrases "make an example of him" or "do this to send a message" are examples of a deterrence mindset.

TRANSFORMATIVE AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: QUESTIONING PUNISHMENT

Retributive justice and deterrence models go together like peanut butter and jelly, and people rarely think of them separately. Retributive systems think of punishment as its own intrinsic good; the punishment itself helps to correct a harm (through scale balancing). Deterrence systems think of punishment instrumentally; punishment is useful because it can help keep or establish peace or the absence of harm.

There are, however, systems of justice that imagine a world without punishment. At their best, these systems are high in accountability and consequences for actions, but do not conflate the two with punishment. Let's explore the two that are most often cited: transformative and restorative justice.

Transformative Justice (TJ)

Depending on who you talk to, transformative and restorative justice are either quite different or not very different at all. There's quite a lot of debate about that and, while there are a lot of overlapping concerns, they are distinct enough, at least in most iterations I've come across, to warrant separate explanations.[23]

TJ seeks to critically examine and address the social contexts that allowed, or even promoted, the occurrence of a harm. It looks for structural and systemic ways in which harm and injustice manifest and works to address them even while working through individual and interpersonal harms. It places a strong emphasis on community accountability and encourages this accountability to take place without the use of state-sanctioned authorities, specifically the police and court systems.[24]

TJ work has largely come out of grassroots efforts at addressing violence, especially in communities that are targeted

23 For an interesting discussion of current restorative justice iterations in comparison to TJ, check out *Transformative Justice in the Age of #DefundPolice* from the Barnard Center for Research on Women (see resources section for link).

24 There are a number of resources on TJ at the back of the book but I especially recommend starting with the book *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020).

for oppression, such as LGBTQIA, BIPOC, disabled folks, and folks at risk of deportation. Because these groups are so often harmed by the criminal justice system, activists in these communities seek to create ways to address harms that do not involve further danger and harm. In practice, TJ can take many shapes, from circle processes to group trainings on intervention strategies.

If we think back to our earlier scenario with Karl and Jon at the bowling alley, how might a TJ approach look in the aftermath of their fight? One of the first things we'll notice when trying to take a TJ lens is that we need more information about the contexts of the people involved as well as the bowling alley and the role it plays in the community and in the lives of the people involved with the fight. We'd need to know what the argument was about, more information about the identities of the folks involved, what role those identities were playing in the argument, and more. TJ facilitators would likely want to help everyone to get and stay as safe as possible and then to talk through what happened, providing clarity around what would help address any systemic issues that were at play, as well as helping Karl and Jon stay in community without involving the police or perpetuating more harm themselves.

Restorative Justice[25] (RJ)

Like transformative justice, restorative justice seeks to examine the context that led to a harm within a community while working within the community to make it right. The difference lies in a seemingly narrower scope and practice, though there are certainly many RJ practitioners and theorists who apply it in broader contexts. RJ is often described relative to retributive justice. It argues that when a harm occurs there are actual people and communities that have suffered and it is the job of a

25 It's often noted that modern restorative justice has its roots in Indigenous cultures. While this is true, it's oversimplified and inaccurate to group "Indigenous teachings" as a single category and there are a variety of references and influences for current RJ iterations. The Cree and Ojibway First Nations in Ontario, Canada as well as the Maori of New Zealand have had significant influence in modern (1970s and on) writing and practices of RJ in the United States and New Zealand. Similar practices have also been expressed in other locales, including Gacaca in Rwanda and Mato Oput in Uganda. This is not meant in any way as an extensive list but rather just reflects my own limited knowledge.

justice system to facilitate the fixing or repairing of what was damaged. This might include the repair of tangible objects that have been harmed/broken as well as repairing relationships that were harmed.

Like TJ, RJ can take many forms but is most classically recognized with a restorative conference or circle. Typically, a facilitator (or two) will meet with participants of the circle prior to the meeting to hear from them about what happened and how they were impacted. Sometimes other folks in their community or loved ones who can speak to the impact of the harm are invited to the conference as well. There is a lot of variation in the specifics of a restorative conference, but in general, the facilitator will ask questions aimed at getting at what happened, who was impacted and how, and what can be done to make it right by addressing all stakeholders' needs.

One could imagine that restorative justice practices fall within a transformative justice model. I've also heard folks argue the opposite is true. My point here is not to get in the weeds around processes or decide how they are situated in relation to the other. Rather, I'd like to compare the conceptions of justice present in these "alternative" justice models to the retributive model most of us are familiar with so that we can start to look at how they show up in our everyday conflicts and conceptions of what's right and wrong.

Key Questions	Retributive Justice	RJ and/or TJ
Who is centered in the process?	The State, representing the people of a community, state, or country	Stakeholders involved in the harm, especially victims (when there is a clear victim)
Who makes decisions about what happens?	Police, lawyers, judges, and jurors	Stakeholders and community members. People impacted by the harm and by potential decisions.
What is the job of the justice system?	To figure what was done, who will be punished, and what the punishment will be	To facilitate the correction of harms, repairing of relationships, and plans for reducing or eliminating similar harms in the future.

One of the key differences in these models is the involvement of harmed stakeholders in the accountability process. In a simplistic version of a harm where there is a clear victim and offender, victims have little to no voice in an accountability process past the initial reporting of a crime, and perhaps, testifying in a trial.[26] Victims, and often those closest with them, want to know critical questions such as, "Why did this happen? Why me? What were you thinking?" And almost none of these inquiries are satisfied in a retributive model. Furthermore, punishment often does little or nothing to materially help or support victims after a harm. While restitutions paid for damages done might help monetarily, there may be, and typically are, other ways an offender could help correct the problems caused by their actions that retributive models' lack of flexibility and creativity can't address. Almost all of us that have suffered from a harm, whether or not it went through a criminal justice process, have longed for a different kind of resolution and more accountability.

The mental models we have about justice shape our beliefs about fair outcomes in conflicts. In a retributive model, you might have the mindset that if you've been wronged, the other person needs to be punished to pay for what they did. In a transformative model, you might believe the person who wronged you needs to help fix the problem they caused or contributed to.

Retributive models have a big emphasis on an outside authority deciding who the victims and the perpetrators are in order to know who needs to be punished. Restorative and transformative models rely on stakeholders who don't necessarily have structural authority to help determine what should happen after a conflict. Because most of us are operating from a retributive model, it can be really hard to figure out what to do if we don't have an outside authority for our conflict because a) we often don't have a lot of training or ideas on how to handle conflicts and b) we've been raised to think that bad conflicts have to be settled by authorities. So we try to rely on any authorities we can get a hold of, like Human Resources or the cops.

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26 Victims can also be harmed by and arrested for not testifying in trials (Cotton 2017).

For the rest of this book, we'll mostly look at ways to start handling our own conflicts and help others handle theirs, without reaching for authorities that often cause more harm than good. It's a good idea to understand some of the frameworks we have around justice and keep them in mind as we reflect on our own conflicts and struggles.

Part Two: Third-Party Conflict Transformation

Chapter Five:
HELPING EACH OTHER IN CONFLICT: HOW TO BE A GOOD THIRD PARTY

Have you ever had a conflict and *not* talked to someone else about it? We almost always talk with at least one other person about our struggles. It's true for us, it's true for our friends and loved ones, and it's true of the folks we are in conflict with. How much do we impact others when we talk with them about their conflicts? Does it matter what we say? Does it matter how we respond? Some communication practices have robust bodies of evidence behind them to answer a resounding "yes." Research on Motivational Interviewing (MI)[27] has found that the words someone says—even the order in which they say those words—can impact whether or not someone who is ambivalent will make a change or not.[28] But we don't need research papers to know that how we show up for people makes a difference.

If my friend Casey comes to talk with me about a mutual friend they've got a disagreement with, how I respond will co-create the narrative Casey will have about the conflict. If I respond in anger at the mutual friend, or tell Casey I think they're blowing it out of proportion, or if I don't even really pay attention when they're talking, or use it as an opportunity to talk about all my problems with this friend—all of these responses, and many more, will impact how Casey will respond and move forward in the conflict. Not only that, it will impact

27 MI is an evidence-based collaborative communication style for talking with people about ambivalence and change. Though it wasn't specifically designed for use in these contexts, I find many of MI's tools to be extremely helpful in working through conflicts.

28 For more on Motivational Interviewing and associated research, check out *Motivational Interviewing (3rd ed)* (Miller and Rollnick 2013).

how I think of this friend and how I move forward as well. I can't make changes or solve conflicts *for* people (nor do I want to) but the way that I show up for folks who are talking about these things really does matter and can make a difference, both negatively and positively.

So, thinking we don't matter or what we say doesn't matter is one of the ways in which we end up hindering others when they're conflicted. Another belief that might block us from helping is the fear that we're not going to do it right. We worry we don't have enough training, or skills, and that we're going to mess it up. And while I do think there are some common pitfalls that are good to avoid, most of us are far more skilled in conflict than we give ourselves credit for. You don't need to be perfect to do this work. And the best part is, you get better the more you practice.

THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION IS ALL AROUND YOU

Third party intervention is when a person outside of a conflict between two people (or two groups) performs an action to interrupt, and hopefully transform, the conflict between the two parties. This intervention is so common, we might not even notice how often we actually rely on folks to provide this service. Here are some examples:

- A parent breaking up a fight over a toy between two siblings
- One sibling talking to another sibling and parent who are in a dispute
- A co-worker helping another co-worker craft an email to someone they're upset with
- A friend talking with their friend about a conflict with their partner over household tasks

In each of these examples, the third party could both escalate and de-escalate the conflict. Let's take another look:

A parent breaking up a fight over a toy between two siblings:

- Escalate: The parent could tell the siblings to "fight it out" or tell one of them to "stop being such a baby."

- De-escalate: The parent could hold onto the toy for a few minutes while helping to negotiate a sharing plan.

One sibling talking to another sibling and parent who are in a dispute:

- Escalate: The third party sibling could jump on the anger bandwagon with the other sibling and offer more and more examples of how the parent is bad, a jerk, etc.
- De-escalate: The third party sibling could listen carefully and help both parties take a break from their conflict and gain perspective.

A co-worker helping another coworker craft an email to someone they're upset with:

- Escalate: The third party coworker could help them craft an exquisitely passive aggressive email that helps them get their point across but will almost assuredly not be taken well by the recipient.
- De-escalate: The third party coworker could encourage them to wait until they're less angry about the situation, listen empathetically about what's going on, and help them figure out a way to communicate that will help ease tensions while getting the problem solved.

A friend talking with their friend about a conflict with their partner over household tasks:

- Escalate: The third party friend could offer suggestions for "burns" or smart-but-mean, things to say back to their partner about their contributions to household chores.
- De-escalate: The third party friend could listen and ask about what's worked in the past for this couple when they've been in conflict.

Each of us has likely been on the receiving end of both types of third party interventions. We've had "help" that wasn't help at all, or maybe it felt like help in the moment but really just increased our anger and discontent. And we've had interventions that have soothed our nerves, helped us feel understood, and

prepared us to move forward wisely and peacefully.[29] We've also had help that falls on a spectrum somewhere in between. The importance of our role as third party interveners in our social spheres almost can't be overstated, though it often goes unnoticed. This kind of informal mediation gets utilized way more than actual formal mediation, restorative circles, and transformative justice processes. So let's give ourselves some credit for being the vital metaphorical lifeblood that helps keep actual blood from spilling on a day to day basis.

Being naturally good at something doesn't mean we can't practice and improve though, right? And maybe you're not feeling very naturally skilled and could use some tips, pointers, and practice. These next chapters are designed to give us a skill and confidence boost on some of the most basic and important conflict transforming skills.

29 I'm not at all advocating for never getting angry or only walking through our conflicts with total calmness. Anger can be a powerful teacher and tool. It can help us understand what we care about and give us energy to make important changes. Rather, I want us to pay attention to when we feel our anger or indignation getting spun up and escalated without an outlet for transforming a conflict and when we feel ourselves turning others into irredeemable enemies.

Chapter Six:
LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

When you think of a good listener, who springs to mind? What did they do and how did you know they were listening? Do you demonstrate these behaviors when you're listening? The qualities of good listening can be tricky to describe, even though most of us are confident that we know it when we see it. If we were to generate a list, we'd likely come up with a lot of what it's *not*. Good listening is not: looking at our phone, breaking eye contact at weird times, interrupting to tell a non-sequitur story (or something about ourselves), disagreeing and arguing, or making judgmental facial expressions. Instead, good listening might look like: being present and focused on the speaker, making movements with the face and head that show engagement (like a head nod), interrupting with small joining language such as "yeah" and "right" and "ok." This is a non-exhaustive list but we can see pretty clearly that what we mean by "listening" actually covers way more than our auditory senses; it's more like a whole body experience. When we're talking with someone, we're not just focused on ourselves and our speech. We're also paying attention to what's going on with the receiver of our speech, taking small, unconscious, and intuitive measurements of how much they're *trying* to understand us.

Listening is one of the only activities where your effort is truly the most prized attribute you can bring to the table. And even though effort is not the only part of listening, if you're bringing it, the rest of listening is relatively easy. People have a basic need to be understood and so it really matters to us when we notice others putting in an effort to understand us.[30] It tells

30 We might have grown up learning about basic needs such as food, water, shelter. But, as is probably not surprising to you, it turns out there are tons of other needs that we have and we tend to struggle if we don't have them. Abraham Maslow is typically credited for the theory of human needs in social contexts. However, he learned and developed large aspects of this theory from the Siksika people. For an enlightening and informative look at this occurrence, I highly recommend the article, "Could the Blackfoot Wisdom that Inspired Maslow Guide us Now?" (Ravilochan 2021) linked in the bibliography.

us that we matter to the person listening, that we're connected and in community, and that we're not alone. Signaling this kind of stuff is not just nice because it feels good—our survival is linked to being in community with others; humans are poor at surviving without other humans. If we feel alone, isolated, ostracized, and like we don't matter to individuals and groups, it threatens our whole sense of survival. As long as you trust that someone is attempting that effort to understand you, you are able to relax with the knowledge that at least some of your basic needs are being met.

In the rest of this section I'll discuss some other strategies that I find really valuable in being a good third party, but for all of them the underlying key to success is our showing up and putting in the effort to understand. In the next few paragraphs, I'll talk a little bit about what can get in the way of our efforts to be there for others: problem solving, unsolicited advice giving (UAG), and "buts."

HOW TO LISTEN WITHOUT PROBLEM SOLVING

Unwanted problem solving is a cliché of relationship dynamics; a jokey footnote of what-not-to-do, usually described in heteronormative romantic relationships but certainly not limited to them. And it's a cliché for a reason! It's a really common way of responding when someone talks to us about a problem. Unfortunately, it's very rarely what the person with the problem wants and it can even drive a wedge between you and the speaker, causing them to feel more alone and less understood (the opposite of what we're going for). It's tough to turn off this problem solving mode, though, and maybe we're not sure what to say or do instead of offering advice or trying to "fix it" for people. Before we look at what we might do instead of offering advice, let's first look at why we're so driven to offer it in the first place and why it can be problematic.

Problem Solving: Why am I like this?

For most of us, problem solving comes from a good place. We have some empathy for the person talking and we imagine what we think will help them out. We assume the other person hasn't

already thought of this or they would have done it and they haven't done it or they would have told us. I mean, what kind of monster has a solution for someone's problem and keeps it to themselves? We naturally want to help others, some even argue that a basic human need is to contribute to others and that desire to help gets triggered when we listen to someone's problem and have an idea for a solution. The urge to share our ideas can feel almost compulsive. One psychologist called this urge "the righting reflex." It's reflexive because of how automatically advice-giving and course correction seem to come out of our mouths upon hearing another's problem.

Another contributing factor to our impulse to problem-solve is that we are positively activated by novelty. Our dopamine systems get triggered into a satisfying cascade when we're presented with a problem that seems solvable.[31] And let's face it, other people's problems almost always seem solvable to us. It seems wanting to problem-solve or advice-give is pretty natural and normal, so what's the big deal? There may, in fact, be no problem with problem-solving or advice-giving *so long as that's what the person actually wants!* The trouble is, most of the time, that's not actually what the speaker is looking for.

THE ADVICE PROBLEM

There are probably many ways in which giving unsolicited advice can be problematic. Here, we'll focus on three: underestimating complexity, misidentifying what would help, and implied judgment.

Underestimating Complexity

Have you ever quickly described a problem you're having to someone and then spent the next five minutes fending off their suggestions because they don't understand the intricacies of the problem? And, on the other side of this, have you ever listened to a friend briefly describe a problem and quickly offered some suggestions that were met with "That won't work because . . ." or "I already tried that and . . ." Our problems are typically far more complex than we are able, or even want to, describe in a quick conversation. Like an iceberg, problems that seem simple, small,

31 For more on dopamine and our brains, I highly recommend the books Behave by Robert Sapolsky and *The Distracted Mind* by Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen (Sapolsky 2018) (Gazzaley and Rosen 2017).

and easy to navigate on the surface have a whole lot of mass beneath them. So, much like the Titanic captain miscalculating the size and need for adjustments with the infamous iceberg, our advice is a bad fit for the problem because it underestimates the complexity of the problem or conflict at hand.

Misidentifying What Would Help

We can see how if we're underestimating the complexity of a problem it would be easy to give advice that's a bad fit. But there's another way in which non-consensual advice giving can be a poor fit: when advice is not the kind of help the person wants or needs. This can be a bit like someone giving you food when you're thirsty and just want water. To stretch this metaphor further: imagine you haven't had anything to drink in days but you've had plenty of food. Your friend learns that you need some help getting something in your body and brings over their best cooking. But you don't want it, you just want water. You can appreciate the effort your friend put in to make the food and you're grateful that they've shown up for you in your time of need, but it's just not *what* you need.

This metaphor is different from what actually happens with advice-giving in at least one important way. It'd probably be pretty easy to say to your friend, "Chill with the food, I'm thirsty, just bring me something to drink!" Because we've grown up being able to identify the sensation of thirst and the need for liquids. With conflict though, as we've seen in earlier sections, we haven't all had the best, or even any, training on identifying and naming what is going on for us and what would be helpful. There are some folks you talk with who might be able to clearly say, right in the beginning of a conversation, something like, "I'm going to tell you something, but I just want you to listen. I don't need any help figuring it out." Many of us, though, might not be able to articulate that we don't want advice but we do want help. Or if we can articulate it, don't, because we worry the person will think we're rude or ungrateful and won't talk with us at all. And if it seems like there's a choice between tolerating unsolicited advice or not getting to talk with someone about the problem at all, then we'll choose the advice, like drawing moisture from food when you can't seem to get a drink.

Implied Judgment

One of the challenging and beautiful things about communication is how much is communicated through implication and shared understanding (we'll leave aside the question of how much is actually shared for now). We assume a lot in conversations as a shorthand to get to understand one another; it would be really arduous to communicate without this shorthand. When my friend talks with me about her dad, for example, she's relying on the shared history we have of talking about her relationship with her father so that she can just say, "So, I talked to my dad today," and I can immediately know from both her tone and our shared understanding that she's upset. These are the times when all that goes unsaid can be beautiful because it creates a flow of understanding between people. One of the many times it can be tricky, however, is when one person is noticing or guessing what is implied and the other is not. When we receive unsolicited problem solving from someone, what we might feel is implied is, "You can't figure this problem out on your own," or, "You don't understand what's best for you, but I do." In other words, we feel judged, even if that's not what the speaker was consciously thinking.

There's good reason the instruction "be nonjudgmental" is pretty ubiquitous in all kinds of professional fields as well as a frequent flier on group guidelines: it feels really crummy to be judged. Why is that and why do we judge? Some level of judgment is wired into our brains in order to help us discern what's going on in our environments and social spheres. We need to be able to tell the difference between who is our safe family group and who is a stranger from a very early age; this is a judgment. At this simple level, when we're judging people, we're sorting them into one of two categories: part of our group or not part of our group. But this natural discernment can turn from a sort of cautious, and even curious sorting, to self-righteous labeling as we grow older and more practiced at judgment. The judgments might extend from simply sorting people to actively labeling someone as good/bad, right/wrong, for me/against me, etc.

So that's an explanation (albeit an oversimplified one) of *why* we judge, but why is it that it feels so bad *to be* judged? Because if we're being judged as bad, not part of someone's

group, and as "enemy," it triggers some very deep and necessary evolutionary wiring in us. We need to be accepted, loved, and part of groups to survive, and every time we think that's not what's going on it sets off little alarm bells in us. While we might not feel scared by these alarm bells per se, at the very least, we don't like hearing them. Most of us tend to want to spend time with people that we feel unconditionally accepted and not judged by, in part because our nervous systems can just chill without all the alarm bells.

Implications are part of our sometimes beautiful, and sometimes horrible, shared understanding in communication; unsolicited advice feels like judgment because of what we imply when we give it. Our intention may not be to cause a feeling of judgment in the person talking with us, but that is often the impact of our words. Advice-giving and problem-solving triggers the judgment cascade because it usually implies either 1) You don't think the person can figure it out for themselves, or 2) You think the ideas or strategies they're sharing to address the problem are bad or wrong

If we can keep in mind that the primary benefit of having a good listener is a sense of being understood, then we can understand how unsolicited advice is counterproductive. In fact, not only are we likely to cause the person in conflict to feel less understood, we might also cause them to feel more alone and even harm our relationship with them.

Throughout this section, I've focused on *unsolicited* advice: problem solving and tip-giving that someone didn't ask for. There is definitely a place in third-party intervention and general communication with folks for helpful advice giving, but often (maybe even always) it's not helpful unless it's done with consent. Obviously, if someone asks you for your advice or what your ideas are for dealing with something, it's a-ok to offer those up.[32] Even so, proceed with caution. I've often found that people will ask for the opinions, advice, and suggestions of others when talking about tough topics (like conflict) in order to surface the judgments of others, rather than to actually get ideas. Many of

32 There's a great strategy for seeing if someone wants your advice or information called Elicit-Provide-Elicit and we'll get to that in a bit.

us just have so few experiences of people listening to us without forming opinions about what we should do, that, rather than wait or try to guess what the opinions are, we ask for them to be laid out early on so we can address them or just know what kind of listener we're dealing with.

Ultimately, it's a lot easier to withhold your advice, sound nonjudgmental, and demonstrate listening for understanding if you just genuinely are not judging. This requires humility and some reflection. It means I need to press pause on myself and hang out with my thoughts right before I offer unsolicited advice. How do I know what this person has tried? How do I know that what I'm going to offer isn't something they've tried? Have I heard from them about what is most important, what's worked, what they care most about? What has led me to believe I know what's best? To me, this isn't just a practice of humility, but an expression of truth. I don't know what would be best for another person in any particular situation and, while this doesn't preclude me from having good ideas about it, it's wise to remember that my perspective is limited and I'm not the sole owner of truth.

Breaking the Habit

I've found that most of us are really skilled at giving unsolicited advice and it can be hard to change the habit. One important step in altering this pattern is even noticing that we're doing it to begin with. Below are some phrases and behaviors to be aware of and avoid when working on curbing this impulse.

- Using sentence starters that sound something like one of these:
    - Have you thought about ____
    - Have you tried ____
    - Maybe you could ____
    - You should ____
    - What I would do is ___
    - I know you're upset (or some other emotion), but _____

- Giving knowing, judging looks—usually implying a reference to a past conversation you've had with the person about the topic at hand. For example, your friend Mia starts to tell you about the fight she got in with her mom that fits a pattern you've talked about before and you give her a look. The look communicates that you both know what you're about to say she should do because you've had this conversation many times.
- Asking a bunch of open ended questions that are leading to a particular strategy or idea you have, like, "What do you think about ____"

Trying to understand the person who is talking to you is one of the most effective strategies for third party intervention because feeling understood automatically de-escalates us. Feeling understood helps us relax and offers fertile ground for our own problem solving. We become more open to others' perspectives, empathy, and compassion—all of which can help us transform our conflict. Unsolicited advice giving does more for the (supposed) listener than it does for the speaker because it gives the illusion of empathy without actually providing it. In this next chapter, we'll look at what to do instead of offering advice and problem solving.

Chapter Seven: EMPATHY

Another word for understanding someone is "empathy." The term has become popular, and controversial even, in the last decade.[33] And it means different things for different people and depending on where and how they were trained. For instance, when I talk with social workers about empathy, they usually use it to describe a general sense of understanding and feeling with or for another person and this might differ from the definition in other fields, or folks trained in certain communication strategies like Nonviolent Communication (NVC).[34] Still others use "empathy" and "compassion" interchangeably. For our purposes, I'm going to use empathy to mean understanding and feeling with someone. Empathy could, and often does, happen totally in our heads, never making it to our words. However, empathy is only able to do its magic when the other person knows we have it for them, like when we express it with our body language and speech.

As mentioned in the last chapter, we might not be able to tell someone exactly how we know they're listening, but we know it when we see it. It's the same for empathy. We can tell as we're talking to someone if they're understanding us, judging us, or just spacing out.[35] There are clues we give off through micro-movements of our facial muscles, blink rate, tension in our shoulders, etc. and these clues are actually incredibly hard to mask or fake because we're not consciously aware of them. There are other reasons not to fake empathy, but this is a big one: we're bad at it. For the most part, in order to demonstrate empathy externally, we need to be feeling it internally.

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33 See the work of Tania Singer and Paul Bloom on the pitfalls of empathy along with the benefits of compassion, for example. (Singer and Bolz 2013) (Bloom 2018).

34 Nonviolent Communication is both a communication model and a theory for understanding human behavior originally developed by Marshall Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2015).

35 This is, of course, not the case for everyone. Folks who are neurotypical may not be as skilled at reading the facial expressions and body language of folks who are not and vice versa, for instance (Keating and Cook 2020).

Past a certain age, we mostly stop talking about playing pretend and using our imagination. But imagination is critical to planning for the future, all kinds of creative tasks, and empathy. We need to be able to *imagine being* the person we're trying to empathize with. We have to try to put ourselves in their shoes to be able to actually demonstrate good empathy.

Once, I was training a group made up primarily of therapists on communication practices, including empathy demonstrations. I asked the participants to each think of a non-work scenario in their lives where they felt annoyed, angry, or judgemental at someone. Then, we all sat in a circle and one volunteer would tell the group their scenario, another volunteer would role-play the "villain" of this person's conflict. Next, each person in the circle would take turns responding to the villain with a reflective statement (a kind of empathy demonstration that we'll get to in a bit).

Our first volunteer shared a story of a conflict she was having with a local lawmaker who was arguing with her about a law she was trying to get passed that she felt better protected the rights of children. I asked the volunteer to give us enough detail about the situation that we would be able to pretend to be the characters in her story. After two people took their turns trying to respond to the lawmaker, I realized my mistake. I didn't give participants the instruction to imagine actually being the lawmaker. I paused the activity and asked that we all close our eyes and imagine being this lawmaker. I asked the person who was in conflict with us to describe what's going on for him as she's imagining she is him. She told us, "I'm annoyed with this law, I want it passed too but it's not going to happen and everytime this lady comes to talk to me about it I feel like she thinks I don't care about kids and that I'm a monster. I'm not, I'm just realistic. And I'm also busy and she acts like her issue is the only issue on my plate." Suddenly, we could all relate to this lawmaker. It didn't make the conflict go away, or change the importance of the law for our volunteer, but it did shift her ability to see his perspective which opened up other possibilities for her.[36] It also allowed our participants to understand this person better and put that understanding into words.

36 For instance, she could talk with the lawmaker in a way that assumed he cared about kids (rather than assuming he doesn't), talk with him about all the things he has on his plate and brainstorm ways to support him with making

DEMONSTRATING EMPATHY WITH OUR WORDS

My favorite instructions on empathy demonstrations are the simplest: just imagine what it is like to be the other person in this particular situation, and then put it into words. There's a wonderful book called *How to Talk so Little Kids will Listen: A Survival Guide to Life with Children Ages 2-7* by Joanna Faber and Julie King where they describe a simple practice for giving understanding/empathy to young children when they're angry or upset. They give us a three-step process for, "the next time your kid says something negative and inflammatory":

1) *Grit your teeth and resist the urge to immediately contradict them!*
2) *Think about the emotion they are feeling*
3) *Name the emotion and put it in a sentence*

And this strategy really isn't just limited to when someone says something negative or inflammatory. I love this practice because its simple instructions are widely applicable in a variety of situations and easy to remember.

Exercise:
Let's try this strategy out right now! Think of a situation someone has told you about lately where they were upset and imagine yourself using this strategy. What would you say? How do you think the other person might respond?

REFLECTIVE STATEMENTS

As mentioned above, reflective statements are the bread and butter of mediation and a lot of other conflict practices, they're also prevalent in therapeutic communication. Nurses, doctors, social workers, psychologists, and just about any other "helping" professional you can think of, has probably been trained in reflective statements at one point or another. And with good reason! They're really effective at not only convincing someone

time for this law, listen to other strategies he has for supporting children outside of the law being proposed, etc

that you're trying to understand them; they're also excellent at making sure you *actually do* understand.

In its simplest form, reflection is a good description of what is happening with this practice. You are essentially acting as a verbal mirror for what someone has said to you. Here are some examples involving you and your friend Jem:

Jem: I'm so annoyed, I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: You spilled coffee all over yourself and now you're going to be late!

Jem: I just finished the last of the chocolate and now I'm out!

You: You finished the chocolate and now there's no more!

Not much is happening here and if we were Jem, we might think our friend was replaced by a robot. I like to think of these simple reflections as the salt of good communication—not a great ingredient by itself, but it's pretty central to building up good flavor.

Parroting back at least some of what someone has said can be really helpful especially in two key examples: 1) when someone is really escalated or upset and 2) when someone is talking for a long time. When we're really upset we're in a high alert state, looking for danger and threats, including being misunderstood or misperceived and we might feel like everything is against us. Hearing someone say what we've said can help us feel less on alert and stop scanning the environment for threats, even if we're still upset about something. When someone is telling a longer story or talking for a good bit of time, small, simple reflections let them know that you're still hanging in there, still listening, like saying "mmhmm" or "yeah." Less simple and more complex reflective statements become valuable in most other circumstances.

Complex Reflections[37]

If simple reflections are like looking in a mirror, complex reflections are like looking in a magical X-ray mirror that shows you not just what you look like but also some of what's going

37 For more examples of complex reflections, check out Motivational Interviewing : Helping People Change (3rd ed) (Miller and Rollnick 2013).

on internally. A complex reflection gives back to the speaker a little more than what they actually said, usually reflecting some content and a feeling. It's not unusual to be listening to someone and have a pretty good guess as to what they're feeling but never actually hear them say a feeling/emotion word. Just like in our imagination/empathy strategy, we're making a guess about what's going on for the person and putting it into words. Let's return to our friend Jem for another example:

Jem: I'm so annoyed, I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: Ugh! Frustrating morning! It sucks to have to go to a meeting when you're not feeling at your best.

This is different from a simple reflection because we're adding or guessing at some meaning—we're extrapolating based on what Jem has told us. There could be many other things going on here besides the coffee and the meeting and we don't know which may be bugging her the most. For instance, maybe the meeting includes people that she's having a tough time with, maybe the coffee spilled on a hand-me-down shirt from her mom that died, maybe she just hates being late. If you know your friend well, you're likely to be more accurate in your guess, but it's still a guess.

TIPS FOR REFLECTIONS

I think of reflections as a high risk and high reward communication strategy. They're risky because when they're not done well they can sound clunky and inauthentic; high reward because when we stick the landing, they can really help the speaker out and increase their sense that you're understanding them. They're also deceptively easy. Usually, when I'm workshopping reflections with folks, the instruction goes quickly and everyone thinks they have it, but when we're put in pairs and small groups we struggle to say something to the speaker that sounds like our natural voice and often what comes out of our mouths are questions instead of reflections. Here are some of my favorite tips for communicating some good reflections:

Don't Try to *Sound* Like You Understand, Just Actually Try to Understand

Sometimes we get so focused on which words we're choosing that we miss the whole point. The point of reflections is not to say the perfect thing back, it's to actually understand what the speaker is saying and communicate that understanding to them. So let go of saying the perfect thing and just try to really be with the person speaking and imagine what's going on for them. If you let go of your responses and just stay present with the speaker, you're more likely to find your own natural voice when it's your turn to say something.

Make It a Statement, Not a Question

Research done in Motivational Interviewing (MI) has shown pretty powerfully over the years that stating a reflection vs. asking a reflective question helps the speaker feel more connected to the listener.[38] Let's look at an example again with Jem:

Jem: I'm so annoyed, I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: Are you frustrated because you're not feeling your best and now you have to go a

meeting you don't want to go to?

The question feels a little superfluous, right? Now Jem has to worry about answering a question vs. just being able to go on with talking about how she's doing and what she wants to do next. When I'm working with folks on this one, I've often heard the concern that people will be angry with them if they reflect in this way, that the speaker will say something like, "I'm not frustrated! How do you know what I feel!?" The risk is there for sure; however, I think it's a lower risk than we think and has more to do with our own desire to not be wrong than it does with how the speaker will receive our reflection. The most common complaint I hear from people who get the questions instead of statement reflections is that the listener sounds

38 See Building Motivational Interviewing Skills: A Practitioner Workbook (Rosengren 2018) and Motivational Interviewing : Helping People Change (Miller and Rollnick 2013)

like they're talking to them like a therapist[39] or trying some technique on them instead of just listening.

Tone Down the Prefaces

Many folks use prefaces to start off reflections and I've found they can have the same kind of impact on the listener as using questions instead of statements. Here are the two I hear most often:

- It sounds like . . .
- What I hear you saying is . . .

I don't think there's anything intrinsically wrong or bad about using these, but I suggest proceeding with caution. They don't add any meaning to the reflection you're about to say and again, I think this is the reflection version of covering our own bums and worrying more about ourselves than the listener. Let's go back to our friend, Jem:

Jem: I'm so annoyed! I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: It sounds like you're really frustrated with your morning!

vs.

Jem: I'm so annoyed, I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: You're really frustrated with your morning!

The only thing I'm doing differently in the first example is making it explicit that what I'm about to say is my own interpretation of what Jem is saying, *which Jem already knows!* By making our separation more explicit, I'm subtly drawing attention to myself and away from Jem. We could be wrong about our guess whether we say it as a question, preface it with "it sounds like," or just say it plainly. Using the questioning and prefacing strategies doesn't protect us from being incorrect. I find that when I let go of worrying about being right or getting it perfect, I'm more available for understanding what's going

39 I mean no disrespect to therapists here. In my work I've found that many folks have a high tolerance for certain communication styles in a clinical relationship that they do not have in an interpersonal relationship, and when they hear these therapeutic styles come out in regular communication it can cause some anger or disruption in the conversation.

on with the speaker and they'll appreciate that much more than some attempt at a perfect sounding response.[40]

Pay Attention to *All* the Responses from the Speaker

Most of the time, we can tell if we got our empathic guesses or reflective statements right by watching the reaction of the speaker. For example, while sitting in their doctor's office, it's really common for people to agree to treatments, usually medications, that, after leaving, they will never take.[41] Why do doctors prescribe something the patient has no intention of taking? At least part of the answer to this is that the doctors aren't paying attention to nonverbal cues from the patient when they're discussing treatment options.[42] If they did, they might see the patient has hesitation or body language that says "no," even if they agree to get a prescription filled. We can often tell by watching our friends', and others', reactions to our reflections if we've got it right. We might notice a softening of their face or relaxing of their shoulders, for instance. Or, they may become more animated and excited as they feel understood, earning you an exuberant "yes, and" as they continue to talk. Sometimes people might be hesitant to correct our reflections (no matter how they're phrased) so it's a good idea to pay attention and adjust our guesses. Let's go back to Jem:

Jem: I'm so annoyed, I just spilled coffee all over myself and now I'm going to be late to this dumb meeting!

You: Oh no! You spilled your coffee! You probably needed it to make it through this

meeting!

Watching Jem after this reflection you notice her shoulders seem just as tense if not

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40 An exception to avoiding a preface or a question when reflecting is when you're genuinely confused.

41 It is estimated that about 20-30% of medications prescribed are never taken, and that perhaps it's closer to 50% not taken for chronic illnesses (Brody 2017).

42 Another reason is that there is a power imbalance in this relationship and the patient might not feel they have the power to say "no." I'm indebted to my teacher Miki Kashtan for this insight who has instructed that, "If someone doesn't have the power to say 'no' to you, then you don't know what their 'yes' means."

more tense and she is busying herself with her bag, not making eye contact anymore.

Once you notice this body language in Jem, you might have a clue that your reflection didn't quite hit the mark (maybe it's not about the coffee and you made that the focus, for example). Even if Jem says something like, "Yeah, I guess."[43]

It's pretty easy to empathize with Jem and her situation. After all, I don't like spilling coffee on myself and, while I'm not a particularly timely person, I don't love being late. And most of all, I really hate dumb meetings. So, it's not a big leap for me to imagine how Jem might be feeling, to try to see things from her perspective and put it into words. Things get more complicated when we don't agree with the person or we don't easily see things from their perspective. This next chapter is meant to give us some tips and tricks for getting through some of these more challenging interactions.

43 At this point, I might be more willing to ask a question to clarify vs. using another reflective statement.

Chapter Eight:
CARING FOR ALL: 3RD PARTY INTERVENTION WHEN YOU DISAGREE

When we're listening and being a third party intervener to someone's conflict, it can sometimes be hard to figure out what the right thing to do is: Should we take sides? Should we try to get the speaker to understand the other person's perspective? Do we just straight up disagree with what the person is saying and think they're wrong, and if so, what then? When someone is just upset at an inner conflict or mad at an inanimate object (like Jem and her spilled coffee), we don't need to worry about whether or not we agree with them. But what about when your brother is talking about a political argument he got into with your mom, only you think your mom is right and you find your brother's political views abhorrent? Can we still be a good third party-intervener? Should we opt out? Should we start our own conflict? I don't have a formulaic response for these times because I think the answer is almost always, "it depends."

It depends on the topic, your relationship with the speaker, your privilege, your own personal experiences, your trauma history and background, your degree of physical and psychological safety . . . the list goes on and on. For myself, if I'm not at risk and I have the capacity, then I try to engage and be a caring third-party, even if I'm stressed or triggered by the conflict. I still have to check in with myself, maintain safety and boundaries, and stop or exit the interaction if I cease having safe capacity to help. But I feel very called to the work of conflict transformation, which for me means moving into uncomfortable spaces and hanging with the people there to make change, even if I really disagree with their views. There are things about my own life experience and privileges that make this a safer task for me than for some of my friends. I also fully respect and honor

the choice *not* to enter into some of these conversations and conflicts.

I do want to encourage other white folks to consider taking on more risk and discomfort in these conflicts, however, especially if you're left-leaning and come from a right-wing family or community. I've talked with many white folks on the left who no longer talk with their family members because they're racist, sexist, conservative, voted for Trump, or something else we might find morally repugnant. I also know that many of us grew up in these racist, sexist, conservative households and carry our own traumas from the patriarchy and other systems of oppression. A concern I carry is that cutting these folks off from *us* cuts them off from some possibility of transformation. Those of us who grew up in and around these situations have critical insights and understanding of what will help make change. If we cut off the people we disagree with, who will help them understand other perspectives and transform? If my brother is racist, and I cut him off from my life because of this, he doesn't stop being racist, he just has one less person in his life explaining how his racist actions cause harm. In small communities, shame through the use of ostracization and shunning, *might* be effective in changing someone's behaviors. However, that's rarely what's happening when we cut off a family member since they are still able to meet their needs for relationship and community from other people that share their views.

I also acknowledge that it is hard work staying in a relationship, or even just communicating, with someone whose views are so opposed to your own. We might feel embarrassment, shame, frustration, etc. We might worry that their views and actions reflect poorly on us. And unfortunately, it might just not be safe enough for us to do that work. There are no easy answers. All that being said, here are some of my strategies for navigating these types of conflicts as a third-party.

NEUTRALITY IS NOT AN OPTION

I grew up with two critical misconceptions around the word "neutrality" that I want to unpack here because they are particularly important when we're intervening in conflicts.

The first myth I learned was that neutrality is possible. From an early age we are drilled with the notions of Western science's supremacy in all areas of knowledge. Part of this conceptualization is the centrality and importance of the scientist, who we are taught to view as a neutral observer of nature, phenomena, and experiments. In order to be this neutral observer, the scientist is supposed to possess and exhibit certain qualities, like being dispassionate, rational, and objective. They're not supposed to have a feeling, opinion, or stake in any portion of what they are studying. When we're young, at least in much of the United States, we're taught that neutrality with science means non-intervention and that we're able to not intervene by being rational, objective, and emotionless. And if we think back to some earlier discussions in this book, we might remember the problems with believing our emotions aren't welcome or useful. It is beyond both the scope of this book and my own areas of knowledge to write at too much length about how and why this conception of the scientist is fantastical. However, I can note that at a fundamental level, there is no such thing as an observer who does not participate in the events they are observing.[44] The very act of observation is itself an intervention. And we may like to pretend scientists don't have opinions, emotions, or skin in the game, but this is categorically false. Because of the regard we are taught to hold for science, we start to regard all of the things that come along with it as good, including this conception of neutrality.

And this is the second misconception I want to interrogate: the belief that neutrality is a good idea and even a virtuous position to hold. I think some of this misconception comes from the supremacy of scientific thinking and some of it comes from our concern for fairness. When we're in a dispute, we are highly attuned to a sense of fairness and we're looking for any arbiters of justice around the dispute (be they parents, friends, or HR)

44 The "Observer Effect" is a known phenomenon in which observation itself impacts the thing being observed. See, for example, "The Observer Effect" (Baclawski 2018).

to be "fair." But, I think we've conflated fairness with neutrality. I remember in second grade visiting a classroom where the teacher had a big handwritten poster on the wall that said "Fairness doesn't mean everyone gets the same thing, it means everyone gets what they need." Rather than a third party that is neutral, it might be more productive and helpful for us to have third parties that care for the needs of all, or are multipartial.

The idea that in order to do some kind of peace-oriented work with disputing parties we have to "not take sides," is one of the biggest misconceptions about conflict intervention, mediation, and other related fields. And, like a lot of misconceptions, there's a kernel of truth. I won't be very good at helping two parties reach an agreement if I am essentially just rooting and working for one side to "win." Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist and creator of Nonviolent Communication described basic human needs that operate underneath our conflicts. That conflicting parties have underlying needs was not a revelation; what was unique to his conception of needs, however, was the idea that basic and universal needs are not actually in conflict. Aligning with this conception allows me to work towards solutions with conflicts that care for the needs of everyone involved. Unfortunately, this doesn't mean everyone's needs always do get met, but folks are usually willing to live with a solution that they are confident was reached with their needs being held and cared for; basically, where they know they mattered.

This is really different from being neutral about their strategies, behaviors, and words. To be helpful third-party interveners we don't need to be neutral on racism, colonialism, and other systems of oppression—neutrality on these, and other issues, is a barrier to caring for everyone's needs. This is where multipartiality comes in. I attended a workshop with Miki Kashtan where she described the difference between neutrality and multi-partiality: "I see my role as advocating for everyone's needs and it's a very different role from neutrality [. . .] It ends up skewing the outcome when you're trying to be neutral. When you try to be neutral you'll default to the dominant culture."[45]

45 Kashtan, "The Art of Facilitation" (2017).

GROUNDING MYSELF IN THE MOMENT AND IN VALUES

If you've ever done first-aid types of training then you might remember the number one thing you're supposed to do before trying to help is to check the scene and check yourself. Is the scene safe enough for you to help without getting hurt? Are you in a position to help without getting hurt or making something worse for someone else? And then you might do a little review to see what you've got available and what is needed.[46] I usually do this in two steps.

First, I check in with how I'm feeling, both physically and emotionally (and for me, these are often the same things). I notice whatever I'm feeling in my body, take a couple of conscious deep breaths, and attempt to shift all my attention to what's happening in the present moment. I often tell myself one of my favorite reminder phrases, "be where your feet are."[47] There doesn't need to be any special occasion for using a check-in practice, but I find them especially helpful and important when I'm entering into a challenging situation. And helping someone with a conflict when I disagree with some or all of it can definitely be challenging.

A second type of check-in I do is around my values and what's important to me. If I'm escalated about the content of a topic, I might easily lose sight of other values that I hold and forget that I want to be of service to others who are in pain around conflict and help folks to better understand one another. I want to pay attention to what's happening and ground myself enough so that I can make a choice about what to do.[48] It's not about competing values but about choosing which values I think

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46 This is common in de-escalation training too. You are usually taught to check in with yourself first. For example, in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, this is an explicit first step (Holden, Martha J., Andrea J. Mooney, and Michael J. Budlong 2001).

47 I don't know the origins of this phrase but I learned it from a sponsor in a recovery program.

48 Like many others, I've been deeply influenced by Viktor Frankl's writing and conceptualization around choice and freedom. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (Frankl 1962).

will best serve the moment for the betterment of all. Let's look at a hypothetical example with my brother a little more closely.

> My brother Alex talks to me about a Facebook argument he got in with our mom, that led to an in-person argument about whether or not store owners should use guns to protect their property from rioters or looters. Alex feels strongly that they should. That not only is it their right to protect their property with weapons but that people who don't do this are just being dumb and deserve to get looted. Our mom argued that she thinks it's insane that someone would think killing someone is an acceptable reaction to property damage or protection. She also said she raised him to be kind to others and that murdering them for getting caught up in a protest action is the polar opposite; it's taking life as if it's the value of an object and is callous and ignores all the problems that led someone to take, or damage, property to begin with.
>
> Alex describes the argument to me and is really upset. He had the argument at the end of a long work day when he was picking up his two kids from our mom's house where she was watching them. He doesn't understand why our mom can't see his perspective and hates that she thinks he doesn't care about people's lives. I also have strong feelings about this, saw the argument online, and really aligned with our mom's point of view.

So here is a case where I could potentially be a third party intervener and I'm definitely not neutral. Grounding myself is an even more critical practice than if the content of the conflict was something I didn't care about. I might start by taking a big breath and noticing where my mind is at. Am I distracted and thinking about all the things I would have said to Alex if I were my mom? Thinking of my own responses to everything my brother says? Or escaping the scene all together by thinking about what I'll make for dinner? I'm going to take inventory in that moment with a couple breaths and gather myself back to the present moment, focusing my full attention on the conversation at hand. I might also notice what's going on in my body at the same time. Am I clenching my jaw and shoulders, backing away

from my brother, making a fist? If I notice tightness, I might consciously release it wherever it is and think about softening. If I have enough space and time, I might imagine the oxygen I'm breathing is spreading to these tight places and giving them more space and nourishing my cells.

Next, I'm going to reorient myself to which values and tasks are most important to me in *this* moment. I don't see this as one value being more important than others, but rather as discerning which values are going to serve our collective needs the most at the moment. The reason I align with my mom in this example is that I place a high value on people's lives. I also really value compassion. My valuing of life doesn't need to compete with my compassion—I can still fully value life more than property and value compassionate communication with my brother. Since no one's life is currently at risk in the conversation, it's less important to me to focus on the value of life, at least for now. I can turn my attention to what task is at hand for me, given my values.[49] Is it proving to my brother that he's wrong? Is it helping him de-escalate so he can see other perspectives? Is it helping him repair his relationship with my mom? Is it giving him empathy?

There's no formula I can follow to lead me to the right answer, and I've messed up many times. But giving myself a moment to find my internal compass usually saves me and the person I'm talking with a lot of pain.

AFFIRMING WITHOUT AGREEING

We are so accustomed to seeking out and hearing from people who agree with us when we are upset that we might easily confuse agreeing with understanding. A key human need is to be understood and it is probably easier to have a sense of being understood from someone that already agrees with us. Similarly, it's easier for us as listeners to feel like we understand what someone is meaning when we agree with their perspective or the facts that they're discussing. While agreement may make

49 An enlightening exercise to help figure out your values is the Values Card Sort (Miller, Rollnick, and Press 2013). Instructions for doing this activity can be found online by searching for "value card sort" or by navigating to the link in the resource section from the Urban Indian Health Institute (Urban Indian Health Institute 2013).

understanding easier, it's not necessary for understanding.[50] For example, I've had many conversations with my friend Ty, who is 5 years old, about some of his favorite mythical creatures, and I can completely understand what he's saying and his perspective on each character without agreeing that they exist or that one character is better than another.

Still, it can be tough to think of what to say other than variations on, "you're wrong," when we disagree with someone. There might be a time and a place, even within the same conversation, for voicing your disagreement, but we're unlikely to help the conflict if that's where we start. So where *do* we start? In the rest of this section I'll describe three related practices in order of increasing difficulty (for me at least).

Connect with the Feeling(s)

Earlier on I discussed the magical practice of empathy and reflections. Believe it or not, this practice still works even when you disagree with someone. It may take an internal reminder that reflecting what someone says doesn't mean you're agreeing. And you might even need to let this be known to the person you're helping, depending on the topic. There are lots of parts of speech and the meaning that we're getting from a speaker that we can reflect. But when we don't agree with someone it can be hard to find options. I think the easiest practice is to reflect the feeling that the person is either explicitly naming or that you're identifying. Let's go back to the example with my imaginary brother Alex and flesh out some of the dialogue we might have. Let's imagine Alex is near the end of describing what happened with our mom.

> **Alex:** She seriously drives me nuts sometimes! Like first of all, yes, I do think people should use their *constitutional* freakin' rights and defend their property, and also I really don't need to get into it with you right now while I'm trying to go home and you've been watching my kids all day. Like, now I feel like a jerk.

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50 Agreement can also make understanding harder as we may easily end up focusing on our experience of the point of view, facts, perspectives, etc. since they mirror our own.

Me: You were feeling like, "Yeah, I stand by what I said," but also kind of, like, guilty about fighting with her at all when she's been watching Jay and Chris. Plus you're just tired and want to go home!

Alex: Yeah! Like, could you not bring this stuff up just whenever you want? Maybe you've had time to sit around and think about what you want to say all day, but I definitely didn't.

Me: Ugh yeah, maybe you're okay talking with her about this stuff but you felt kind of, like, surprised by her timing.

Alex: Yeah.

There's so much going on for Alex in this scenario, right? Even though the thing I might feel amped about is the "constitutional rights" part of what he's talking about, it's not the only thing happening in this conflict—and maybe not even the most important thing to Alex to talk about or work on right now. In this scenario, I tried to focus on what I was guessing Alex was feeling about the interaction: guilty, tired, wanting to go home, and surprised. If Alex doesn't know my views on this and I want to let him know I don't agree, there's still space for that. For example, I could say something like:

Me: I can totally get just not wanting to talk about it at that moment. Even though I don't agree with what you posted either, I really get that it was just not the right time for you to talk about it. I'd love to tell you some of what I was thinking about the post later if you're open to it[51]?

Even though I'm ranking this strategy of focusing on the person's feelings as easier than the next two, it can still be tough to pull off. And it will be harder the more invested you are in the content you disagree with. It's hard because in order to accurately make a guess about someone's feelings, we have to try to imagine what it's like to be them, see things from their perspective, etc. And frankly, we don't want to do this when we disagree, especially when we're angry or heated about the topic. I think there's also a part of us that might sincerely worry that

51 It can help to actually set up a time to talk so that you don't let it slide or forget.

we'll somehow become complicit in a problematic behavior or strategy by trying to do this work of imagining/understanding. Remembering our own moral compass and letting the other person know that we don't agree with them (while not debating feelings) can help allay some of our fears. So too can knowing when we're too angry or upset to really offer understanding to the person we disagree with and taking breaks and opting out when we're talking with someone that we have a tough time staying in integrity with.[52] These skills will be helpful with the next two strategies as well, which also require imagination and understanding, but perhaps at deeper levels.

Connecting with Needs

In Nonviolent Communication, there's a specific form of empathy that's taught using Rosenberg's conceptualization of needs. The theory states that we have feelings when our needs are met and when they're unmet. As you might guess, when our needs are met, we're likely to feel some of the good feelings: grateful, understood, playful, etc., and when they're unmet, we're likely to feel bad: grumpy, angry, misunderstood, lonely, etc. We'll focus on "unmet" here since we're talking about conflict and that's mostly what would come up in these examples. We can try to guess what needs aren't being met, based on the person's description of what's going on and the feelings we glean from them. The main categories of needs from Rosenberg are: Physical Well-Being, Safety, Connection, Meaning, Fun, Autonomy, and Honesty.[53] In this model, there are many more specific needs nested in the main needs, like those under Meaning: effectiveness, purpose, stimulation, learning, and respect, among many others. Each of these are different

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52 Doing this work is sometimes called "bridging" or "bridge-building" and it's not without challenges and pitfalls. In a fantastic resource called "Bridging Differences Playbook" the authors write, ". . . it's important to recognize that not everyone can or should be a Bridge Builder, or feel compelled to build bridges [. . .] It's ethically dubious–and, research suggests, often counterproductive–to ask people to bridge differences when they're being discriminated against or otherwise denied social power" (Greater Good Science Science Center n.d.).

53 Miki Kashtan has noted that you can narrow this list down farther to four basic categories: Physical needs, Safety needs, Connection needs, and Meaning needs.

specific needs but they may be loosely organized as needs for meaning.

The strategy for connecting around needs sounds really similar in practice to the feelings connection strategy, but you usually have to dig a bit deeper into understanding someone in order to figure out what their needs are or might be. And just like when we're trying to reflect feelings, this becomes ever more challenging the more strongly we disagree with what the speaker is saying because we may not want to understand or empathize with them. To use this strategy, I recommend getting pretty familiar with the basic needs list from NVC or another source.[54] Then, you'll need to make some guesses about which needs aren't being met for the person you're talking with. In our earlier example, what are some needs of Alex's that might have been unmet? Some of my guesses would be: acceptance, peace, ease, empathy, and understanding. My experience has been that there's often more than one unmet need and more than one "right" answer to guessing them. Just like with our reflection practices earlier, I try not to do too much question-asking when using this strategy but instead try to frame my guesses in the form of a statement, then listen intently for correction if I'm wrong. I also don't often say the word "need" because even though I might call things like "acceptance" a basic need, it's not the common understanding of that word for lots of people. I'm more likely to use the word "want."[55] Let's go back to my conversation with Alex:

Alex: She seriously drives me nuts sometimes! Like first of all, yes, I do think people should use their *constitutional* freakin' rights and defend their property and also I really don't need to get into it with you right now while I'm trying to go home and you've been watching my kids all day. Like, now I feel like a jerk.

Me: Yeah, I bet you're just really wanting some understanding without argument and like, some ease at the end of a long day.

54 For a pretty deep dive into human needs theories check out the free entry in the Encyclopedia of Social work (Dover, 2013)

55 Again, hat tip to my teacher Miki Kashtan for helping me understand needs and wants.

Alex: Yeah! And I feel bad getting into a fight with her after she's done me this huge favor.

Me: Right, you really want that connection you have to be safe from any political arguments. You want her to understand how much you appreciate and respect her and you worry she doesn't know when you have fights like this.

Alex: Yeah!

On the face of it, these reflections can sound really similar to the others, but internally, it takes quite a bit more empathy to be able to do them accurately. Just like anything else with conflict, doing this takes practice! One of my favorite ways to practice is to try making some of these needs-connection statements to someone angry I hear on the radio or TV. I also suggest practicing with someone you know well in a low-stakes situation.[56]

Connecting on Values, Strengths, and Skills—Affirmations Practice

There's a practice in Motivational Interviewing (MI) that is tricky to pull off and I've rarely seen it done well in workshops and trainings. I know, not a promising or confidence-building start, but I want us to be realistic about what we practice. In MI, they call the practice "affirmations." I don't always use this term though, because in practice it's not what people normally think of when they hear the word.[57] It's not just saying something nice to someone; instead, you're paying attention to what the person values, what strengths they've demonstrated, or a skill you've noticed them use, and then you're naming what you see. In MI, it's used as a way to help someone build confidence that they can make a change and to help give them a sense of autonomy and empowerment. In a conflict setting, I might not be focused on a change per se, but helping to build or demonstrate someone's own autonomy and empowerment are really potent ways to help transform a conflict. Despite the blustering language we often use in conflict, most of us feel really disempowered and

56 And you might want to let them know you're practicing something!

57 I don't know about you, but I get some old-timey Saturday Night Live sketches popping up in my head of Al Franken's "Daily Affirmations with Stuart Smalley."

even like we have no choices or autonomy in what happens with the conflict.[58] Affirmations are also another way of connecting with the person that doesn't require any sort of agreement with a behavior or a particular perspective. Since there are several things (and probably more than is discussed here) that you could affirm, I'm going to break this practice down a bit more.

Affirming a Value

Values affirmations can feel powerful, but like the needs-connection strategy, they can be tricky to find and name. Most folks hold certain values in higher regard than others and when we're talking with someone in conflict, we can often get a sense of what at least some of their values are. Just like the needs inventories and lists, I think looking at lists of values can help grow our vocabulary for this practice. It can also be helpful for ourselves in clarifying our own values. And similar to needs, folks might have multiple values they're trying to align with, or negotiate, at once. Part of their conflict may very well be an internal conflict around values and not just an external values conflict with the person they're upset with. Looking back at the scenario with Alex, what do you guess are some of his values? I might guess he values duty, honesty, courtesy, and family. Let's break this down a bit more and notice where we might see these values show up in some of the dialogue:

Duty: when discussing the responsibility he thinks someone has to protect their property.

Honesty: when describing how he wants to be true to his thoughts when he communicates with our mom.

Courtesy: in the way he wants to be seen by our mom as really valuing her watching his children and doesn't want to be rude by arguing with her after a day of babysitting.

Family: clear throughout—in his worrying about his relationship with our mom, her relationship to his children, and their collective well-being.

If I'm able to tune into what my brother Alex is saying and pick up on what he's valuing, I might be able to do one, or all, of the following: help to clarify why he's feeling conflicted or what's

58 In transformative mediation, disempowerment is even understood as a primary experience for people in conflict (Folger et al. 2010).

most bugging him about the conflict, remind him what's most important to him or what he most cares about, and point him in the direction of one of his guiding values. These value guesses usually come in the form of a statement like:

- You really care about ____.
- You really value ____.
- _____ is really important to you.

Let's see how this might look in practice:

> **Alex:** She seriously drives me nuts sometimes! Like first of all, yes, I do think people should use their *constitutional* freakin' rights and defend their property and also I really don't need to get into it with you right now while I'm trying to go home and you've been watching my kids all day. Like, now I feel like a jerk.
>
> **Me:** It's really important to you to be honest about your views and you also really value these family relationships so much. It made it hard to know what to do in that moment, I bet.

The first sentence in my response is naming values, the second statement is more of a reflection or empathy guess related to the values statements. I often pair different strategies like this because they can flow into one another in a way that feels authentic for both me and the other party. This skill will develop with time and with our own natural way of speaking. Values affirmations can feel powerful because when we're in the midst of a conflict we might feel a lot of tumult and like we've lost our guiding principles or purpose. Having someone state our values back to us can help awaken us from the trance of conflict and feel a bit clearer on what the right thing for us to do is.

Affirming a Strength, Skill, or Past Success

Another kind of affirmation statement requires us to pay attention to what the person has done well or what has worked for them in the past. On the one hand, these can be easier than values affirmations because you don't need to do quite as much guessing; there's usually a concrete action or behavior that you're noticing and naming vs. a perhaps more nebulous value. On the other hand, these can be tricky if you're needing to pull

from prior knowledge or conversations with the person to name the skill, strength, or past success. These kinds of affirmations are especially useful in building folks' confidence that they have what it takes to handle the conflict in some way. We might also consider asking the person what has worked for them in the past. This can be helpful for at least two reasons: 1) if you're genuinely not sure what's helped the person in the past, asking will bring these strategies to light and/or 2) allowing the person to name for themselves what they've done well, worked through successfully, etc., will help bolster their confidence. In the case with Alex, I might remind him of prior experiences he's had getting through conflict with our mom, or name a strength that I think he has that could be valuable in this struggle:

Me: These arguments you've had with Mom are so tough! And you've been able to get through them before and still keep your good relationship with her going. I wonder how you managed in the past?[59]

Or even:

Me: You've been able to really notice what will make things worse in these tough times with Mom and that's probably benefited you both. You were able to tell that it was just not going to go well if you argued after you were getting out of work, so you bit your tongue in that moment.

In these examples I'm either bringing up, or asking Alex to bring up, times when he was able to be successful at navigating a conflict for himself. The hope is that this will help Alex to begin to problem solve in a constructive and peaceful way through his current struggle.

IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM MI

There are two important pieces of knowledge I've gained from MI that I think are relevant here. The first is that folks are more likely to do what they hear themselves talk about. MI was developed to help someone resolve ambivalence around a behavior change, so early research was especially focused on what helped folks actually move in the direction of making an

59 Notice, I'm doing a little empathy here and I'm using "and" rather than "but" to join my empathy statement with an affirmation. When we say "but" it tends to negate the first part of what we said to the listener.

identified change. Suppose, instead, that Alex is talking with me about wanting to quit smoking (a behavior change that he's ambivalent about). Research in MI has shown us that the more Alex hears himself talk about quitting smoking the more likely he is to do it. So in MI there is a big focus on helping people stop talking about all the ways something is hard, challenging, full of obstacles, etc. and instead talk more about what's possible, what has worked before, and what they might do to be successful.[60]

A second relevant piece of research from MI is that when you're reflecting two or more things back to someone who has been speaking to you, the speaker is most likely to talk about whatever the last thing was that you reflected. So if I say to Alex: "You're really frustrated with Mom but you also want to try to figure out how to work things out with her." Alex is more likely to talk about the second thing that I said—trying to work things out.

Combining these two pieces of information from MI, we end up with a pretty potent tool for helping someone transform a conflict. Because we can help them focus on resolving or transforming the conflict through not only what we reflect back to them but in the order in which we do so.

There are some big caveats here, however. First and most importantly, there is a code of ethics that MI practitioners are meant to adhere to that involves understanding that we use the knowledge of MI to help someone, with their consent, navigate their ambivalence. We actively advocate against people who work in sales or politics using MI because of the likelihood that it will be used for manipulation in some fields. We also urge MI practitioners to practice equipoise (a sort of neutrality) when talking with someone who doesn't give an inclination of what they do or do not want to do. For example, if someone says they are ambivalent about taking a new job, and there's no indication that the new job would be harmful in any way to them or others, the MI practitioner would be encouraged to just ask questions and use reflections as they typically would. This practice is still

60 Interestingly, the research has also shown that the more folks talk about all the reasons they can't change something (called "sustain talk" in MI) the more likely they are not to make a change. Knowing this, we might be even more motivated to stop trying to problem dig and solve for people since this line of questioning and answering actually does more harm than good!

helpful in supporting someone with a decision but doesn't focus on using tools like paying attention to which order you reflect ambivalence. These tools are not a secret, however, they're taught and used with caution.

Secondly, the research in MI has been primarily done in treatment fields for people who are ambivalent about a behavior change.[61] There is a way in which many, or maybe all, conflicted people could be described as ambivalent. However, conflict transformation and resolution were not the fields MI has been practiced in, so it could be that some of these strategies just aren't applicable in conflicted scenarios vs. the behavioral health scenarios for which they were designed. Anecdotally, I've found these two MI based strategies to still bear fruit when working with someone in conflict.

Multipartiality Pitfalls

There are plenty of challenges in attempting third-party support in a conflict where you feel aligned with only one of the parties. Two of them are common enough to warrant a closer look: playing devil's advocate and unintentional escalation. Neither of these pitfalls are unique to interventions where you have strong opinions, but they do tend to show up more in these types of interactions.

Playing devil's advocate is when someone argues against a certain idea in order to surface any hidden problems. It can be an especially useful strategy when you have high agreement in a group about a certain idea or proposal. Someone in the group may essentially role-play someone who disagrees with the proposal in order to make sure the idea is actually strong enough to survive attacks. The group might use this exercise to strengthen their proposal or idea; using ideas from the role-played opponent and fixing issues that surfaced as a result of simulated debate. It can be a great way to bring dissent into a conversation when there just isn't any that's authentically present. However, I've found this is rarely how devil's advocate is *actually* used. More often, I've found that someone actually

61 A classic example for using MI strategies is when talking with someone who is ambivalent about quitting smoking or changing another health related habit, like exercising.

disagrees with something and then says, "I'm just going to play devil's advocate for a minute," using the idiom to disguise disagreement. Opting for this strategy could be a great way to get your disagreement out into the discussion if you don't think it's safe enough to do so openly; on the other hand, it can stifle dialogue as folks often know the person using it doesn't agree with them and that they won't come out and say so. This tactic can be particularly thorny with third-party interventions where we have disagreement because the person will guess you disagree with them, often feel threatened, more escalated, and then defensive. It's incredibly challenging, if not impossible, for us to take the perspective of others when we are threatened, escalated, and defensive. As a conflict intervener, these are all reactions I'm looking to avoid with a person in conflict. This is especially true if I disagree with a view they hold, since I'm hoping they'll be able to de-escalate and do some alternative perspective taking. I think devil's advocate is best used in relationships of moderate to high trust where dissent and problem-solving are welcome and expected and when the emotional stakes are relatively low. These are not the circumstances under which most of us experience our interpersonal conflicts.[62]

Devil's advocate can also feel problematic to the receiver for reasons similar to unsolicited advice-giving; there's a really good chance the person does not, in that moment, want to see the other side of things.[63] In this way, it's like offering up a solution to something that the person doesn't need, want, or ask for. Just like with unsolicited advice, it's likely the person in conflict is wanting us to listen and understand—and playing devil's advocate feels more like you're listening and understanding the other party who isn't there. You might be thinking something like, "I don't care if they want it or not, they're gonna hear it!" I get that sentiment, especially when we're talking about some really important issues. What I remind myself when that urge comes up is that just because I want to say it and it's important for them to hear it doesn't mean they *will*. And most of the time, I want to choose to speak in ways that will increase the likelihood thzat someone will be able to hear me and other

62 Occasionally, I think there can be a useful place for the devil's advocate strategy for conflict intervention but I'll get into that a bit more in a further section on advice giving.

63 This doesn't mean they won't be willing to see it in the very near future!

perspectives. I also acknowledge that sometimes the most important or best thing I can do is to tell someone something that they won't hear or receive in that moment, part ways, and mourn the gap between us. I try to be really aware of what my options are and make a choice in these tough moments, not just responding out of a habitual communication pattern. Because as we've explored earlier, when we respond out of a habitual pattern, we will default to the dominant culture.

A second pitfall I've noticed in these interventions is accidental non-productive escalation. I say "non-productive" because there are times when increasing the intensity of a conflict is actually quite healthy and productive. Kazu Haga speaks of something similar in his book *Healing Resistance* when explaining the difference between negative and positive peace. In negative peace, things look peaceful and fine or calm, but there's quite a bit of conflict and tension underneath the veil of peace. Surfacing the conflict that is underneath will be a critical step in transforming it, but viewed from some angles, it will look like escalation. It can be a pitfall in conflict intervention when the third-party escalates, but not for the purpose, or towards the goal, of productively shifting the conflict. I've found this is more likely to happen when you strongly align with the person you're talking with about the conflict. For example, if I strongly agreed/aligned with Alex instead of my mom, I might fall into this trap while talking with him. In these cases, we usually turn the volume up on both our own and the other person's anger and reinforce their view of the person they are in conflict with as an "enemy." Suppose I aligned with Alex and I responded to him like this instead:

Alex: She seriously drives me nuts sometimes! Like first of all, yes, I do think people should use their *constitutional* freakin' rights and defend their property and also I really don't need to get into it with you right now while I'm trying to go home and you've been watching my kids all day. Like, now I feel like a jerk.

Me: No, don't feel like a jerk! She's the one that's bringing this stuff up when she already knows your views. She always does stuff like this and then gets mad

> at us when we don't want to hang out with her. It's absolutely ridiculous. I think she's bored and just thinks of shit to bug us with all day. We should just stop doing anything with her until she can stop goading us into fights.

Pretty different vibe to that conversation, right? I find that the person in the conflict will usually respond to this in one of two ways: they'll get slightly defensive of the person they have a conflict with and want to explain how that person is not as bad as we just stated or they'll get even angrier with the person, responding to our intensity around the conflict. If they have the former response, it can be tough for the speaker to feel like we've really empathized and understood their perspective and they may think twice before talking to us about any issues with that person in the future. If it's the latter, then there's a good chance we've just made the conflict worse, even if the person feels validated or understood. I often imagine anger in some of these conflicts like a small fire that will grow or shrink depending on how it's tended. This goes not only for the person who has the fire, but for me as a witness to it as well. Neutrality is not real here, either. Both parties' words can impact the size and direction of the fire. When I'm talking to someone who's really angry, I want to ask myself, "Are my words acting as water or accelerant to their anger?"

I don't think these pitfalls are specific to intervening when you have strong opinions but I do think they tend to rear their heads a bit more in these cases. I invite us all to pay attention to other pitfalls in these sorts of interventions and to notice what our own patterns of response are. The more we are aware of what we are doing, the more choice we will have in any given moment with how we behave, intervene, and potentially help create a more just and loving community.

Chapter Nine: MORE STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

Suppose you've done a great job of listening and understanding, providing some empathy, and if you've got a strong disagreement with the person you're intervening with, you've empathized without agreeing and avoided some common pitfalls. What's next? What else can you do to help transform the conflict? Just because someone feels you're being present and understanding them, doesn't mean they're any closer to changing their perspective or transforming the conflict. Some of the skills we've already gone over are going to come in handy here, but I have a few more tools that will be useful as well. Let's start off with understanding a little bit more about what can be going on for us when we're in a conflict, because that context will help us understand why some tools are more impactful than others.

POWERLESSNESS AND CONFLICT

When I was studying nursing as a second, or maybe third, career, we had a rotation in a psychiatric unit and I remember listening to the nurses give reports to each other. Two words popped up over and over: hopeless and helpless. They were used to quickly and pretty accurately describe how many of the folks in the unit felt. But the contrast of the casualness of the statement with the person's actual state felt so incongruent that it's stayed with me ever since. It's often the first phrase that will pop into my head when I'm working with someone in a protracted or acute conflict. I often hear the person say some variation on any of the following:

"There's no point."

"They're never going to change."

"They'll never understand."

"I can't do anything about it."

"This is just how it is."

Why is it so common for us to feel so powerless, so hopeless about conflict? To begin with, many of us just don't have a lot of evidence that things will change in relationships where there are long histories of patterns of behaviors. We also rarely have models for seeing how it could go differently, and we haven't been explicitly taught how to get out of some of these sticky conflicts in a way that doesn't create more problems or put us at great social risk. On top of all this, many of us are carrying with us unresolved or unhealed traumas from childhood that tend to get triggered in conflicts.[64] The pervasive repression of our feelings, wants, and needs by our socialization as children can leave us feeling like we have no power to control or change our circumstances as adults, especially when something risky like conflict is happening. It can take a lifetime of work and healing to recover some of what we lose to violence in childhood, especially early childhood. Still, there are antidotes, the most powerful of which are relationships, particularly safe, stable, and nurturing ones. We can help nurture positive relationships during conflict in the ways we've already discussed: by being present, working to understand and empathize, and not unproductively escalating the conflict. There are also verbal antidotes to this powerlessness that we can apply to conflict situations. My favorites are autonomy statements and solutions-focused questions and solution seeking questions.

Autonomy Statements & Solutions-Focused Questions

These are any statements that are meant to remind and strengthen the sense of autonomy of the person you're talking with. They can be the same or very similar to affirmations, such as a statement that is a reminder of a past success. This will both affirm the person's strength and resilience and also remind the person that they can, and have before, chosen options that worked for them. Other autonomy statements might just explicitly name the freedom the person has. Some common examples are:

"Only you can decide."

64 For more on the triggering of traumas during conflict I recommend sections of Sarah Schulman's Conflict is not Abuse (Schulman 2016).

"It's up to you what you'll do next."

"I wonder what you'll do next," or "I wonder how you'll move forward."

"It's tough to feel like you have choices when you don't actually like your options. I wonder how you'll decide."

Another way of strengthening a sense of autonomy and bolstering some hope are through appreciative and solutions-focused questions. Two models, 1) Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and 2) Solutions-Focused Treatment/Therapy (SFT) offer a lot of examples for how to ask some of these questions. Both models work off of a strength-based approach. Here, the assumption is that we're most successful with any endeavor when we work to notice and build off of strengths rather than trying to find all the problems and fix them. It's not that problems or barriers don't show up in these models, but that the focus is turned elsewhere. The assumption is that most of the problems will improve or resolve by focusing on what *will* work, not what won't. In AI this goes a bit further as the practice is grounded in Constructivism—the idea that our reality is actually constructed by the kind of language and metaphors we use, and the stories we tell. This kind of strength-based approach can go a long way in building hope since the person using it gets to spend time on imagining what would work, what's positively possible, and what's gone well in the past. Here are some examples:

- **Finding solutions from the past:** When this came up before, how did you deal with it? What worked well? How did you get through it? What did you learn when it happened? When you were feeling at your best in this relationship/situation, what was going on?
- **Imagining a better state:** If you could wave a magic wand and transform this situation, what do you imagine would be most changed? Imagine you go to sleep and something magical/miraculous happens, and when you wake up, this situation is better—what would it look like? How would you know? What are three wishes you have for this situation/relationship/conflict?

- **Scaling questions (often related to the imagining questions):** On a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being you're already there and 0 being as far away as possible, how close are you to your desired end state with this conflict? What did it take to get to the number you're at now? What would it take to move up a little bit? How would you know you got there?
- **Small steps questions:** What's the smallest next step you can take to get closer to what you want?

Many of these questions also serve another purpose: helping the person who is in conflict to clarify what would be helpful to them in either transforming the conflict and/or giving them some peace in another way. Gaining clarity is such a valuable aspect of third-party dialogue—I'd like to spend a little more time on it as well.

Listening to someone else's conflict can feel like total chaos sometimes. We might be hearing all the complexities and think, "I truly don't know what I would do in this situation." Not knowing what you would do if you were them is a really wonderful place to be, because you're less likely to start giving advice from that position. The trick is to remember that it's not your job to know what the other person should do, it's just your job to know what you can do, and choose your options as wisely as possible. One of your options is to help someone get their own clarity about what would be best for them and/or the situation. Sometimes the person will get this clarity just by virtue of talking it out in a safe, supportive, non-judgmental space. In fact, this is far and away the most likely scenario. I would say 80% of the people in conflict I talk with are able to get some sort of clarity by just hearing themselves talk about the conflict, while not defending against advice they don't want to take.

It doesn't always work like that though, as I'm sure you're well aware. Sometimes, we've been spinning about a certain situation for a long time and the more we've thought about it, the more circular we've become. And we can say what the issues are out loud to someone else, but we're just walking someone down the well-worn trail of our mind and showing them the

same scenery we've been looking at, not seeing anything new. In these cases, particular open-ended questions are helpful.

CLARITY IS KEY

When we first start talking with someone about a conflict they're dealing with, we can offer a lot of support by just helping them sort out what is going on for them, what they're most wanting, what might help, etc. Conflict can be disorienting so even just supporting someone as they find clarity about a situation can be extremely relieving.

Clarifying Your Role

First, it can be helpful to clarify with the person if there's something in particular they wanted from you in talking about the conflict. For instance, are you friends with the other party and you're sensing that the person talking to you wants you to talk with that friend? Or are you not sure if they want you to listen or brainstorm with them? Some carefully crafted questions can be wonderful here. I wish it was as easy as saying "What do you want from me?!" But when people are feeling kind of hopeless and not sure what to do, they might be embarrassed that they need/want help, or that they haven't solved the conflict on their own. They may even be defensive, or any number of emotions that make the phrasing of your questions pretty important. You might benefit from giving your question a little preamble, something like, "Hey, I really want to keep talking with you about this and I really want to make sure I'm being the friend you want me to be right now or being supportive in the best way possible . . ." and then ask whatever you need to ask such as, "Do you think it'd be most helpful if I'm just quiet and really listening or do you think it'd be better for you if I try to problem-solve with you?" The goal is to help the listener understand that you can be there in whatever capacity they need you.[65] Another option is to ask a shorter, more direct, but also more open-ended question like, "What would be most helpful from me right now?" or "What can I do to support you through this?" You might also tack on a little empathy statement in the

65 Provided you really can do that! Remember our own personal safety and boundary checks.

beginning like, "Wow this is such a tough situation. What would be the most helpful thing I could do for you right now?"

I don't have a hard and fast rule for when I ask which types of questions, just some general approaches. Most of the time, I opt for something more like the first set of examples: naming a few options for what I think could be helpful while also leaving the door open for other options from the person. I usually go this route because, even though it's open-ended, it can be difficult for folks to know what to say to "How can I help?"

There are a few reasons for this. To begin with, many of us are so indoctrinated not to ask for help, we literally don't know the answer to that question. Another reason is that when we're in a really stressed or triggered place, it can be hard for us to access the parts of our brain that help us brainstorm or imagine, and unless the person had a very clear idea of what they wanted from you going into the conversation, that's what they'll have to do when you ask. On top of that, when we're in the midst of a conflict conversation, we're not always expecting a meta-question about how we're talking—it can be jarring in the midst of emotional intensity, like drinking orange juice when you're expecting milk. Offering options can help it feel less jarring because it's more like a conversation and less like an interview. The more you work on getting this kind of clarity with your friends and loved ones, the more they'll be ready for those questions as well. In fact, after following this practice with many of my friends, I now find they will explicitly name when they want suggestions or advice in part because they know I won't generate it without a prompt.

Clarifying What the Conflict is About

You might also be able to help the person you're talking with get clarity about content related to the conflict, especially surrounding what the conflict is about and what they want to do about it.

It might sound strange, but sometimes it's the case that we just don't know what we're actually in a conflict about. Maybe we've had an interaction with someone and we feel negatively about it but we can't quite figure out what's bugging us. This is tricky third-party territory because we can easily inadvertently

escalate with our responses and questions. Within this, however, we can be useful by asking some well-formed questions.

My two favorite strategies are inquiring about the importance of something or taking big guesses. Asking about the importance of something is a useful tool because naming what we value or what matters most to us can help us not only have some relief from the confusion, but also figure out what we want to do next. I'll usually say something like, "This situation has been challenging! What do you think makes this [topic] so important to you?" This sentence is framed pretty generically and the more specific you can be while asking the question, the more likely the person will be to accept it as normal. So with my brother Alex, I might say, "Ugh, this situation with Mom has been tough, huh? What's most important to you when you think about how things have gone with her this week?" Another strategy I might try is to just take a bunch of guesses about what you think is going on or what matters to them about the conflict. In this case, employ yes or no questions. It usually only takes a few guesses before either you get it right or the person is able to articulate a bit more clearly, probably for both of you, what the nature of the conflict is for them. This strategy needs guesses that are specific to the situation, so I'll, again, use the conflict with Alex and my mom to illustrate. If I was struggling to follow what Alex was saying, was upset about, or I got the sense that Alex was also not sure what he was in a conflict about, I might say something like, "So, is it that you don't like the time of day that she's talking to you about this stuff? Or something else, maybe?" It doesn't matter how bad or off base your guess is because the person is likely to still feel connected to you because you're *trying* to understand them.

Clarifying What Happens Next

Another great role for a third-party intervener is to help the person figure out what they're going to do next about the conflict. The answer to "what's next?" really depends on what you've heard from them already. If the person has discussed some ideas about what they might do, then it can be helpful to reflect those options back to them. This strategy has the added benefit of helping the person stay focused on what they can

control, which in turn can help remind them of the choices and power they have. These reflections don't need to come directly after the person names them, you could use them a bit later when it feels like a good spot to summarize.

Suppose I'm talking with my friend Kieran about his frustration with the way his partner, Jake, listens to him while they talk on the phone. At a couple points, Kieran has named some options: talking with Jake about the problem, refusing to talk on the phone with Jake, and continuing just to tolerate the issue and get mad about it every once in a while. In a summary statement, I could reflect these choices back to Kieran. The conversation might go something like this:

Kieran: It's just so frustrating, like, give me the respect of at least pretending to listen! I can hear the TV in the background, why even bother talking to him?!

Me: Yeah, these kinds of phone calls have been really irritating you for a while! Earlier you said you might just refuse to talk with Jake on the phone at all or that maybe you'll see if he will sit down and talk with you about it.

Kieran: Yeah, I should probably sit down and talk with him. Ugh, I hate having conversations like this!

I could also add a question at the end like, "Do you think you'll try one of those?" or "Are you still thinking one of those options might work?" I tend to just leave things as reflections since the person will usually talk about what they'll do either way. Dealer's choice. In this hypothetical situation, Kieran has listed options that aren't dangerous, so far as I can tell, and I don't know what would work best for him. I would have my own preference if I were him, but this isn't about my preferences, at least until and unless Kieran wants to know them. So, I'm just going to name the options back to him in no particular order and with no implications in my tone, not because I'm secretive, but because *it's not about me.*

This can feel tricky if the options we've heard from the person are non-starters. It's pretty common for us all to get a bit hyperbolic and dramatic when we're really upset. Before we know it, we're sounding like a caricature of a teenager in a movie. Going back to our example, imagine Kieran had

verbalized one of his options like this, "The next time he's trying to talk to me about how terrible his boss is, I'm just going to clang pots together in the background and throw some random 'mmhmms' and 'yeahs' out there so he knows what it feels like to be trying to explain something to someone and have them just completely not listen to you!" In this case, I might reflect back the options differently. Maybe I'll name the clanging pots options facetiously, like "Okay, so you've got the pot-banging option, sitting down to talk, or just tolerating it." It's facetious because Kieran and I will both know the pot option isn't going to happen, so reflecting it back at all is sort of a joke. But it does show you're listening and reflecting a ridiculous option can help break some of the tension. And if I'm wrong, and it truly is an option for Kieran, (this can happen when you don't really know the person) then I've still done a good job reflecting back. The more hyperbolic and aggressive the options that someone names, the more I'll pay attention to what I'm reflecting and in what order. Remember that the person is most likely to talk about the last thing you reflect, so I'm going to name the safer, less over-the-top options last. I might not reflect the scary sounding ones at all. Or I might name them and say something like, "Kieran, earlier when you were pretty upset you said you might throat-punch Jake next time you see him. Are you still thinking about that as an option?" if I'm trying to assess safety and more high risk interventions.[66]

Other times when we're talking with someone about their conflict, they haven't given any indication (that we've picked up anyway) about what they might do or next steps they're considering. In these cases, we can head back to some of the statements I reviewed earlier from AI and SFBT. The phrasing may differ, but I'll be asking them what they've been thinking about for the future, or what's worked in the past. Suppose Kieran hadn't named any of those options in his fight with Jake. Then I might ask some of the following:

66 These bigger, physical safety concerns, are outside the scope of this book but there are programs and trainings out there for de-escalation and violence interruption. For instance, check out Meta Peace Team and Nonviolent Peaceforce in the Nonviolence Resources Section.

- I'm guessing this isn't the first time you've been frustrated in your relationship, what's helped you two get through tough stuff before?
- I bet you've been thinking about this for a while and already have some ideas about what you could do.
- Sounds like this has been bugging you for a little while now! What are you thinking might help give you some relief?

Sometimes you can ask these kinds of questions really early in someone's description of their conflict and they go over without a hitch. However, I suggest paying attention to the person's energy and the flow of the conversation before throwing them out there. Even though you're not doing UAG, sometimes when we're upset, we're not ready to think about what would help, at first we just want to be understood for how bad stuff feels. In these moments, being asked about what's worked before or what might work soon, can feel like you're being rushed. I want people to have a sense of spaciousness in conversation with me because I really think it helps us find our way. I don't have a better way to say this than to just suggest you pay attention to wise-timing. If that kind of feeling your way through a conversation is new to you, then I also suggest just giving yourself some permission to mess up and then give yourself feedback about it so you can learn.

Finding Clarity

Sometimes when I'm talking with someone, they know generally what they want to say and how they want to proceed with a conflict, but they're either too upset to go for it or they need some help with the specifics of what they'll say. In either case, I think some brief practice, like role-playing, is soooo beneficial. In this section I introduce role-playing as a clarifying practice, but it obviously can serve many purposes. In that vein, as we increase our collective repertoires for conflict intervention, I want to invite all of us to experiment and play with these practices.

First, a note about role-playing. Role-playing has a really bad reputation. I'm guessing some of that bad rep is because we've been in trainings or classes where it was used and it was

really agonizing to watch or participate in, or both. I think another reason we groan at the idea of it is that there's no intellectualizing your way through it—it's hard work. We have to understand something enough to embody it and then get feedback about it! It's a high risk, high reward kind of learning activity. But having something modeled and then modeling it ourselves is one of the most effective learning strategies out there. I think of it like this: we expect pilots, doctors, and lots of other folks to train for high-risk activities with simulations. It's not enough for me that they've read the books and talked about doing them. I don't want someone performing a procedure on me or flying me through the sky that hasn't *practiced* those things already. Our communication when we're in conflict really matters; we can do a huge amount of harm or good through our words. It's really tough for us to even remember to try, let alone actually practice a new skill when we're escalated. Typically, we need to have practiced in lower stakes situations or simulated versions of the real thing before we can pull out new skills in high-stress situations.

Most of the time, unless I'm working with someone who is used to role-playing their conflicts, I'm not going to actually say the words "role-play" when I offer this in conversation as a third-party. I'm more likely to say something like, "Hey, how about we practice what you want to say to your friend?" or "Pretend I'm them, what would you say?" I might also give a longer spiel about practicing to them as well, like, "Hey, I know this might sound weird, but I've found it really helpful to try practicing what I'm going to say to someone when it's a really tough conversation. What do you think?" If the person you're talking with doesn't want to try this out, no big deal! Just like UAG, we don't want to turn this into a judgment about what they are or are not willing to do to transform the conflict. If they do decide to practice with you, here are a few tips for playing the person they're in a conflict with:

- **Go a little easy at first**, especially if this person doesn't normally try to role-play. Meaning, don't be the most difficult version of the person you're role-playing.

- **Help them through the awkwardness** by encouraging them to keep going even if it feels weird or silly, but stick to the role-play if possible.
- Once the person is comfortable, try to **be more authentic** in what you think the real person, or any real person, might say.
- **Try it multiple times for the same situation**. More than likely, it will take multiple attempts to land on something that will actually feel authentic and give the person enough practice that they are confident enough to talk with the person they're in conflict with.
- **Take breaks for breathing** and somatic practices if/when it gets really tense or tough.
- **Have fun!** We learn through play and even though what we're role-playing might be very heavy and serious, we can have moments of levity and think of the whole experience as experiment and play.

Another benefit to role-playing is that it can have the side effect of turning down the dial on our anger. Once we've had an opportunity to say what we need to say, even if it's pretend, we usually feel more chilled out. This can be so helpful when someone is in a conflict and the other person is also really upset. I've even role-played what I'm going to say to someone in conflict in order to enter into the conversation from a more de-escalated state. I highly recommend this strategy for folks who have particular people in their lives where almost any conversation with the person activates their stress response. Role-playing can serve as exposure therapy. We start to train our nervous system to survive differently in these interactions, which in turn allows us to stay longer in the conversation, have tougher conversations, or even talk with certain people at all.

As a third-party intervener helping with a conflict through role-play, we can also be of service in helping someone spot when their nervous systems are getting especially activated. Many of us carry a lot of embarrassment and shame about feeling stress and tension when talking with certain people or in certain types of relationships. It's helpful to normalize this nervous system activation. Most folks are familiar with at least

one of these experiences in conflict or in tense conversations: heart pounding, shoulders rising up towards the ears, tension in the back and/or front of neck, tightness in chest, tightness in stomach, GI symptoms, changes in breathing (such as rapid, shallow breaths), cracking voice, welling up of tears even though you're not feeling sad, general muscle tightening, and my personal favorite: teeth chattering. I'm sure we could make a much longer list, but these are some of the most common I've witnessed and experienced myself. I think the reasons we get embarrassed about these incredibly common and near-universal experiences are complex but at least one part of the explanation lies in our socialization around emotions that we explored earlier. If we're taught and trained to minimize emotions and that emotionless rationality is the ideal, then the signs of emotions in our bodies can feel like a betrayal. We don't want to admit to ourselves, let alone another person, and especially not a person we're in conflict with, that we feel anything about what's happening with the disagreement. We sometimes conflate feeling something with losing the argument, being wrong, and/or being weak. Fear about these somatic responses to conflict is a major barrier for many folks in talking with someone they're conflicted with, so as an intervener, we can help by bringing a lot of compassion to these tough moments. There are a number of strategies you might employ here and using each will depend on what level of knowledge and comfort the person has in discussing and/or working with somatic responses. Here are some tools, in no particular order:

Bringing It Up and Normalizing

Before you role-play, or as you role-play, you might bring up the topic of how we might feel conflict in our bodies and wonder if anything like that goes on for the person you're talking with. For example, if you're talking to your friend, Toni, who is in a conflict with Rich, you might say something like:

> Ya know, whenever stuff is getting intense or I'm arguing with my cousin or a couple of my friends, I always get kind of anxious. Like, my heart will be pounding even though when I think about it, nothing is really that scary or bad. It's like my body just does its own thing whenever things get heated with a few people.

Does anything like that happen with you when you're talking with Rich?

Ask What Works for Them; Share What Works for You

Similar to some of our strategies from earlier, you might just ask how they've previously dealt with their stress reaction to the conversation. And if it's welcome, you might share your own strategies too, acknowledging that what works for you might not work for them. This can easily go into UAG territory so proceed with caution, but people can find it really helpful to just hear what works for others. Even if they don't use the same strategy, it can be reassuring and hope-giving to think about something working for someone. Sticking with our same example, I might say:

> Obviously, I don't have the same situations, but I could share what's worked for me if you think that'd be helpful?

Take Role-Play Breaks

You might ask the person before you start to role-play if it's okay if you take "time-outs" especially if either of you notice something happening in your bodies. Note: you might have to be the one to do this first to truly give the person permission and to decrease their sense of embarrassment about doing it.

Practice Somatic Strategies

These practices are pretty dependent on what the person is experiencing. Here are some examples:

- Noticing when our breathing has gotten rapid or irregular. Pausing to take some slow belly-breaths.
- Intentionally dropping the shoulders down from the ears.
- Bringing some massage or self-massage to areas that feel especially impacted by the stress of the conversation.
- Pairing breathing with a movement, such as inhaling while raising your arms up to the sky, breathing out, and lowering them to the earth or the belly.

- Using facial and body expressions as if you're having the conversation but without speaking the words.
- Going for walks or even doing the role-play while walking.

Consider taking a break where you focus on a particular sensation and bring all of your attention to it. You may want to try closing your eyes to help you focus on the particular sense you're engaging in, with the exception of vision, of course. For the sense of smell, take some sniffs of something you find pleasing while noticing as much as you can about the aroma and how you feel as you smell. Try tasting something you enjoy or something that has a strong flavor or sensation (such as a sour candy), bringing all your attention to the sensation. For the sense of touch you might see how many sensations you can notice in your body. Feel the weight of your body on the chair, floor, etc. Or, you might try to focus on the touch sensation of an object in your hands, studying it with your fingertips alone. For sound, try to notice all the sounds around you and focus just on one or two of them. You may try to pick out the loudest sound, then the quietest. Alternatively, try putting on a piece of music and bring all your attention to what you hear. For vision, take a look around you and focus your attention on just what your eyes can take in. You may want to focus on just one object, or pick a particular corner of a room. It can be helpful to do this outside and look at something in nature, such as a tree. It can also be helpful to focus on something in the distance, as this can help the pupils relax.

THE ROLE OF GRIEF

Another important and often neglected practice in intervention, and connected to getting clarity, is the role of mourning, or grief-work. Sometimes, maybe oftentimes, in working through a conflict we realize at a certain point that some expectations or hopes that we had are simply not going to materialize. We want someone to love us differently than they do; we want someone to understand us and they don't; we want to understand someone and we don't; we want support from a particular person and they can't provide it—the list could go on and on.

Gaining clarity about not getting what we want or getting what we don't want can feel devastating. It might actually feel

better to be in conflict with someone (or ourselves) than realizing in a crystal clear way that what you're wanting is not available (at least in the present moment). Giving space to grieve that the world and our situations are so different from how we would like them to be is a critical step to opening up paths for other solutions.[67] I call the practices of ignoring, pushing aside, and generally not accepting feelings of grief, sadness, and mourning "grief-blocking." In my work with folks who are doing high-trauma exposure jobs, like emergency response work and child protective services, I've found that grief-blocking is rampant and usually encouraged by peers. Sometimes we call these strategies "compartmentalizing," however, I think of compartmentalizing as a common gateway to grief-blocking, but not the actual practice.

Compartmentalizing is a helpful strategy used to attend to others' needs or a purpose bigger than oneself in particular moments where you cannot attend to both. We put our needs or feelings or wants in a "compartment" so that we can focus on others whose needs we assess to be greater or more important in that moment. We're usually familiar with this practice in helping professions, such as nursing, medicine, teaching, social work, etc. For example, a dear friend of mine has spent years as a burn and traumatic injury nurse. When she cares for someone with severe wounds and burns, she puts her own reactivity and emotional response in a metaphorical compartment so that she can focus on the tasks needed to help heal the person who has suffered the burns. Or in another example, a social worker at a violence intervention clinic might have an emotional response to a story of abuse they hear from a client and they put their response aside so that they can focus on the person in front of them. The trick with keeping compartmentalization as a useful strategy is to actually open the compartments up and interact with what we put in there. Opening up the compartments might mean that we have time set aside to allow ourselves to feel whatever we put aside while we were interacting with someone who needed our help. For instance, the friend I mentioned might have a practice of giving herself ten minutes before driving

67 I'm grateful to Kit Miller, friend and former Director of the MK Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence for this incredibly useful and relieving phrase that I've heard her repeat every so often, "The world is so different from the way I want it to be at times."

home at the end of her shift to close her eyes and go back to the moments when she was caring for someone and allow herself to feel whatever was coming up for her that she put aside. Another opening practice might be setting aside time each day or each week for journaling, drawing, or another creative practice which allows someone to express what they kept hidden in order to care for others. What I've found is that a lot of us just never do this work of reopening compartments and in this way, it becomes a gateway practice to grief-blocking.

Compartmentalization and grief-blocking are not limited to these kinds of examples and work, however. Grief-blocking, and its consequences, are prevalent in conflict as well. It can look like swallowing disappointments, never admitting or accepting that something isn't working out the way we'd hoped, or having the same arguments with the same person over and over again. It can show up in a lot of ways and, as per usual, I don't have one formula for knowing when it's time to do some grief work vs. something else. For myself, if I notice I'm in a pattern where blaming, anger, and resentment are the primary activities and feelings, it's usually a clue to me that I might have something to accept and mourn.

Acceptance is a really loaded word and has a lot of baggage. I want to unpack it a little bit. I don't mean that we accept abuse, violence against us or another, or any other situation or behavior that affronts our human dignity. Instead, I mean we accept the way reality is *in this moment* so that we can make a choice about what to do next. For example, if I have a simple but repetitive conflict with a partner about the dishes, acceptance might mean I accept that my current strategy for resolving the issue isn't working. Or suppose I have frustration with a relative who has views deeply divergent from mine and they refuse to talk with me about it anywhere except in Facebook comments on posts and I'm in a continual cycle of conflict with them in these comments. Acceptance here might mean that *for now* I stop trying to change their minds in this way, in this format.

In these conflicts we can get a kind of tunnel vision, where we're focused on one way of trying to make the situation work. Or maybe we've tried a lot of other ways and we're fixated on one strategy because admitting that it's not working will

leave us feeling hopeless. We compartmentalize and block the feelings of hopelessness or sadness and continue on with anger and resentment at the person we're in a conflict with. Even if you don't recognize yourself in some of these descriptions, you might recognize the person or people you're accompanying through conflict. As third-party interveners, we can help in some of these situations by compassionately naming what we're noticing and offering some space for them to grieve. This might sound something like, "This situation has been frustrating and I wonder if it's even harder to think about the possibility that it won't work at all" or "You're so wishing they would change and it's hard to know that you can't make them. Have you thought about what you'd do if this situation never changes?" And then we might just hold space for some tears and breathing together.[68] I would guess I'm employing grief or mourning work in conflict about 95 percent of the time—it's around acceptance that we can't force someone to do something.

The interesting thing about mourning is that once we stop blocking it, we often have an outflowing of creativity. It's like we're stuck on one side of a river and all of our favorite things are on the other side. We know that crossing the river is hard, we're going to be sore, it will make us tired. And we're so focused on the pain of crossing the river that we forget what awaits us on the other side. We can get like that about grief too. We get really focused on how bad it will be to feel bad and we get fearful. One of the most wonderful and terrible things about everything in our lives, including feelings, is that nothing lasts forever. I've talked to countless people, and been with them as they start to open up some of these compartments, that worry that if they open these boxes, if they touch into this pain and let themselves cry, they'll never stop. This worry is yet to happen. I have seen years of pent up grief start to spill out and it's big and it needs a nice safe container, but "no feeling is final."[69] If you're working with someone in a conflict who's experiencing a lot of pain and starting to mourn, you might set up some small

68 I often tell folks that crying is an evidence-based practice. We actually cope more quickly with challenges where we want to cry and allow ourselves to do so. (Rogers 2020).

69 This is a line from an excellent poem by Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, "Go to the Limits of Your Longing." You can find a link to a website with it being read on the On Being website (2010) in the bibliography.

rituals or scheduled grieving. It sounds ridiculous, but I'm not kidding! When we're out of practice with grief, we have to first set up systems to remember to feel it at all. I sometimes will ask a person I'm working with, "What do you have to grieve today?"

ADVICE, SUGGESTIONS, AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Believe it or not, the last strategies I want to cover for third-party intervention are some techniques for giving advice and problem-solving. At this point, it's probably no surprise to you that I think we ought to be extremely judicious about when we give advice or suggestions. When someone explicitly asks for it, or answers "yes" to you asking if that's what they're looking for, are the two main times to pull those suggestions out. Sometimes, though, we might have some piece of information or suggestion that feels really important or juicy or valuable and we want to see if it's okay to share it. In these instances, MI has a great little strategy that comes in handy. It's called Elicit-Provide-Elicit (EPE) or ask-give-ask. It's really what it says on the tin, but here's a bit of a breakdown:

- **Elicit/Ask:** The first step in this process is actually two sorts of questions. The first is about consent. Some examples: Is it okay if I share something with you? Is it okay if I bring this up? Is it okay if we talk about this? Someone will almost always answer "yes" to this question so pay attention to their tone, body, language, and what the quality of the "yes" is. If you hear a "no" in that "yes," reconsider. You can double check that it's ok, or offer them an out. For example: "After I asked that, I realized that it's probably just not helpful right now! Sorry about that, please keep telling me what's going on . . ." Or: "It kinda sounds like you're not sure if you want to hear advice right now and I totally get that, how about we just drop it for now, but if you want to know later or something I'm happy to bring it up again." The second type of question is to ask what they already know or think about the topic. This is an especially useful step if the thing you're offering is information or concrete strategies for something. This first set of

questions can help to make sure we don't give people information they either don't want or already have.

- **Provide/Give:** If you've gotten true consent to provide a suggestion, now's your time! I suggest making it brief and only one to two things, max. If you start spitting out a bunch of suggestions when the person felt like they were giving you permission for just one, they might feel like you tricked them and start disengaging. Here, you can even relay information that the person didn't provide and that you think they have a knowledge gap about based on their responses to your first questions.
- **Elicit/Ask:** What do they think about what you just suggested or said?

This is a strategy that can be useful even in the medical profession where it's assumed folks are going to tell us what to do and offer advice. There are three reasons I think this strategy is highly useful in these situations: 1) If someone doesn't want your information or advice, then you're truly wasting both of your time by offering it. 2) If someone has already tried or already knows the information or suggestion you're going to share with them, then why bother sharing it? 3) Asking if someone wants to hear what we're going to say reminds both of you that they have autonomy in this interaction and that they aren't just a receptacle for your ideas or thoughts.

There's nothing wrong with having ideas or information to share and the more we do this with consent and care, the more someone will be able to receive our gifts.

Part Three: Helping Ourselves in Conflict

Chapter Ten:
PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS IN CONFLICT

It's wonderful to get assistance from a third party during a conflict if you've got someone available. However, even someone with a deep bench of support is going to need some go-to practices to process or cope with conflict on their own.

We have a lot of complex ways to analyze and talk about conflict, but your body mostly has one interpretation of it: stressful. Our bodies don't care much what the conflict is about or our nuanced explanations for how it started. It reacts, pretty much, the same way every time by raising the stress response. This is a generalization and there are definitely exceptions to the rule. For example, if you've been working in conflict transformation for a long time you might have a higher stress threshold. Additionally, specific relationships might garner different stress responses and we might find, for instance, that conflicts with our parents cause a bigger stress reaction than with a friend or a stranger. But on the whole, when we are in a conflict, we get some stress activation. In this chapter, I'll discuss a few of these strategies as well as a little background into how conflict can impact our bodies and stress ust out. First, let's look just a little more closely at what's going on when we have a stress reaction.

OUR BODIES SYMPATHIZE WITH US

A lot of our body's functioning is done automatically for us without a lot of intervention from our thinking brains and, in fact, if we had to intervene, stuff would fall apart pretty

quickly. To put a finer point on it, we don't have to consciously tell our bodies to do any of the following: breathe, blink, digest food, pump blood through our organs, and about a million other things that our bodies will just go on doing without us making a decision to do so. And thank whatever, or whomever, you like to thank for things because we would quickly perish if we needed to negotiate all those tasks. All this automatic work that your body does is through the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system can be divided roughly into two sections: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems. This is a simplified analogy but one I find useful when thinking about stress: you can think of these two systems as parallel lines that don't cross; you're either in one or the other. The sympathetic side gets you ready for action; this is our stress and activation side. If we're getting ready to play a sport, run away from danger, take a test, give a speech, or get in a heated Facebook comment debate with Uncle Rick about wearing a mask during a pandemic, we're hanging out on this side of our nervous system. I like to remember this by saying, "The sympathetic nervous system *sympathizes* with our need to escape danger." Meanwhile, the parasympathetic nervous system, sometimes called our "Rest and digest" system does the opposite; it helps us chill out. But let's stick with the activating sympathetic system for now.

A lot changes in our bodies when this system is activated. Here's a non-comprehensive list of some of what happens:

- Heart rate rises
- Blood pressure increases
- Breathing usually quickens and may be more shallow
    - We may over-ventilate ourselves (hyperventilation) which can make us feel like we'll pass out
- Muscles tense up, especially in some of the major muscle groups like our quadriceps and buttocks
- Our digestion is largely shut off—peristalsis slows or stops (this is the squeezing motion that the muscles in our digestive tract do to move food along)
- More glucose (blood sugar) is released into the bloodstream

- Our vision changes, we might get a sort of tunnel vision and lose some ability to read facial expressions
- We might get sweaty, especially under our arms and our palms

All of these changes, and many more that aren't listed, serve the purpose of helping you survive a dangerous situation. Unfortunately, having this system triggered over and over again is also dangerous and poses a lot of health risks for us. Our bodies want to reach a sort of equilibrium with stress, called "allostasis." We experience a stress and then we come down from that stress into rest.

Imagine you are a passenger in a car and you see another car swerve into your lane and almost hit you. You will likely experience a big triggering of this stress response. Once you see the threat is over and you get to get out of the car and go for a walk or drink some water or talk to whomever was driving about how bonkers it was that someone almost hit you—as long as nothing else super stressful happens that day—your body is going to be able to make it back to that allostasis. You might have some elevated stress hormones on board like adrenaline or cortisol for a bit longer than you feel them, but soon enough your system settles.

However, if a stressful event is happening to you over and over again during the day, your body is going to keep a certain amount of stress on board because a) it can't get rid of the hormones fast enough to get you back to baseline and b) it becomes adaptive to keep you a little bit stressed since the feedback loop it's getting is that it's in danger more often than not. If this kind of danger-stress feedback loop is happening when you're a kid, it can impact how your body handles stress, and how you perceive danger, as an adult. When someone discusses the developmental tasks of various childhood ages, they're usually referring to psychological and learning tasks. But our bodies have a lot of tasks to accomplish when we're younger that don't just involve our cognitive and emotional states, such as building an immune system, and these physical tasks are informed by our environment. If we have a lot of danger triggering a high stress response, it will influence the ways in which certain systems develop. Our brains and bodies

tend to build a lot of resources and capacities around what it deems most useful and needed. So, if we need to be stressed out a lot in order to survive a dangerous home environment and get our needs met, for example, then we might adapt in all sorts of ways to survive and these adaptations can stay with us through adulthood.

In a landmark study done in the mid-90's, it was shown that there's a correlation between really stressful events when we're kids and lots of other struggles later in life. This study, called the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE),[70] helped seed the development of lots of further research in this area and helped folks begin to understand the links between high stress and trauma as young folks and its effects later in life. The reasons for this correlation are complex, multifaceted, and not fully agreed upon. However, there's pretty strong agreement from most folks that it has to do with the cumulative impact of stress.

Earlier in this book, we spent some time talking about the ways our experiences as young folks might have influenced our approaches to conflict as adults. Here though, I'm focusing more on how some of these early lessons might manifest in our bodies during conflict. If we've lived through and under a lot of toxic stress or trauma, conflict might pose a different kind of threat to us than if we don't have this stress on board. This can happen in at least three ways. To begin with, if we are operating at a higher baseline of stress and are in a sympathetic response through much of the conflict, then we might be less accurate in our interpretations of nonverbal communication. For instance, if we're in a sympathetic response and we can't tell what someone's facial expression means, we are more likely to interpret it as negative towards us or threatening in some way. On top of that, it's harder for us to access our full executive functioning in these moments and we may struggle to communicate as well as we'd like to. If we're in a sympathetic response and the person we're in conflict with isn't, this can amplify our sense of ineffectiveness and likely drive up the stress response more. Secondly, conflict can add to our cumulative

70 See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's site "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)" (2021)

stress, which has serious negative health consequences for us. Finally, we might have specific trauma triggers that can become activated by or during conflict.

The word "triggered"is sometimes used in a cavalier or general way to mean anything that brings up a sore subject for someone or bothers them. That certainly can happen in a conflict, but here I'm using trauma triggers to mean anything that brings up a past traumatizing event. Often, they are connected to one of our senses, like a certain color, or a smell, or the sound of someone's voice, and they may or may not be directly related to the trauma itself. Our brains do some acrobatics around our memory when something traumatizing happens to us. It's like they say "Uh oh, something real bad is happening, let's really vividly hold on to some information so that we can make sure to escape this situation in the future!" This can seem like a strange strategy if you've experienced trauma and its subsequent triggers before because you may have very little cognitive memory of the traumatic event itself but a powerful memory of some random sensory experience, like the vision of a green water bottle you saw on a table right before the event happened. So triggers can be really tricky because we don't always know what they are, what's caused them, or when they're going to show up!

If you've got high stress going on and then you get triggered on top of it, it can be hard to imagine how you're going to get through a conflict. I don't have a one-size fits all (which by the way, doesn't exist) strategy here. I encourage folks to explore trauma-treatment modalities with therapists and other healers that they trust to get through some of these tough experiences. In the meantime though, let's move on to a few suggestions for getting through stress and triggers in conflict with a little more ease.

EVERYDAY PRACTICES TO LOWER OVERALL STRESS

Gosh, this is a boring answer, but if you can practice something most days that feels good and de-stressing to you, then you're well on your way to offloading some of that cumulative stress. The more you can turn down the volume on your stress at baseline, the easier it will be for you to move through the stress

of conflict (or any other stressful events). When I've done workshops on self-care or stress strategies, I've found that almost everyone knows what helps them to be less stressed on a daily basis; these workshops are really about reminding us what helps us and less about gaining knowledge about new strategies. Do you know what those de-stressing practices are for you?[71] Some of the most common I've heard are: connecting to a spiritual practice such as prayer or meditation, meditation practices such as a breathing and/or mindfulness activity, creativity practices like journaling and drawing, and movement based activities like walks, yoga, and sports/exercise. Whether one of these is your jam, or something else entirely, my guess is that, like my workshop participants, you know of *something* that works well for you if done daily. So, if you were looking for a little more motivation to either get back into or start a daily restorative habit, perhaps the knowledge that it will likely help you get through tough conflicts will help.

IN-THE-MOMENT PRACTICES TO HELP WITH STRESS RESPONSES

Daily practices can work wonders to get our overall stress levels and sympathetic activation a bit lower on a consistent and persistent basis, but sometimes we need a little supplementation with an in-the-moment strategy to help us cope with high activation. To be honest, there's not a huge dividing line between the kinds of calming activities you'd do everyday and what might work in an emergency. Though many of them could be done for either purpose, I find it helpful to have a sort of list of things I can pull out for some internal stress first aid.

Naming and Changing Sensations

There are a lot of clues in our bodies that our stress level is rising and noticing what's happening can be a huge step in lowering that activation. When you're feeling a bit stressed,

71 In this case, I'm referring to the de-stressing activities that feel restorative or regenerative to us in some way. These activities leave us feeling rested, energized, or better in some way after doing them. Some things that we do at the end of a tough or stressful day, however, are less restorative and more like eating an ice cream cone when you're hungry: the ice cream may help a little but it's not exactly meeting your nutritional needs. In this category we find things like binging a Netflix show, drinking a glass (or more) of an alcoholic beverage, online shopping, or scrolling for a long time through our favorite app.

try to notice where the sensations are in your body and name specifically what you feel. Sometimes the practice of noticing and naming is enough and we start to feel a bit more calm. If not, another step can be to do the calmer opposite of whatever you're noticing. For example, if you notice your shoulders rising up towards your ears, you can actively move them back down into a more relaxed position. These sorts of activities can help us tell our bodies, "Hey, thanks for trying to help out but I'm actually good right now! No need to stress!" Most of the actions that will help us relax a bit more in these states are going to involve bringing some consciousness to various muscle groups to get them to release or relax. Below is a list of some of the things we might commonly notice in our bodies along with some actions to try instead:

Stress Response in Body	Conscious Responses
Raising shoulders	Lowering shoulders
Balling up hands into fists	Opening palms, clenching and unclenching
Tightening jaw	Open mouth, wiggle jaw a little, consciously unclench jaw muscles
Fast breath or breath holding	Try one deep breath and then some slow breaths in through the nose
Scrunching face up	Blink or flutter eyes, drop muscles in face, use slight smile at corners of mouth
Tightening in chest	Breathe in deeply while spreading arms out wide or up over head, drop arms gently with exhale. Repeat for several cycles of breath
Tight feeling in neck or trapezius muscles	Drop shoulders, move head gently to stretch the neck. Massage neck gently with thumbs

Breathing Practices

If I had to name only one strategy to help myself through stressful conflicts it would be this, to breathe slowly through my

nose, down into my belly. So many books have been written on how powerful breathing practices can be and I can't even begin to do the topic justice here. Let's talk a little bit about why these practices are so powerful.

As we've discussed, our autonomic nervous system is just not under our conscious control. And if you've experienced a lot of trauma in your life that gets activated by stressful and conflictual circumstances then you might feel like your body is being hijacked by some external force of which you have no control. We can't really consciously tell our digestive tract to turn the peristalsis back on or our pupils to go back to a normal size. But we *can* work on our breath. And our breath has some direct messaging with our heart which can help us jump back over to the parasympathetic side of the tracks. It's very hard for our bodies to stay convinced that we are in physical danger if we're breathing slowly and deeply. It's like the best body hack you could ask for and though you'll get better at this hack with practice, you can do it right away and as long as you're alive and conscious, this strategy is available to you.

If you stood in front of a room and asked everyone to take a deep breath, what do you think you'd notice? Most of the time, what we'll see, at least in most of the United States, is a room full of folks with their shoulders spiking up towards their ears. Many of us think moving our chest and shoulders up and gulping for air is a great way to get a big breath in. However, having our bellies puff out instead is more likely to get us a fuller breath. Stick with me for a brief and very simplified physiology spiel.

In our abdomen and lower chest cavity is a handy, and frankly pretty weird muscle, called the diaphragm. This muscle looks a bit like a parachute-shaped lid that's either closing the bottom of the chest or the top of the organs in the rest of the abdomen. When we breathe in, it contracts and moves down, creating space for air to enter the lungs. And when we exhale, it relaxes and moves back on up the chest. Our heart rate increases a little bit when we inhale and decreases a little when we exhale. And our diaphragms help our heart figure out what to do by telling it what's going on with breathing in our bodies. Our hearts then respond in kind by speeding up or slowing down. The slower we are breathing and the longer our exhale, the

more our hearts get the message that it's time to chill. This communication is mediated by a really big and branchy nerve called the "vagus nerve." The vagus nerve is basically in charge of our parasympathetic nervous system (the chill system) and the more it's stimulated, the more we are put into the parasympathetic system. In fact, if it's overstimulated we can have heart problems like bradycardia, which is a too-slow heart rhythm. Slow breaths, especially those with long exhales, are excellent ways to stimulate our vagus nerve and thus, get over to the parasympathetic system.

In short, focus on those belly breaths. Here are a few techniques to utilize this newfound information:

Box breathing: A breathing cycle where you hold your breath both after the inhalation and the exhalation, all for the same amount of time, usually to a count of four. So, inhale for a count of 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4.

4:8 Breathing: In this technique, you inhale for a count of 4 and exhale for a count of 8. Depending on your breath capacity, this might not feel like a good fit for you and you'll need to experiment with different numbers to find the right fit. The overall point of this practice is to make your exhales longer than the inhales, potentially twice as long (or longer if you can manage it). If you're having trouble extending your exhale, it can help to count out loud rather rapidly as you exhale until your breath is barely a whisper and you can feel your core braced in.

Even breathing: In this technique, you just try to make your inhale and exhale the same length, and a bit slower than your normal rate.

There are so many more breathing practices to activate the parasympathetic system than are listed here. Doing any of these in a moment of high stress can help switch us out of our fight/flight/freeze response. And just like anything else, the more you practice them, the better you get at it. I highly recommend giving them a whirl when you're just a little annoyed or frustrated or in a small disagreement with someone,

then slowly titrating your practice up to when you're in a full blown conflict or stress response.

Other Practices for Hacking the Parasympathetic System

Like I said, the vagus nerve is pretty weird and there are other ways to activate it besides breathing techniques. Here are a few of them in case one strikes your fancy:

- Dunking your face in ice cold water: This practice activates something that all mammals have called the "diving reflex." Essentially, it's a great self-preservation response our bodies have to keep us alive if we're submerged in water. Our vagus nerve tells the heart to slow way down and also constrict blood vessels in most of the body—both of these measures preserve oxygen, which obviously we're not equipped to get from the water.
- Laughing: This stimulates diaphragmatic breathing, and thus the vagus nerve.
- Humming/Singing/Gargling: The vocal cords and surrounding muscles are connected to the vagus nerve and it's believed that any of these activities can help to stimulate the nerve.
- Valsalva Maneuver: This is a fancy name for the feeling you get right before you're going to sneeze or when you bear down to poop. It's like trying to exhale very hard but with a closed mouth and holding your breath.

While any of these practices could potentially help us when we're really escalated from a conflict, there are probably some that we're comfortable doing in front of someone else and some that we're not. If I'm in the middle of a verbal fight with my partner, it might really help me to dunk my face in cold water, but I'm probably not going to choose to do that. However, most of the breathing practices, once you've taken them for a test drive, can be done even while you're in heated debate. Since we're unlikely to be able to do things like count or use a timer in these moments, my general suggestion would be to just focus on

breathing slowly, moving the belly up and down, and through the nose if possible.[72]

PRACTICES TO TRY LATER

There are some practices that are good to try out later, not because they're weird to do in front of someone, but because they'll usually require that we're not in a super escalated state. A few of them take a fair bit of concentration as well, making them best as solo practices.

More Breathing Practices

Alternating nostril breathing: This is an active practice involving the use of your hands on your nose, so you're more likely going to want to try this on your own or with others practicing the same technique. Start by closing the nostril of one side of your nose, let's say the right, with a finger, then inhaling through the left nostril. Plug the left nostril, breathe out through the right. Breathe in through the right, plug the right. Breathe out through the left, then in through the left, plug the left. Continue in that pattern.

Cardiac coherence breathing: This breathing technique attempts to align the breath rate with the needs of the cardiac system. Essentially, you're slowing down your breathing, which slows the heart rate and helps even out the rhythm. For most folks, this rate is about 5-6 breath cycles (an inhale and an exhale) per minute. To begin, set a timer for a minute and count how many breath cycles you naturally have, without trying to change your pattern. Assuming you have more than 6 breath cycles, set a timer again and this time try to slow your breathing and see if you can shave off a cycle or two until you get to 5-6 per minute.

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72 I'm not going to go into it here, but there's lots of good and compelling evidence about the importance of breathing through the nose, including helping to calm us down and lower blood pressure. For more on this, check out the very fun to read, Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art by James Nestor (Nestor 2020).

Seeking Self-Clarity

In earlier sections I discussed the value of helping someone find clarity about what some things they might be wanting or needing in a conflict might be. Often, when we're really upset, we've got this running internal monologue going about all the ways we're mad and why we're upset and why we're right and why the other person is wrong and on and on. Essentially, it's a long list of complaints. We're usually really focused on what we don't like in these moments; rarely are we thinking about what we really *want*. This next practice can help us "flip the script" and change perspectives into naming what it is that would help us feel settled, soothed, or just generally better.[73] The first step is to come up with a pithy way to describe what you don't like or are frustrated about in one sentence. For instance, if I'm in a fight with my partner about deciding who is going to plan and make dinner, I might have a sentence like, "I have to do everything; she can't even plan one meal!" Next, examine the sentence to see if you can find your wish behind the complaint. In my example, it might be that I want a break from meal planning, or perhaps I want to feel like things are equitable in the relationship. Then, put that wish/desire/want into a sentence. It can be helpful to start it off with something like, "I love it when . . ." or "It's great when . . ." or "I enjoy it when . . ." So in my example, I might say something like, "I love it when I feel like things are shared equally" or "I feel great when I rest in the evenings." This simple reframing practice can help us in a number of ways by relaxing our nervous system, helping us get clarity about what would feel good, and stopping the negative inner monologue. It can also help us to find a request to make to the person we're in conflict with, which can be more connecting than making a complaint to them. As an extra bonus, try repeating your reframed phrase a few times, like you would if you were doing the negative self-talk and notice how you feel differently than before when you were monologuing about the problems with the other person, conflict, etc.

Processing with Expression

When we think of conflict, many of us imagine people yelling and gesticulating or maybe even physically harming one

73 This practice is adapted from Mary Mackenzie's self-empathy practice, filmed and viewable on youtube (Yen 2008).

another. But for many folks, this isn't at all what conflict looks like for them. For those of us that tend towards avoid-and-accommodate conflict styles, we might be bottling up, pushing aside, or straight up ignoring our thoughts and feelings related to a conflict. Processing some of this stuff out through creative expression can be really helpful because not only do we get some emotional relief, but we can also become better at expressing ourselves in other ways and gain clarity around the conflict in general. A former colleague of mine, Amy Scheel-Jones, a long time counselor and consultant on a variety of topics related to trauma, grief, and resiliency, says, "Sometimes you just have to 'blank' it out! I mean, write it out, draw it out, dance it out, yell it out, run it out, paint it out, sing it out!" In other words, do whatever works best for you to start moving some of the stagnant emotional waters that can accumulate. It doesn't have to be pretty or shared with the world, but finding a form of expression can help prepare you to tackle tough conflicts.

Chapter Eleven:
COGNITIVE PRACTICES: MENTAL MODELS AND PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS

Our internal, solo practices can also extend into how we think about conflict, both in general and with respect to particular disagreements and misalignments. Like any of the other strategies we've looked at, the more you try these skills out, the better you'll get at them and the more you'll be able to use them in tougher and tougher moments. In this section, I'll discuss three different, but related, ways of perceiving and thinking about conflict that can help us unlock doors to solutions for some of the conflicts we experience. First, let's spend a minute talking about mental models.

Mental models are representations we have in our minds for how things work in the world. They're our implicit explanations for how things relate to one another and how the world (or different aspects of the world) works. When we're children we often have mental models that we learn are incorrect later in life. For instance, we might have a mental model that represents the world as including many types of creatures that we've never experienced ourselves before. Within this model is a practice of information seeking and confirmation through our parents, or other adults, and this model works well for a time until you learn that a number of things are not actually real—including dragons, unicorns, the tooth fairy, and Santa. (In some cases, this can even work backwards, I unlearned the existence of narwhals along with unicorns and then discovered narwhals are actually real around 30 years old.) Some of our mental models were built semi-consciously as we learned them in school or other sources of education and some of our mental models we

just picked up along the way. Most theories we have to describe phenomena in the world could also be called mental models. The cool thing about these models is that we can unlearn and learn new ones, within reason. For instance, it would be hard for us to unlearn our mental models around gravity unless we go to space. We have mental models about human behavior, and specifically about conflict. These are our theories to explain why we get into conflict, what the conflict means, how the parts of a conflict interact, and what our expected outcomes might be based on the model. For a lot of my young life, my mental model of conflict was something like this:

> Conflict is what happens when two people disagree about the truth. There is only one truth, so one of the people is right and the other is wrong. If they have a reasonable argument, explaining their evidence, they'll be able to figure out who has the truth and end the conflict.

Easy peasy! Just have a rational debate and see who's right! As I got older, I realized this model was tragically flawed. Here are just a few issues with it:

- A lot of conflicts don't have to do with truths or untruths. For instance, a neighbor could argue with me about mowing my lawn before 9:00 a.m. and there isn't really a "fact" or "truth" to parse out there.
- Each person might have some portion of the facts or truth, or none of it.
- Unless the argument is purely just about facts, rarely have I seen "reasonable" arguments or debates resolve a conflict. For instance, when someone showed me evidence of the existence of narwhals, it instantly ended our very short argument about whether or not they were real.
- Folks bring emotions to conflicts that may require attention in order to resolve the conflict and don't have to do with "truth" per se.
- Folks might have the same facts but have wildly different interpretations of them, also resulting in conflict.

- One person might not have the training, resources, or physical ability to reasonably argue, so that strategy is not always available.

Anyway, you get the point. There's probably more wrong with this model than there is right with it. Still, I stuck with this model for a long time because that's what we tend to do with these models. We start to get some evidence that they don't work, but it doesn't occur to us that our way of thinking about something is the problem. We just keep trying to cram things into the model until either there's just overwhelming evidence that it doesn't work and we go looking for something else, or we encounter another model that works better. Do you have a sense of what your own mental models are around conflict? They can be tricky to pin down, I think in part because they're built with other models, a big one being whatever our model of human nature is. Many of us have a model of human nature that is a sort of amalgamation of some economic theories around self-interested actions and a cut-throat interpretation of Darwin's evolutionary model of survival of the fittest. In conflict, it shows up a bit like this, "This person is just going to act in their own self-interest and I have to do the same or I'll be walked all over or lose every time." This model is such a bummer.[74] Fortunately, other models exist and there's increasing evidence that some of those based on self-interest and survival of the fittest are really incomplete and pretty inaccurate pictures of our nature (Bregman 2020). Let's discuss a couple different ways we can look at conflict that I think leave us more space for positively transforming situations.

CONFLICT AS INFORMATION

At this point, you probably already know that I don't think of conflict as bad or problematic. But for a long time I did and many of us hold that belief, or at least the feeling that it's bad. Certainly it can cause discomfort and stress. And often these feelings of discomfort from conflict get interpreted into something like, "I've done something bad or this person did something bad, or someone else did something bad." We make a leap from the experience of a feeling we don't enjoy to a kind of

74 For more on these models and how they're actually incorrect, check out the book Humankind: A Hopeful History by Rutger Bregman (Bregman 2020).

blame, directed at ourselves or others. This mental model offers us an opportunity to instead take these feelings as information, or feedback, about the state of something, often a system.

If I go to drive my car and I can't get it to move, I've got some information, right? I now have feedback about something needing to be changed. Maybe my battery is dead, or I need an alternator, or I just have the car in neutral. I might feel frustrated or annoyed that I need to do something with the information but I'm not mad at the information itself; the information is not the problem. We might think of conflict in the same way. It's information that some system or way of being needs attention and some kind of change in order to function properly, or even thrive. In the case of our conflicts, and not a car, we might have a conflict about dishes that is giving us information about a system for completing household chores; a conflict with our supervisor over a project deadline might be information about work distribution or decision-making authority for projects.

Using the "conflict is information" model allows us to approach conflict with more curiosity than animosity and to begin posing questions like, "What is this misalignment or conflict telling me or wanting us to know?" or "What systems, or ways of operating, could be adjusted to increase our well-being or functioning?" Approaching conflict with this mental model, in and of itself, is not going to solve a conflict I have with another person, but it may help me find solutions when I'm stuck or help me approach the other person in a different way (usually with less blaming and shaming) and find solutions through the conflict that work better for both of us.

Exercise: Actually applying this mental model will take practice, especially if it's not at all your norm. Begin by looking at any conflicts you've had in the past that have been resolved. Once you've identified one, reflect on what information that conflict might have been giving you and the other party. What system or way of operating together wasn't working well and needed to be changed in order to transform the situation?

Next, try examining some longer-standing unresolved conflicts. If you're struggling to come up with any, I suggest thinking of something from your family. See if you can apply

this framework to this conflict—what information is this conflict giving you? What system or way of being is it addressing? This kind of reflective inventory gets us in the habit of applying the model so that when we do find ourselves in an urgent conflict we apply the model to the argument in real-time. At first, this will likely be difficult to do in the moment, so get in the habit of taking time for yourself afterwards to reflect on what information the conflict is giving us. Then, eventually, with practice, we won't need to set aside separate times to think about conflict, this new mental model will come naturally. Note that we can apply this same practice approach to other mental models as well.

CONFLICT AS TEACHER

This model is related to the "conflict as information" model in that it involves bringing curiosity to our conflicts. It has a perhaps more personal approach in that we're invited to think about what opportunities the conflict is giving us that we've been wanting or needing to work on in order to continue our own development. For instance, do I get angry every time my dad implies someone in the Democratic Party is a fascist when he asks me for my thoughts on current events? If so, what opportunity for practice is presented to me in these moments and from my reaction? Maybe I want to work on a breathing practice or developing compassion for myself when I'm angry, so I could be grateful for this conflict for giving me the opportunity to practice. Because we don't get better at this stuff by just intellectualizing it and talking about it, we only get to improve when given the chance, and since I'm not very good at making myself as angry as my dad is at making me, now's my big chance! This one can really feel like a stretch for some folks. Like all of the practices we've discussed, leave it if it doesn't work for you! I like this one because it helps me have an almost happy and hopeful attitude about conflict, which inevitably impacts how the conflict goes for me, and I think, the other person too.

NEEDS-BASED CONFLICT ANALYSIS

The last model I want to review has some correlaries in multiple locations, including the 19th century organizational and management researcher, Mary Parker Follett; the famous negotiation treatise by a couple of Harvard dudes, *Getting to Yes;*[75] and the model developed by Marshall Rosenberg for Nonviolent Communication. The basics of this model, sometimes called the PIN model, are that there are deep needs associated with every conflict and that what people are actually arguing about is usually not the needs but instead some particular position or strategy. Or, as Mary Parker Follett puts it:

> There are three ways of dealing with difference: domination, compromise, and integration. By domination only one side gets what it wants; by compromise neither side gets what it wants; by integration we find a way by which both sides may get what they wish.

In this common conflict analysis model, we can think of any party to a conflict as having three relevant components:

- **Position:** This is the outward stance someone takes in a conflict. It could be what they're demanding or saying needs to happen. This is the outward articulation of the conflict from one party.
- **Interests**: These are the underlying reasons that someone says what they say, or takes the position that they take.
- **Needs**: These are the universal basic needs we've discussed before and encompass more than just food, water, and shelter. They are underlying both the interests and positions in a conflict.

Proponents of the PIN model also often posit that there are multiple points of overlap with both the interests and the needs for conflicting parties, meaning it's really just the positions that people are arguing about. So, if one is able to look past the position of another party, they're more likely to find a solution that works a bit better for everyone than simply one person getting their way with a position. Example: Let's say Mick and Antwon are roommates in a conflict over shower access in the

75 (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1986)

morning. Mick thinks Antwon is always trying to get away with more than his share of the resources and doesn't contribute to the upkeep of the house through chores very much. Antwon thinks that Mick is overly judgmental and critical and is always watching him and waiting to catch him doing something that Mick doesn't approve of. They're disagreements have come to a head over shower access in the morning because Mick wants Antwon to hurry up or entirely cede the shower to him in the morning. Mick's *position* is that he should be able to use the shower for as long as he wants in the morning because Antwon can use it any other time of day. His *interests* are to get to work on time and have things feel fair around the house. His *needs* are for respect and understanding. Antwon's *position* is that Mick needs to lighten up and stop tallying how much time he spends in the bathroom. His *interests* are in not having to look at charts to decide about bathroom time and to just use the shower whenever he wants. His *needs* are for ease and understanding. The PIN model helps us see what's underneath the surface of this conflict. If Antwon and Mick are able to move beyond their positions in this conflict, they're more likely to find a solution that meets their interests and needs. Perhaps after hearing from one another their needs for understanding are met and they come up with a plan that allows them to text each other about shower time, for example.

As mentioned earlier in the book, NVC has a model based on needs as well, though it's a little different from the PIN model. NVC teaches that we have universal basic needs and that we have feelings about these needs as well as strategies to try to meet them. When we're in conflict, it's usually because we are attached to and purporting a narrow set of strategies to get our needs met and the other person might be doing the same and/or is rejecting our strategies. When we're able to shift our perspective away from our strategies and focus on what our underlying needs are, we're more likely to find a solution that works for both parties. Though there are similarities between the two models, NVC has a much bigger focus on the relationships and connections between parties whereas the PIN model is mostly used for negotiation. NVC is focused on people giving and receiving from one another compassionately

and from the heart rather than trying to get the best outcome in a negotiated agreement. Followers of both the PIN and the NVC models also usually state that our needs are not actually in conflict because our needs are not mutually exclusive.

Learning and applying this model may take a little more practice, mostly because it's a bit more complicated than the other two. The essence of the model is that we can find collaborative solutions that will actually work for everyone once we can get past the surface-level positions or strategies. To implement this mental model on your own, I suggest applying the same framework I named for the first model, Conflict as Information. Two additional strategies can be helpful to internalize this model: 1) applying it to other people's conflicts and 2) diagraming it. Sometimes it's just really challenging to think so analytically about our own conflicts, so practicing with someone else's can be an easier place to start. I've even done this with characters on a show I'm watching for practice![76] To diagram this model, you might fill out something like the grid in the exercise, adapted from the USIP's Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators ("Peacebuilding Toolkit for Educators" n.d.):

Exercise:

Parties	**Positions:** What are each of the parties demanding or stating they want, must have, etc.?	**Interests:** Why does each party want what they want? Why are they choosing to take the position they've taken?	**Needs:** What are the underlying needs for each party? Which needs do you imagine would resolve the conflict if they were met?
Party 1			
Party 2			

76 Can you tell I'm writing this book during a pandemic where Netflix-watching is somehow turning into a strategy?

There are, of course, more mental models than I'm listing here that can help with conflict. Maybe you've even thought of a couple as you read this that you think might help, but haven't practiced using with conflict. Why not pull those bad boys out and experiment a little bit? Our thinking, cognitive processes, have much more of an impact on how we respond to things, including conflicts, than we'd like to imagine. I think a lot of us imagine that our internal lives are just their own thing and it's okay if we trash talk other people or wax poetic about how right we are and how wrong everyone else is in a conflict, but these ways of thinking actually show up in our external lives too. Our thoughts become our words and our actions, so it makes good sense, to me anyway, to spend some time training my thoughts in the direction I want them to head. Because even though we normally think about practice as associated with desired techniques for something, we actually get better at everything and anything we practice. If I spend my days thinking really negatively and angrily about other people and conflicts, then I'm going to get really good at being negative and angry. Instead, I want to train myself to get better and better at viewing and thinking of conflict as generative and life-giving.

Chapter Twelve:
TALKING WITH A THIRD PARTY ABOUT YOUR CONFLICT

When I talk with organizations, especially human resource departments, about working with third parties for conflicts, I usually get a really strong, pretty negative, reaction. And while I think this reaction exists outside of organizations too, I think using organizations to help explain this phenomenon is instructive. Also, I'm more likely to get active dissent about it in these more "business-like" settings. The party line here is that if you have a problem with someone (rarely do we say the word conflict!) you should have a direct conversation with them about it. What I've found in reality, however, is that it's super rare that folks actually engage in direct conversations about a behavior, practice, or conflict. Here are some of the most common strategies I've seen used in organizations *instead* of direct conversation:

- Talking to HR or a leader in the organization about the conflict.
- Asking the supervisor to talk to the person they're in conflict with or fix the conflict/problem.
- Holding a meeting to tell everyone not to do something that really only 1-2 people were doing.
- Sending an email to tell everyone not to do (or to do) something that only 1-2 people were/weren't doing.
- Creating a policy and a corresponding training or mass communication to intervene on a behavior that only 1-2 people are engaging in.
- Telling multiple other people about the behavior you don't like, starting a rumor mill/whisper campaign.

There are so many strategies for indirect conversation in a lot of places of business (I'm looking at you too, not-for-profits!) and I think the reasons are varied. Here are a few::

- We don't know enough about how to actually have these tough conversations without creating bad outcomes.
- We may hear that direct conversations are expected but notice that they are not the norm, and so we learn not to have them.
- We may witness folks receive pretty negative consequences for direct conversations about conflict and so choose not to try.[77]

Through a lot of this book, I've encouraged third party intervention because when wielded skillfully, it can transform tough conflicts. And because, despite our denial of its use, third-party intervention is a critical part of our social evolution as humans. There's no doubt that the practice can be fraught, however, if we're not intentional and mindful about its use. In the following sections, I'll discuss some selection criteria for finding our own intervener as well as some strategies for talking with someone who's giving you a lot of unsolicited advice.

SELECTION CRITERIA: CHOOSING OUR PEOPLE

I love my friend, Andre. He's sarcastic, witty, sardonic, super smart, and he's always got my back. He's helped me out of tough situations with a laugh and an "it's nothing" kind of attitude. But he's rarely the friend I go to if I'm in a conflict because he gets really riled up on my behalf and doesn't really help me figure out how to make peace. We can have great friends that aren't great third parties and I want us to spend a little time thinking about how we choose and who we choose when we're in a conflict with someone else.

If the anger or escalation within me about a conflict is a fire, then the first thing I want to ask myself before talking to someone else about the conflict is, "Do I want someone who will pour water or gasoline on my flame?" And sometimes, I want to talk with someone who won't add to the fire, but will tend

77 This is very prevalent and is indeed part of white supremacy culture.

to it gently so I can use the energy from it to make change. For most conflicts, I want someone who is not going to just jump on an anger bandwagon with me, because while it might feel nice to have someone "side" with us, it can actually push us farther away from being able to find a resolution with the person we're in conflict with. Perhaps you've had the experience before of being a little upset with someone, talking with someone else who actually gets you even angrier and indignant, and then coming back to the person you are unhappy with with so much animosity that it feels disproportionate to them, and maybe to you too upon reflection. I've definitely experienced this myself as well as seen it in many conflicts. What people say to us when we're angry or upset can really make a difference in how we think about, and thus respond to, a conflict—so I hope we're choosy about our confidants. Some other things I might look for in selecting a third party might be:

Their ability to empathize with or understand the other person's perspective. This doesn't mean I want them to play devil's advocate or reflexively try to get me to see the other person's side of things. It means that I trust they can approach conflict from multiple angles and that they are able to pull out some perspective-taking strategies when I'm ready for them.

They won't hold a perpetual judgment against the other person. I've talked with a lot of folks who won't talk with their friends about conflicts because their friends will look at them differently and/or judge them for continuing to communicate or be in relation with the person they're conflicted with. Sometimes managing the friend's emotions about the conflict is more work than the conflict itself and so they won't bother discussing it.

They won't gossip about the issue or conflict. Might seem like an obvious criteria, but this can be a big deterrent for using some folks for third-party work. You might feel that there's just no way they won't talk to multiple other people about the conflict, so unless you're okay with a story getting around, don't go to that person.

They're compassionate and have strong values and boundaries. While I really want to talk with someone that can see the good in others and perspective-take, I also want a friend who will speak up if what they're hearing is that someone is being abusive or violent towards me. I want them to be able to express concern or worry, skillfully.

These are just a few of the selection criteria I might consider when thinking of talking with someone about one of my conflicts. They might not be the most important criteria for you or you might have additional pieces that are missing. Whether the same or different, I'd really encourage all of us to notice and investigate who we choose to talk with and why we choose them.

Exercise: Here are some questions to help investigate why we choose who we do as a third-party:

- Who do I talk with the most when in conflict?
- How do I feel before and after I talk with them? Do I usually feel more angry and upset?
- Do I feel listened to and understood?
- Do I spend a lot of time defending either myself or the person I'm in conflict with?
- Do they get angry or impatient with me quickly, especially if I don't take advice they're giving?
- Do they make comments about my conflict that feel voyeuristic and like they're collecting it as a story to tell others?
- Is it a reciprocal relationship? Do they also talk with me about conflicts?
- Do they also challenge me to look at things differently after I feel understood and use good timing?
- Do I like talking with this person because they agree with me and tend to think I'm always right? Have they continued to agree or "side" with me even when I've realized later that I was incorrect or wrong about something?

I'm not advocating for perfection in my friends when it comes to talking with me about a conflict. I think and care hard about this stuff and I'm really confident that I slip up on the regular. I think it's great to be choosy, and also, we can coach our friends into what we need if they're open to it. For instance, we might have a friend that is overall a great listener and perspective-taker, but chronically gives us advice or tries to problem-solve when we're not looking for it.

ASKING FOR UNDERSTANDING FROM AN ADVICE-GIVER

I want to spend some time specifically talking through how we might ask for what we need from a particular kind of friend, a UAGer, because I think this is the most common bump in the road we tend to hit when talking with someone about conflicts. I also think it's a pretty changeable behavior for folks, if they're open to it, and there's also a few strategies we can employ as the person in conflict to get what we're needing.

The first and perhaps most obvious strategy is to simply ask the person not to do it. Of course, I've got some caveats to this tip. I find it helpful to have meta conversations with folks I'm close with, or conversations about our conversations. So, during a time when I'm not actively seeking help from them about a conflict I might bring up wanting something a little different from them when I do have a conflict. Here are a couple examples for how you might phrase this kind of meta-request:

- The last time we talked about my fight with Dan, you gave me a lot of tips for what to do. And it's not that they weren't good tips, it's that sometimes that's just not what I'm really wanting. Next time we talk about that stuff, would you mind hanging on to your tips until I'm less annoyed with him or until I ask for them?
- I've noticed lately that I'm finding it really hard to take in any suggestions or feedback about my conflict with Dan. It's just been hard and it makes it a lot easier for me to feel understood when folks don't offer those suggestions. Would you be willing to hang on to suggestions next time we talk?

- I don't know why, but getting tips, suggestions, or problem-solving when I haven't asked for it just really irks me. Would you be cool with just chilling with that stuff next time we talk? I totally value your thoughts. I just can't hear them in the times when I'm frustrated about stuff.

You might also try asking the person to stop in the moment, though I think for most people this is a bit more challenging. Here are some examples of how you might give that a whirl:

- I wanna tell you about a fight I'm in with Dan, but please don't give me any advice or suggestions; I'm just not looking for that right now.
- I want to stop you there. I'm not up for advice right now, can you just listen instead?
- I know you give great advice but I'm not looking for problem-solving at the moment. I just want to be able to vent for now.
- I've been hearing a lot of advice on this situation and I'm really not here for it right now. Could you just listen instead?

There's a lot of variations on this request or statement, but the general idea is to directly ask or tell the person that's not what you want at the moment and either ask them just to listen or leave it to them to figure out what to do. There are a couple of tricky bits here. The first is that many of us struggle to tell people that something isn't working for us, and it's even harder when we feel like the person is being generous with us by listening to our problems. Another challenge is that, unfortunately, people don't always receive this feedback and request in the spirit with which it's given. They might be offended, hurt, or feel upset in some other kind of way by our request and then not fully listen to us. For instance, you might make the request, go on with your story, and then they say something like, "Well, you don't want to hear what I have to say, so I don't know what to tell you." Then it might feel like this person wasn't really listening to you but having their own internal monologue about being slighted. On top of that, they were likely still forming a judgment or opinion about what they think you ought to be doing and now they're just not telling you what it is. It's tough because what

we might really be wanting is for someone to just hear us with some nonjudgmental, listening ears—not that they just simply keep judgments and advice to themselves. For these reasons, I find it helpful not to just ask for what I *don't* want, but to ask for what I *do* want instead or as well.

So, what do we want? Not always, but usually, we're wanting some space to work things out ourselves in partnership with someone else. We want to feel understood by someone else who is not in the conflict and to perhaps receive some empathy for our situation. Basically, we want the things we went over in the first section on being a good third party! The two very concrete strategies I would suggest asking for from your listener/3rd party are reflections and empathy role-plays. And just like asking someone to stop doing something, we could do this as a meta-conversation or coach them to help us differently in the moment.

Asking for Reflections

Unless you're talking with someone who's very familiar with the practice of reflections, I wouldn't bother saying you want a "reflection." Here are some examples of how I might ask for this practice:

- I really want to talk with you about this and it helps me feel understood if you can just occasionally repeat back what I've said or what you're understanding from what I'm saying. Would you mind doing that?
- Can you tell me what you understood from what I'm saying?
- This isn't a listening test, it just really helps me understand myself better and know how well I'm explaining something if you can repeat back what I've said. Would that be okay with you?

You might also explain that you're not needing the person to repeat back verbatim what you said, you just want to hear that they get the general gist of your words.

Asking for Empathy Role-Plays

I think this is a very satisfying and underutilized strategy. It's satisfying because it kind of gives you this sense of what it

would be like to be really heard and understood by the person you're in conflict with, and that's something we're often craving in conflict. Essentially, you want to ask your listener to pretend they are the person you're in conflict with, but a version of them that is able to understand and hear you. Here are some examples of how to ask for that:

- I know Dan isn't in a place to listen and understand me right now but I still want that feeling because I think it would give me some relief. Would you be willing to just pretend you're Dan for a few minutes so I can tell you the things I want him to understand? It'd help if you could respond like him but when he's at his best and able to listen.
- Could you pretend to be Dan for a minute, but a version that's not so mad at me, so I can practice saying what I want him to hear? And even though Dan is not really listening to me right now, could you just pretend to really understand and get where I'm coming from?

Both of these strategies are squarely in the, "I really need to be understood and get some empathy camp," and wow, wouldn't it be great if that's all we needed for a conflict? But, it's not. To actually transform our conflicts we usually need to have a conversation with the person we're in conflict with and sometimes do some negotiation over a particular issue to get it resolved or transform the dynamic. Next up, how to get help with this step from a third-party.

PRACTICING WITH A THIRD PARTY

My typical experience with folks in conflict is that they have very little hope that a conversation will be productive or will help. Even when the conflict is seemingly minor, we often avoid talking about the issue because we know there's bad blood or misunderstanding and we just don't think it'll work. Practicing what we'll say and having someone respond to it can be really helpful in building our confidence that we can impact a situation for the better. It is, of course, no guarantee that the conflict will get resolved in a way that you want, but at the very least it can help us try. No challenge can be overcome that isn't at least faced. In an earlier section, I mentioned how Appreciative

Inquiry comes from a Constructivist framework: the idea that our words create meaning. I'd like to invite us to remember this perspective when thinking about practicing conflict with someone. There can be a great benefit in imagining and practicing a version of the conflict that goes well.

One way to envision how things could be better is to look to our past conflicts and practice a "do-over." I think do-overs are great to practice and role-play in general, even with the person you're in a conflict with. Here, though, I'm specifically recommending that folks practice a do-over of a past conflict they had with the person they're in a disagreement with now, with the support of the third-party. The reasons I recommend this strategy are:

- It can help you understand what's possible and what could work with the current conflict.
- It's low-risk since you're not practicing with the person you're in conflict with. You won't make it worse if you mess up or say something hurtful.
- It's a great warm-up activity before role-playing the actual conflict.

Sometimes doing a role-play like this is just the nudge you need to look at your conflict in a new light. You might have insights about how to approach the person, or do some internal work before talking with them, and there might be no further need for more discussion with the third party. But for more complex, protracted, or emotionally-laden conflicts, this is probably not going to be the only helpful intervention. In these cases, I recommend next moving on to role-playing the tough conversations about the conflict and using the same steps as in the exercise below (minus 3b). It may be more important to take some time-outs with this role-play since, presumably, you've got less distance and more emotional heat with a current conflict than one from the past.

Exercise: There's no secret sauce here—role-playing a do-over is a real trial-and-error activity and the best way to start is to jump in. In general, I suggest following the format below:

1. Pick a conflict you've had with this person in the past that didn't end the way you wanted it to, or that you can imagine could have gone a different (better) way.
2. Get consent to practice a role-play with your third party, obvs.
3. Set the scene.
    a. Give the person enough information that they can play the role of your conflicted party but don't give them a full post-mortem on the conflict.
    b. Let them know the outcome that happened and why you think it could have been better so they have a general sense of the direction you're heading.
4. Ask them to be relatively realistic but slightly more patient than the real thing. This is because you want to give yourself some time to think of what you want to say without the role-player realistically pressuring you to hurry up. The point is to practice how it could go, not worry about realistic timing.
5. Use time-outs if you need them. You could just ask for a time-out so you can collect yourself, or to get some advice or coaching from the third-party. I advise not over relying on this strategy, though. For instance, rather than stopping the role-play to ask how the third party thinks your conflicted person would respond, just let them respond as the conflicted person.
6. Debrief. Now is a good time to reflect for yourself how it went, what was good, what you'd like to tweak, and hear from your third party what they thought, what shifted, what could change, etc.
7. Repeat. This can take several cycles before you land on a version that feels realistic and like you learned something useful to take with you

When you've practiced with someone else and gotten the empathy and understanding that you need from a third party, it might be time for the big one . . . talking to the person you have a conflict with.

Chapter Thirteen: TALKING WITH THE PERSON YOU'RE IN A CONFLICT WITH

Here we are! All our training has been leading up to this moment! All right, not really. But up to this point, this book has been largely focused on third-party intervention for interpersonal conflicts for the untrained, non-professional. The reason for this focus is two-fold. First, I think non-professional third party intervention is both the most common and most overlooked aspect of conflict mediation and transformation work, so I wanted to spend the bulk of our time in this realm. The second is that most books on conflict are really about what this next section covers: what to do in your actual conversations with a person you're in conflict with. My approach here might be a little different from some of these books in that I'm not advocating any one particular model or approach. Much like the rest of this book, I'm going to present a bunch of different tools that I've found to be the most helpful, and I encourage you to try them out and experiment with what works for you. In the following sections, I'll cover some preparatory considerations (including figuring out if you're in a mutual or one-sided conflict), feedback tools, listening when you don't really want to, and collaborating on solutions.

SELF-CARE PREP

Perhaps before doing anything else, it's good to spend some time considering any accommodations you might need for this conversation to care for yourself and be relatively safe. I say "relatively" because, well, safety is relative! For some of us, any conversation that is about a conflict is psychologically unsafe because of our past or trauma, and for others, safety might mean no yelling. It's not that we can control for all these factors, but we can consider what's likely to happen given our knowledge

of the person and the conflict and what we want to do to set up support for ourselves before, during, and after the encounter.

Before the Conversation:

Consider what might help you feel ready and in your best mind-frame right before you talk with the person you're in a conflict with. Some ideas:

- A quick chat with someone that is helpful and grounding.
- A reminder phrase, prayer, saying, quote, etc. that helps you feel at your best.
- Breathing practice or other practice to help you stay connected to your parasympathetic system.
- Anything that feels caring or kind to yourself such as eating a favorite food.

During the Conversation:

Consider anything that might help you during the conflictual conversation, such as:

- A grounding object in your pocket.[78]
- A helpful phrase or mantra. I recommend making it very short and something you can remind yourself of quickly.
- Any practice you want to remember or do in the moment that's helpful, like a breathing exercise.
- Asking for a time-out or a break or a reschedule. It's okay not to be able to have all of our hard conversations all at once and sometimes we need to tap out.

After the Conversation:

What might be supportive to you when you wrap up the conversation? Some ideas:

- A conversation with a supportive friend

78 My favorite is a smooth and pleasing small rock. Is it weird? Maybe, but I love rocks.

- A hug
- A treat, like a favorite candy or beverage
- Listening to a song that helps you feel or get to your baseline

Sometimes when we're in a conflict, particularly a protracted one, we are having many conversations with the person, so it might not be or feel feasible to do much preparation before every conversation. If that's the case, I suggest doing some very small or short versions of prep for yourself anytime you can predict a conversation, and doing some more intentional and potentially more time-consuming prep when you know you'll have a longer conversation.

LOGISTICAL PREP

If you have an opportunity to do some planning or prep before conflict conversations then I also suggest considering a few logistical points.

Do they Know?

Did you ever run home from kindergarten and announce to a parent or sibling that you had a boyfriend and then have them ask, "Does he know that?" Sometimes conflicts can operate similarly. We might be really mad at someone, frustrated with them, and feel deeply conflicted with them and meanwhile they may have no clue. The strategies you use for your conversation(s) may be different based on whether or not this conflict is mutually felt and held, so it's good to ask yourself this question before you head into the discussion. It's also not at all unusual to think that a conflict is just one-sided, but it's actually held by both parties.

Medium Matters

I've joked with colleagues and peers before that I'm going to add "email ghostwriter" to my resume . . . It's truly staggering the number of intense, complex, and challenging discussions we attempt to have through email. I'm currently writing a book, so I understand the power and allure of the written word, but when it comes to conflicts, I would love for us all to be a bit more choosy about what we put in an email and what we save

for other mediums. Let's review a few of the mediums at our disposal and consider some of their pros and cons:

Messaging

This includes texts, messenger apps, direct messages, and any system where there is a text exchange that's not email.

Pros: Messaging can feel lower risk emotionally than some other forms of communicating. Another benefit is that it can happen synchronously or asynchronously.[79] The asynchronicity can feel especially relieving for folks who want more time to think through a response, for example. Additionally, using a text exchange can make it easier to titrate what your emotional level/response looks like to the other person. This might feel less vulnerable than another method, such as face-to-face when you might have to do a lot more work if you want to hide your feelings.

Cons: Because of the ease of masking our emotions, messaging can make it challenging for people to have an authentic sense of what's going on for the other person. Additionally, asynchronicity may increase tension and conflict in at least two ways. First, through the phenomenon of being "left on read."[80] This might increase tension between parties as the first person to send the message may interpret the lack of response as dismissive, disrespectful, ignoring them, etc. Secondly, it may drag the conflict on longer than it would otherwise go on through another medium. This can have the inadvertent consequence of worsening things as we may get more deeply invested in our "side" or narrative as time goes on. Another downside to using messages with conflict is that fluency with digital communication can vary

79 Synchronously just means the messaging is happening at the same time and asynchronously means happening at different times. For instance, if I'm texting my friend and I see she's messaging at the same time, that's synchronous. If I message her and she gets back to me a couple hours later, that's asynchronous.
80 This is when someone has read your message and you can see they've read your message and they don't respond, or don't respond in a timeframe that feels good to you.

greatly, especially across age groups. This can add a burden to a conflict as frustration might grow over *how* one party is or isn't using messages, regardless of the content of the conflict itself. Finally, losing the ability to rely on building understanding through body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues can increase the likelihood of folks misunderstanding one another and increasing tension or conflict.

Recommendations: I generally don't recommend using this form of communication for doing the heavy lifting in conversations surrounding conflict. That said, I think texting can be a convenient way to bring up a conversation with someone, get consent for bringing up a conversation for another time, organizing a meeting or talking time, and touching base after a hard or long conversation. Sometimes, it's also the only form of communication available to folks for a myriad of reasons. When this is the case, the "nonverbals" of texting can be even more critical to track and assess such as the use of punctuation, emojis, length of time between responses, time of the messages, etc.

Email

Pros: Similar to using messaging, email can feel lower risk emotionally than synchronous modalities. Because it's largely asynchronous, it provides similar benefits to messaging such as giving folks more time to think through what to say and being able to decide how much emotional vulnerability to express. Email, especially in workplace contexts, provides a means of documenting the conversation. Since email is generally a longer form than messaging, it can allow for more intentional organization of thoughts, points, requests, etc.

Cons: Email is subject to similar cons that messaging is, such as dragging on a tension or conflict and potentially frustrating parties with long response times. This method of communicating can also feel overly formal or cold to the recipient. The "pro" of giving the ability to document a conflict, can also

become a con, since the recipient of an email used for documentation may interpret the email as just that—a way to document a problem instead of trying to resolve or transform it. Another major con of email is that it gives folks the illusion of efficiency when actually, it sucks up more time. I've seen conflicted email communications suck up time in at least two major ways: 1) the amount of time the writer of an email will spend wordsmithing some carefully crafted message is typically far longer than they'd need to spend in conversation and 2) the amount of time the reader has to spend decoding this carefully crafted message.[81]

Recommendations: I find this form is used most frequently in workplace conflicts, though not unheard of in other situations and groups. Similarly to my recommendations with texting, I'd steer clear of using this medium to do your heavy lifting if you are actually looking to transform or resolve the conflict. Folks have wildly different interpretations of email "tone" and many people spend hours trying to both word-smith and decipher emails when the conversation could have taken minutes. I think because of our pervasively punitive culture we tend to think that the documentation is critical, especially in workplaces, but I'd really like to invite folks to think about what will actually transform a conflict instead of what will help us "catch" someone doing something or focusing on leaving a paper trail instead of on the relationships in front of us.

Voice to Voice

This includes any media that allows for voice to voice conversation in real time.

Pros: The synchronicity of this method usually allows for faster understanding between parties than an

81 I've found this to be especially true in workplace conflicts where emails about a conflict are cloaked in several layers of politeness and/or passive-aggression making it extremely challenging for the reader to figure out what the issue is or worse, leaving them wondering why the person didn't just talk with them about something instead of sending an email.

asynchronous approach. Since we may be able to detect some aspects of emotion through vocal cues such as tone, speech patterns, and pacing, parties may have an increased sense that they understand what's going on for the other person and how they're feeling[82]. In my experience, the increased information we're able to gather through voice-to-voice communication typically leads to more speedy resolutions, or at least understanding, between parties than through messaging or email modalities.

Cons: This modality can feel emotionally more risky since we'll be communicating more information through our tone, volume, pacing, etc. than we would be through something like email. There's also less time for consideration of word choice and responses. Additionally, the conversations are usually not documented (unless the parties are using an audio recording), which can be challenging if having the documentation supports your understanding later, for example.

Recommendations: I think this is a fine option for having tough conversations. Despite the research on increased empathic accuracy, you may still want to opt for video or in-person for tough conflicts so you are able to see the person's body language as well. To help with the speed of these conversations, I sometimes find it helpful to have some phrases at the ready to give me space and time to pause and reflect, such as, "I want to respond to what you just said but I need some time to sit with it. I'd like to take a break. Can we talk again in an hour?"

Synchronous Video

Including technologies like Zoom, Skype, Meet, etc.

Pros: Again, here we can benefit from the speed of synchronicity. Video may also lend to more information if we're able to detect some emotion and nonverbal

82 For an interesting look at emotional connection across digital formats, check out, "The effects of text, audio, video, and in-person communication on bonding between friends" by Lauren F. Sherman, Minas Michikyan, and Patricia M. Greenfield.

cues. As with voice-to-voice communication, parties may be able to reach understanding more quickly when using synchronous communication.

Cons: Similar to voice-to-voice, we might not want the potential increased vulnerability of our emotions being more easily detected. Another major con that many of us learned during the pandemic is that this modality can be very fatiguing.[83] This may lead to both parties having less stamina for tough conversations and potentially needing more rest when the conversations conclude.

Recommendations: I have the same recommendations for video based conflict conversations as with just voice. With one addition: it can be helpful to just look at the video of the person you're talking with and not your own image, as we tend to spend more time looking at ourselves and adjusting our appearance vs. focusing on the responses from the person we're conversing with.

In Person

Pros: We're evolutionarily adapted for this mode of communication, so our brains have the best likelihood of being able to pick up on all the information provided in these cases. There is an abundance of information from non-verbal communication that we're most primed to see when interacting in real life. Because of this potential for information sharing and understanding, in my experience, this is the most efficient way to transform most everyday conflicts.[84]

Cons: Face to face conversations can be high-risk and high-reward. Since both parties, generally, will

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83 The jury is out on why exactly but some theories are that our brains are working harder to detect the body language and cues from the other person. At the same time, the other person and ourselves, may be manufacturing our cues in a way we wouldn't naturally, due to viewing ourselves on a screen. Both adjusting our own cues and trying to read cues of someone who is adjusting them may increase the sense of fatigue.

84 Note, this might not at all be efficient in some conflicts. For instance, when there are enormous power differences between the parties or when there is a history of abuse or violence between the parties.

be less likely to mask their emotions, they may feel more vulnerable. Though this vulnerability is part of what helps us understand one another and transform conflict, it can feel quite scary, since we might feel at risk of getting hurt. Another con I've seen is that sometimes, for a variety of reasons, one or both parties might not be ready to meet face to face. Coming together to talk about something and then having it not go well can end up lowering our confidence and sense of efficacy in transforming the conflict.

Recommendations: Generally, face to face is the conflict resolution gold standard. While there are plenty of reasons this might be the least fun option or just not one that is available to you, if at all possible, I encourage folks to try out this method when they can.

There are of course exceptions to everything above. When we're working through a conflict with someone who has a lot more power than us, a lot less power than us, or who has experienced harm from us, or us from them, we may have to adjust away from particular platforms or mediums. My point is not to convince anyone that one form is always better than another, but rather, what you choose matters. If you're a little uncomfortable with higher risk mediums like face to face, but there's no major obstacle to having the conversation that way, then opt for that.

Chapter Fourteen: NON-MUTUAL CONFLICT CONVERSATIONS

So, you're in a conflict but the other person doesn't know, huh? It might sound ridiculous, but it's really common to feel upset, annoyed, frustrated, or some other negative feeling towards someone when they don't know how we feel or why we're upset. Essentially, these conversations are about giving feedback and making requests. A caveat to this is if in giving the feedback you discover that the person you're upset with is also upset with you, hold tight, the next section is on mutual conflict.

To me, the best feedback models are ones that allow the person you're talking with to know how you are impacted by something specific that they did or said and then have some level of problem-solving or request-making to change the dynamic. Sometimes, the person will start to anticipate your feedback, self-correct, and nullify the rest of what you were going to say. Still, having a basic model can be helpful as a guide so that you remember to do things like ask the person what they think. In the following sections, I'll review four models that have similar elements but may fit your needs differently for different types of conversations. But first, I'll cover a building block to conflict conversations: I-Statements.

I-STATEMENTS

If you haven't learned about these statements before, you won't be surprised to find out they involve the word "I." These are statements that tell the listener how you, specifically and personally, are experiencing something. The goal of these statements is to communicate honestly and from the heart about something that is impacting you while simultaneously making it clear that you're not blaming the listener for a particular

feeling that you're experiencing. This is accomplished by using "I" instead of "you"when referencing your own feelings.[85] Using these statements may also help us move from the general to the specific and help the listener understand your perspective more easily than if you didn't use them, since in theory, the listener won't be distracted by getting defensive. The general structure of an I-statement is one in which you state how you are impacted (usually with a feeling word) by a specific action or behavior while using the word "I." It oftens involves the word "when" in cases where it is used to communicate about a specific behavior or event. I-statements are also usually followed by a second statement or request about what the speaker would prefer. Here are some examples without the added preference statement:

- When the can of soup dropped on my foot, I felt pain.
- When I saw the report wasn't done, I felt frustrated.
- When I get home from work and I'm about to make dinner, I feel tired and frustrated if the dishes aren't done.

These statements can seem so simple we may wonder why they need to be taught. However, it is super common for us to switch into universalizing or generalizing our language when we're upset. And we may say phrases that sound a bit more like this:

- You're always so clumsy in the kitchen! That hurt!
- It's ridiculous that you haven't done the report yet.
- It's like I have to do everything around here! You never do anything to help out in the evenings!

See the difference? Presumably the speaker of them feels something, but they're covering that in language using "that" and "it's" and "you." My overall suggestion for using these statements is to be concrete about what is impacting you and use "I" to name how you are impacted. Now, let's move on to those feedback strategies.

85 I-statements are also known as I-messages and their codification into a communication strategy is usually attributed to psychologist, Thomas Gordon (Gordon n.d.).

OUR OLD FRIEND EPE

It turns out, elicit-provide-elicit (aka EPE and ask-give-ask) is also a useful tool for giving feedback, not just advice. To demonstrate how to use it for feedback, let's use a non-mutual workplace conflict. Monica is working with Greg on a project for a big customer and doesn't like the way Greg communicates through email. She is worried Greg's communication style angered the customer and she's been feeling angry about the situation all week. Her assessment is that Greg doesn't pay attention to how he comes across in communication and that she has to do more work with the customer because he has been careless with his words. Below are some examples of how we might apply EPE for a conflict feedback situation. For ease and clarity, I'm going to leave out Greg's potential responses so we can just see how Monica might structure her comments.

- **Elicit:** Ask for consent to talk about the topic (potentially including timing, medium, etc.). Ask what the person thinks or knows about the situation/topic. Ask if you can share some information, thoughts, or feedback.
    - "Greg, I wanted to talk with you about the email you sent Akil, would now be an okay time?"[86] "I had some thoughts about what you sent, would it work for you if I got into those right now?"
- **Provide:** Give the feedback you wanted to give. Now is the time to pull out those I-statements!

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86 In this instance, I would suggest that Monica not ask Greg what he thinks about the email and just go straight to asking a consent-based question for engaging about the topic. I would make this suggestion because a) Monica is feeling frustrated and she's unlikely to ask that question in a way that would land as open and curious and b) because she's looking to share information about her feelings and preferences for something, not general, non-controversial facts. For instance, if she asked, "Greg, what do you think about the email you sent?" or "Greg, I'm curious if you have ideas about how your email to Akil landed with me," it might be difficult for Greg to interpret the reasons for asking these questions as neutral or genuinely curious. It's far more likely that line of questioning will increase Greg's defensiveness and perhaps lead him to believe that he's being "trapped." I would suggest using this approach if Monica was instead looking to share relatively neutral information where she wasn't sure how much of it Greg was aware of.

- "When I read that email, I got irritated because I interpreted the tone of the email as unprofessional." (This is ok, but not great. If I were Greg I'd be thinking, "Well, sorry your interpretation is bad!" And I also wouldn't concretely know what I did that triggered that interpretation. Still, Monica said how she was feeling using an I-statement which is still better than universalizing it and saying, "It was an unprofessional email," which has even less information for Greg.)
- "When I read the email you sent, I was worried about Akil's response, because he is very formal in his communication with us and you didn't use punctuation or capitalization."
- "When I read the email you sent, I was angry because I saw that you didn't use punctuation or capital letters and I want all our customer emails to be grammatically correct."

- **Elicit:** Ask what the person thinks about what you said, make a request, and/or ask for ideas of what to do about the issue at hand.
  - "What do you think would work better in the future?"
  - "Would you be willing to proofread your customer emails before sending them?"
  - "What do you think?"

This will look and feel a bit different when the person is actually responding, but the basic structure is still: checking-in, giving your feedback using an I-statement, and then asking for some collaboration.

NVC FEEDBACK

Nonviolent Communication has a rich history as a model for communicating in general as well as in conflict specifically.[87] A basic understanding of this model can give us some ideas for what to say in conflict conversations, non-mutual or otherwise. As a reminder, the creator of NVC, Marshall Rosenberg,

87 See especially Speak Peace in a World of Conflict : What You Say next Will Change Your World (Rosenberg 2005) in the conflict resource section.

theorized that we all have basic needs and feelings about those needs. Typically, we feel some sort of negative feeling when needs aren't met and some sort of positive feeling when they are met. NVC structure consists of four basic components: observations, feelings, needs, and requests (OFNR).

- **Observations:** These are statements, or parts of statements, of the behavior, action, or words of the other person that impacted you. They are observable, specific phenomena and not a judgment or interpretation of the event.
- **Feelings:** The feeling, or feelings, you have about the situation, the observation, and your needs.
- **Needs:** The needs you have that are not being met by the situation/observation you're bringing up.
- **Requests:** A statement/question of what you would like to have happen differently, either going forward or to help get your needs met.

This is a simplification of the NVC process and in an NVC training there's a lot to learn about each of these components. For instance, significant time is often spent in helping folks understand and hear the difference between requests and demands. To actually use NVC, you'd typically put the components together into just a couple sentences using an I-statement. Some trainers will talk about using the full OFNR version of NVC as being a bit like riding a bike with training wheels and that more fluid NVC will be based in this process but use less formal language.

Here's an example of the more structured, training wheel version of OFNR using our grammar stickler Monica. "Greg, when I saw your email to Akil that did not contain any periods or capitalized letters, I felt frustrated because it didn't meet my need for support in our work with customers. In the future, would you be willing to use punctuation and capitalization for the emails you send to customers?" A less formalized statement might sound a bit more like, "Greg, when I saw your email to Akil, I was frustrated, and I'm really wanting some support in customer communication. Would you be up for using grammatically formal language in customer communications in the future?" Not a huge difference, but often folks take out any

language that actually labels their feelings as feelings or their needs as needs.[88] The point is to make the language your own, while still keeping the structure and principles of NVC.

CONSENT AND DIALOGUE STRUCTURE

This next structure isn't based on any one particular communication model, but is a combination of some of my favorite practices in feedback-giving based on years of workshopping with folks in a variety of fields who aren't always interested in learning a whole model just to talk with someone about something that's bugging them. In this four-step process there's a big emphasis placed on making it as easy as possible for the listener to receive the feedback.

1. **Consent:** There are several types of consent you might look for here, including consent for the topic, time of the conversation, medium of the delivery, and even the person giving the feedback.
2. **Intention Transparency:** Being clear about why you want to give the feedback and what you're hoping the feedback might accomplish. Again, it's important to use I-statements here.
3. **Specific and Right-Sized:** Name the concrete behavior that you're giving feedback about and ideally make it about one thing or one example in particular.
4. **Check-Back and Dialogue:** Check with the person about their understanding of the event, behavior, etc. You might check for feedback from them, corrections to what you stated, or their interpretations of what happened.

This structure has components of the other two but is typically more flexible. Heading back to Monica and Greg, it might look something like this:

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88 This might happen for a couple reasons. Many people are disinclined and maybe even discouraged to talk about their feelings in the workplace. Additionally, though we're familiar with the word "needs" we don't talk about needs like "connection" in common parlance. So if we say, "I have an unmet need for connection," to someone who isn't also practicing or learning Nonviolent Communication, it might sound confusing.

Monica: Hey Greg, is it all right if I chat with you a bit? It's about the email you sent to Akil.

Greg: Yeah, what's up?

Monica: Is now an okay time? It might take a few minutes.

Greg: Yeah that's fine, I'm just working on this spreadsheet and I can take a break.

Monica: Great, thank you. So, something bugged me yesterday and I want all of us to be able to communicate about stuff instead of letting it fester. So I wanted to tell you that when I saw that email you sent to Akil, it really bugged me. I really want us to have a professional appearance to our customers and you didn't use any punctuation or capital letters, and to me, that looks really casual and not professional. What do you think?

Greg: I mean, I've known Akil for a long time, I don't really think he's thinking of it like that.

Monica: That makes sense, I know I'm more casual in emails to my friends, but I don't want that casualness here with our customers. Would it be weird for you to change how you write to him in emails? Or can we figure something else out so it doesn't bug either of us?

Hopefully, Monica and Greg are able to work this out. The example ends there because those are the basics of that structure regardless of what Greg does with the information. The intention transparency, stating clearly why it is that you want to give the feedback and why it's important to you, is probably the most flexible part of this model in that it's moveable; it could be done in the beginning, middle, or end of the conversation. Additionally, it isn't always critical to name your intentions for giving the feedback, especially if you're talking with someone who is used to having feedback/non-mutual conflict conversations often.

INTERPRETATION NAMING

The final structure I want to review is really more of an addition to the other three models but it's so useful I wanted to give it its own space. This addition involves stating transparently what your interpretation or story is for why someone acted in the way they did and then asking them to correct or edit your interpretation. The other models involving just observation statements can be helpful in moving us away from our narrow interpretations of an event or someone's words—these statements are useful because they remind us that our perspective is not the only perspective, and there may be many reasons someone does something that can't be explained solely by a desire to piss us off.

Getting to a place of pure observation, without interpretation or judgment, however, is a lifelong practice and we might not have that long. I enjoy this practice of just naming what my interpretation is because often when we're giving feedback in conflict, people already know we're holding some unfavorable interpretation of what's happening. Telling them what that interpretation is while staying open to being corrected about it can be a more transparent and honest way to dialogue about a problem. It can put the listener at ease as well because they're able to stop trying to guess what you think about them—you've just told them. The most important part of this practice is stating that your judgment, interpretation, or evaluation is just that, your judgment, and not an immutable fact. It's not the same as an observation or the ultimate truth of a situation. Besides that caveat, this is a flexible structure and just requires any of a handful of sentence-stems, plus some questions, to utilize. Here are some of my favorite stems:

- My interpretation of that was/is . . .
- When you did that I thought to myself . . .
- The story I told myself was . . .
- Here's how I was interpreting that . . .

You might also want to add to the beginning or end something like, "This is completely my interpretation and I'm open to being wrong." It can be helpful to state this more than once! Since I know the interpretations I make when I'm angry are actually

very rarely accurate, I might even say something like, "I feel really confident I'm wrong, but the way I'm thinking about this is_____." The next step is to ask them to help you correct your story. Here are some ways of doing that:

- What do you think?
- I know that story is probably not true, can you tell me what was going on for you?
- What's your story for what happened?

No matter the model or structure you're using, I really suggest bringing transparency, compassion, and curiosity to these conversations. I've worked with a lot of people who have spent so much time thinking about and planning a conversation that by the time they go to talk they almost forget the person they're talking to is also a human with their own inner life, and not a receptacle for their feedback. Staying connected to your own inner truth is important and so is remembering to stay connected to the person you're interacting with. All of these models can also be helpful in talking with someone when the conflict is more mutual.

Chapter Fifteen: MUTUAL CONFLICT CONVERSATIONS

Here it is, the Olympics of conflict conversations. Talking to someone you're in conflict with when they're also not happy with you can be really tough, but all of the other skills we've covered apply here too and once in a while, it can actually go surprisingly well and feel almost easy. I've probably written this ad nauseum at this point, but the more you practice, the easier it gets.

I keep a primary premise in mind when dealing with my own mutual conflict conversations, as well as supporting others with them and it's one that we've already covered. Most, if not all, conflicts are over strategies and positions and solving conflicts at those levels is a fool's errand because there are very few, if any, solutions that will actually work for both parties. Getting underneath these strategies, to what's really important and what our needs are, opens up way more possibilities and it becomes so much easier to find solutions that will work for everyone. Whether it's because it's just hard or because we're not socialized to do it, this kind of uncovering of conflict and getting to the roots of understanding one another takes work—it's just rarely easy and comfortable. If we're lucky, we're motivated to do this work because of our relationship with the person we're in conflict with. But when we don't like the person, we may need to look elsewhere for our reasons to do this work, such as our values. For me, my motivation and reasons to do the work come from a basic belief in the fundamental worthiness of every person, no matter what.

I know for many folks, it just is not abundantly compelling to resolve or transform conflicts with people that they don't like or don't think are worthy of their time, but here's what I notice that keeps me going when I find it tough to see the point in trying. We, especially most of us in the United States, have been fooled into thinking for generations that everything

we don't like or no longer think we need, is disposable. Used containers go in the bin, criminals go in the prisons, kids in school who don't conform go to a different school. We say, "Not in my home, not in my class, not in my neighborhood, not on my street, not in my country." But, ultimately, we're on a small planet and there is nowhere else to go. There is no getting rid of our plastic containers or people that we don't like. Rather than continually passing the harm down the line to the next person or next generation, I want as many people as have the capacity to to transform the harm and pass on something life-giving instead. Not all conflicts are mine to deal with at any particular point in time. But some are. And I want all of us to expand our capacity for what we can transform and how many good relations we can be in, rather than perpetuating the myth of "good riddance."

Ultimately, every conflict trick up our sleeve is going to try to get at the roots, or the underlying needs of both parties, while maintaining, building, or at least not utterly destroying, the relationship. The more parties in conflict that are able to see the problem as the problem rather than a person as the problem, the easier it will be to find solutions that work for everyone. A lot of the tools we already covered are going to apply in these cases, so we won't review everything, but an important early skill that bears repeating is listening.

THE ORDER OF LISTENING OPERATIONS

If you had a similar education to me, then in high school you probably learned about a nuclear deterrence strategy called Mutually Assured Destruction, aptly abbreviated to MAD. Essentially, if two nuclear powers are in a standoff and either were to use their nuclear weapons, the other would retaliate, also with nuclear weapons, leading to the destruction of both countries. This knowledge deters both countries from using their weapons and thus "peace" is maintained.[89]

There are, in fact, many other ways to ensure peace, however, most of which I didn't learn about until I was in graduate

89 Of course, this is a negative peace and is merely the absence of overt violence. There are often many other forms of violence happening between two nuclear powers.

school studying international conflict resolution. A peaceful corollary to MAD is CBM, or confidence building measures. While the acronym isn't as flashy, I think it's ultimately a more useful and longer-lasting tool for deterrence. In this strategy, one party does something, usually a relatively small something, that allows for the incremental building of trust. The other party usually reciprocates in kind after the first party has demonstrated this practice once or twice. CBM participation is incredibly effective at de-escalating conflicts and getting parties to the negotiating table, ultimately leading to a positive peace. It is relatively simple and effective, so why isn't it more common? Because confidence building measures are simple but not easy. The truth is that when we're in an intense conflict, we don't want to give the other party an inch, let alone assure them that we can be trusted and give them things that they want.

While we don't have nuclear weapons at our disposal when we're in conflict with someone else, our co-escalation of a conflict can feel a bit like the MAD strategy. And sometimes we reach a sort of relative calm, or a negative peace. We're not yelling at each other in public spaces but we're engaged in our own Cold War that puts our friends and family on edge. And just like in international conflict, CBMs can be our way out. The first and probably most important CBM I recommend is listening to the person you're fighting with using all the listening for understanding skills we've talked about thus far. I recommend this first because not only will you build confidence in the other party that you are able to work things out with them, but you'll gain a better understanding of what the underlying needs of that person are in your conflict. And once you both know one another's needs, it starts becoming a lot easier to exit the fight. Unfortunately, listening to someone we're angry at can be a lot tougher than it sounds.

Recently, I was meeting with two parties who agreed to sit down to a mediation and they struggled for about an hour to get much of anywhere because, essentially, they couldn't agree on who would listen to the other person first. Both had agreed to listen and reflect what the other person said prior to coming to the table together but both also felt they'd been so wronged by the other that there was just no way they could sit and listen to them and offer them any understanding or reflections or

empathy without the other person hearing them first. Sound familiar at all? It is really challenging to find willingness within us to listen to someone that we're mad with until we feel they can hear us out.[90]

The trouble is when you're both feeling that way, you're stuck. Someone has to listen first or you're locked into the MAD strategy again. We often have a framework in our minds that if we've been really wronged and harmed by the person then it is our right to be listened to, and if we're going to listen to the other person at all then we absolutely deserve to go first. I don't want to convince anyone that they're wrong on that point, but I do want to invite us to consider that most of the time, if we're in a mutual conflict, the other person feels exactly the same way.[91] And if you're reading this book, then you're probably someone who is building the knowledge, strengths, and skills, to be able to tolerate going second. It is tricky because the more you know about conflict, the more work you need to do when you're in it. Applying CBMs is a long-game. You might not be reciprocated with CBMs from the other party right away and you might have to do several rounds of listening first before the other person gets it and is ready to reciprocate.

If you're willing to try this out but know it will be tough for you, I suggest one of two strategies. First, see if you can have a meta-conversation with the person you're in conflict with where you each choose 1-2 things you will discuss and be heard on and agree to take turns, with you agreeing to listen first. If having a pre-conversation isn't available to you, I suggest focusing on listening and reflecting back to that person on 1-2 points before adding in your own perspective, side, thoughts, etc. and then ask for a pause. They may naturally get that it's a good time to take turns or you may need to explicitly ask. You might say something like, "I'd really like to be heard on a couple of things that have come up for me now, are you willing to listen to me talk for a few minutes?" They may say no, and if that's the case, then I suggest either taking a break from the conversation until

90 This is another big reason to try role-playing with someone prior to these tough conversations, because it gives you the opportunity to feel like you've been heard first.

91 Though I find the language of "deserve" a slippery slope into a meritocracy hell that I try to avoid.

it can be a bit more reciprocal or checking with them to see when they might be willing. It might be that they want to tell you one more thing and being heard on that will open them up to listening to you. You have to do some internal checking with yourself to see if you're willing to keep listening. There's no single formula for this stuff, it's an ongoing bit of internal work to see what we feel is in integrity for ourselves while still working to free ourselves from conflict. There are some of us that will give too much in a conflict and wind up feeling resentful and walked over and there may be some of us that harden around certain points or ideas of fairness and leave the other person feeling like we're immovable.

LISTENING AND REFLECTING

If you've worked out the general order of listening and the other person is also willing to listen to you, then my next suggestion is to pull out the skill of reflections. Good reflections, meaning you're really understanding the person you're listening to and able to offer that understanding back to them, are the secret sauce of conflict transformation. There's no other tool more powerful and no other tool harder to hold when you're angry. Reflections require generous or needs-based interpretations of someone's words and behaviors. And when we're angry with someone, we're usually not interpreting their words and behaviors this way. In fact, we're usually interpreting their behaviors as malicious in some way. Generous and needs-based understanding is a total internal pivot and I wish I had a magical jewel that would make this pivot easy. What helps me is practice, space, and breath.

Practice: I practice coming up with needs-based interpretations for all kinds of folks in all kinds of situations. Politicians, radio personalities, villains on a TV show—they're all subject to my internal practice of looking for the need they're trying to meet by acting or speaking in the way they do. I also apply this practice when I get annoyed with someone at the grocery store, over email, or through a text or small interaction. For example, when I'm driving and someone does something I would normally interpret as "rude," like cutting me off, I imagine they might

be meeting a need for integrity by rushing to get somewhere on time or for self-expression by trying to find creative solutions to bad traffic. I might not be correct, but the practice of guessing what need someone might be trying to meet helps me remember that we're always working to meet a need.[92] Again, practice in low-stakes situations to prepare for the real deal.

Space: When I'm really angry or upset, it can be hard to do that internal pivot when the person I'm angry with is in front of me. I need space away from them and quiet time to myself or with a trusted third party to help me shift my perspective and be able to bring my understanding skills to bear.

Breath: The longer I've practiced this pivot, the easier it's gotten to pull it out in moments of high escalation but I have to breathe my way through it. A big slow breath creates the space within me to pivot towards a different perspective. It's activating my parasympathetic systems, calming me out of fight/flight/freeze and it's also giving me a mini-vacation away from my anger and upset.

If we're lucky enough to be in a conflict with someone who is willing to try to reflect back what they're hearing from us, then receiving a reflection is also a critical skill. Recognizing how hard it is to pivot towards understanding someone when you're angry can make it easier to accept some truly hard to swallow and inaccurate reflections from someone who is angry with us. Nine times out of ten, a reflection from someone we're in conflict with is not going to feel accurate to you, at least on the person's first attempt. When hearing a reflection, take the following steps: 1) Thank them for the reflection. Even if they totally misunderstood you, you're thanking them for giving it a try and for the information you receive from the reflection. 2) Tell them that's not what you were meaning and ask if you can

92 For a list of needs, check out the "Needs Inventory" in the resource section (Center for Nonviolent Communication 2005).

try to say it again in a different way to see if that helps. 3) Let them reflect again, rinse, repeat as needed.

When someone is really angry with me, I think of their first couple reflections like a probe. They're sending it out there to see how I respond. Sometimes they even know it's a bad reflection but they want to know that I can handle their anger. And most of the time, I can, so I'll use the process above. But if that angry reflection probe finds me and I just feel angrier or more upset when I hear it, then it's also good information to me that now might not be the time for this conversation. In those cases, I might say something like, "Thanks for telling me what you heard. I'm realizing I'm too angry to talk at this moment. I want to take a break and maybe later we can pick another time to talk." And then I end it. I'm not trying to reschedule in the moment, I'm just trying to exit the conversation before I non-constructively escalate the conflict.

Getting to a place where you can listen and reflect back and forth in conflict is truly a chef's kiss situation and probably 80% of the work of conflict transformation can be accomplished with this practice. I have a few other strategies I want to offer alongside their common corollaries of what not to do because I think the side by side comparison is helpful:

Do . . .	**Don't . . .**
Remember the problem is the problem, not the person.	Personally attack the person you're in conflict with.
Keep to 1-2 related issues.	Approach the conflict with a huge list of complaints.
Focus on your needs and the needs of the person you're in conflict with. This might mean switching strategies.	Demand only one strategy/ solution.
Take breaks, ask for help, give yourself space before agreeing to something you think you'll resent later.	Ignore your boundaries.

Let them take breaks and give them space. Question a "yes" or an agreement if you sense the person is bending too much. Check-back to see if an agreement is still working for them or if they'd like to adjust. Give them space. Don't immediately trust a "yes" or an agreement if you sense the person is bending too much. Check-back to see if an agreement is still working for them or if they'd like to adjust.	Ignore the other person's boundaries.
Keep your head up about small steps in communication, especially for long or complex conflicts. It probably took you a while to get upset with one another—it'll take a while to get to a good place, too. Rarely are complex conflicts solved with one conversation; it can take many iterations.	Get discouraged if you end the conversation with barely anything worked out.

None of these strategies are new to this section, but it's helpful to see how they might stack up in our own mutual conflicts. We'll spend a little more time on boundaries and agreements in the next section.

COLLABORATING ON THE SOLUTION

Many students of conflict are presented with a scenario to role-play negotiations in which two teams are pitted against one another and have to try to negotiate a solution involving an orange. There are variations on this activity, but essentially, there is a single orange and each team needs it for very different, but equally important, reasons. Splitting the orange in half or sharing time with the orange are both off the table for both sides. The teams are given background information about why the orange is so important and what they think of the other side who also wants the orange. Ultimately, the teams are successful if they're able to reach a point in the negotiations where they learn that one side only needs the peel and the other side only needs the fruit.

I've seen students studying peace in graduate school fail to reach this point in the negotiations—and they're actively trying to seek solutions. This is a relatively simple conflict with a pretty simple solution and still, it can be hard work to see the forest for the trees (or the orange peel from the orange fruit) when you're in the middle of a conflict. However, when we're really focusing on getting to the underlying needs of both sides of a conflict, sometimes, the answers for what to do are right in front of us. Sometimes, it's easy. May all of your future solutions-seeking feel simple like this example. But if they don't, here are some of my favorite tips for working out an agreement.

Preferences, Willingness, and Resentment

An early lesson I learned from Miki Kashtan is that there is a big difference between what we prefer or want to do and what we're willing to do. In general, there are very few things that meet the criteria of my preferences while the number of things I'm willing to do are greater. For example, there's nothing about taking out the garbage that I like doing but I'm almost always willing to do it (this goes for almost any household chore for me). And our willingness is not static. Rather, it shifts, expands, and contracts depending on what we learn of others and notice they're willing to do. This flexible nature to our willingness is part of what makes CBMs successful. The more we notice the other side is willing to bend or help us, the more willing we become to do the same. Figuring out what you're actually willing to do, without coercion and force, can be incredibly liberating and even an expression of our autonomy. But, when we are pushed and agree to do something without true willingness, we usually grow resentful. In conflict agreements, I recommend that we all check in with ourselves and with the other person so we can become more and more clear on what we're both *willing* to do without coercion and resentment and encourage us all to look for solutions that move beyond just the narrow window of our preferences.

Chill-Out

Some people love a good fight and are not at all bothered by conflict. Others find it deeply uncomfortable and painful and

will do almost anything to get out of it. When folks who are closer to the latter description have been in a conflict and start to feel like the other side is willing to work with them and collaborate on a solution, they tend to over-stretch and over-commit to things just to end the disagreement. In some ways, this is awesome and is one of the magical things about conflict transformation; folks who were previously at each other's throats are now bending over backwards to help out one another. The trouble begins when we start to commit to things that are actually too much of a stretch. If you're someone who generally has trouble saying "no" when someone asks you for help or asks you to do something, even when you don't want to do it, then this probably applies to you. I suggest waiting a couple hours or a couple days before agreeing to something. You don't need to say "no" per se, you just need to buy yourself a little bit of time. Some examples of things you can say are:

- I want to make sure that anything I offer is something I can really do, so I'm going to wait until tomorrow to tell you for sure.
- I think this idea will work for me but I'm going to give it 2 hours before I decide.
- I need a little alone time to reflect before I make any other agreements.

Be Specific and Actionable

Make sure the agreements you're making together are specific and actionable, meaning they're not vague and open to interpretation. For example, a good agreement might say something like "Mateo will do the dishes on Tuesday evening before 9 pm and Charlie will do the dishes on Thursday before 7 pm" vs. "Mateo and Charlie agree to build trust about the dishes." Sometimes, we can feel positive from the glow of working through conflicts and so we tend to think we'll remember what we agreed on later. We've got the rose-colored glasses of mutual understanding on and we think there's no way we'll slip into old patterns and old interpretations of the other person. But old, conflicty habits die hard, my friends! You're much more likely to be able to continue the momentum of conflict transformation if you're both really clear about what you'll be mutually responsible for moving forward.

Do a Trial Run

The more low risk the specifics of our agreements are, the easier it will be for us to actually agree to them. One way to lower the risk of our agreements coming out of a conflict is to just shorten the length of time that you both agree to do something. It can be really intimidating to agree to a major action plan that's overhauling the current functioning of a relationship. Even if you agree with all of the components, you might just have a sense that it's too much. You can approach agreements like a pilot project and just try something out for a short period of time, like three weeks, and then regroup and see how it's going. A cool thing about this strategy is that it might actually increase both of your willingness to make changes and experiment a little more. If you decide to try this approach, then I also recommend setting a date and time that you'll talk about how the agreement's gone for both of you with some standard questions like:

- What didn't work for us, what was hard?
- What would we change in our next trial?
- What went well? What did we like about this pilot?
- What do we agree to try next and for how long?

Accountability Systems

For particularly thorny conflicts or complex agreements, I also recommend making a system for staying accountable to one another and your agreements. If at all possible, I would find a third party to be a partner in the accountability plan (an accountabilibuddy,[93] if you will), so that you're not relying on the person you've been in conflict with to hold you accountable. I've seen many agreements blown because the way one person was holding the other person accountable caused more conflict. For example, Mateo and Charlie might get in a whole other conflict if every Tuesday at 8 pm Charlie starts texting Mateo that he better do the dishes when they didn't agree for Charlie to hold Mateo accountable in this way. Maybe Charlie does this because he thinks he's being helpful but Mateo finds it irritating and then he doesn't feel like doing the dishes. Talking about how you'll be accountable to the plan can help you avoid these

93 Hat tip to my friend, Alexis, for letting me know about this very pleasing term.

types of side-conflicts. Regardless of whether or not someone else is going to check-in on the agreement, it's a good idea to set up a system to remember and do what you said you were going to do. For instance, if you agreed to start calling your mom to chat more (at least 2x per week) and not about money, then you need a system to actually follow through since you're not currently in the habit of it. You might put it in your phone calendar, set an alarm, leave notes for yourself, etc. I suggest you build a plan that uses the tools that you already use to track what you need to do on a regular basis, such as an app on your phone or a paper planner.

Sometimes we've had a conflict conversation and there isn't any obvious agreement that needs to be made because there was just a misunderstanding, and now that you both understand each other, the conflict is gone. I would still encourage you to take a peek at what caused the conflict to see if something could be tweaked with your future interactions to prevent a similar misunderstanding from occurring in the first place. Then again, sometimes things are easy and everyone is good once they've gotten their part of the orange.

Chapter Sixteen: TROUBLE-SHOOTING

Up to this point, I've tried to cover strategies that I've found to be broadly applicable to all kinds of conflicts. Still, there are a few specific strategies for special circumstances that are worthwhile to cover separately. In the following section, I'll discuss a couple ideas for what to do about conflicts where both parties are being really mean to one another as well as some strategies for intervening if something like this is happening in public.

OOPS, WE'RE JERKS TO EACH OTHER

Have you ever been around someone that just inspires you to be a better person? Every interaction you have with them or opportunity you have to be around them leaves you feeling like you can be the best version of yourself. Or maybe you draw a similar kind of inspiration from historical figures, like Martin Luther King Jr.. Once in a while, when we've been in a long conflict with someone, we can start to feel like they have the opposite impact on us, like we get an anti-Dr. King effect, and we feel at our worst around this person. I've both experienced this effect and witnessed it as a mediator and it can be really disheartening. I've listened to folks come up with well-intentioned and heartfelt plans for what they're going to do or say when they're near the other person and 30 seconds into the conversation they become some kind of Bizarro-monster version of themselves.[94] Conflict can make us bonkers, don't hold it against yourself. In these cases, I think it's a good idea to build some scaffolding to help stay away from your anti-Dr. King self. Here are my favorite strategies:

Make guidelines for your conversation. You can do this with a third party or over email or text if it's really contentious and hard to communicate. I advise making them short and specific so that you can read and understand them even when you're highly

94 The "Bizarro" term actually comes from an old DC Superman comic. Bizarro was meant to be a visually similar to Superman but a villain. (Fleisher 2007).

escalated. Even a small number of guidelines can be hard to follow when we're deeply conflicted with someone. Have a plan that you both agree to for what you'll do if someone breaks the guidelines.

Repair with do-overs. Remember do-overs? Now is a great time to pull those out. Sometimes we've just developed a habit of being terrible with someone and we need to interrupt the pattern in a low stakes way first. It will give you an opportunity to try something new and potentially repair some harm that was done with a bad interaction. You may want to try it with a third-party first.

Ask for accompaniment. If you've both got a third party that you trust, you might ask them to accompany the two of you through some of your conversations. This is different from a mediator in that they won't be necessarily helping you dialogue, but rather will serve as a witness to the conversation which can sometimes help us stay calmer and avoid our bizarro selves. Obviously, preliminary conversations with the third party are really important to make sure everyone is on the same page about what you're hoping the third-party person can provide.

Take a break. Sometimes our conflicts can feel so urgent and we feel really pressured about getting heard and getting things resolved with the other person. However, sometimes, just giving one another a little time can help cool the flames on a bad conflict. It doesn't have to be forever, but if there's no logistical reason that you need to immediately work something out (like you are working on the same project at work or about to be in a car for six hours together), it might be worth giving the conflict, and each other, a little space and time. It can be useful to make guidelines for the time apart if you decide to go this route, such as whether or not you want any contact, who you'll talk with about the conflict, etc.

Find a mediator. Since this book has mostly been about informal conflict resolution, I've steered clear of talking much about mediators. Mediation is great at

other stages of conflict as well, but sometimes having someone with some formal training can be useful for those conflicts where we just can't seem to talk with one another civilly. I suggest first asking around for someone. You can easily find someone with credentials online but credentials are a lot less important than the impact a mediator has on the folks they serve and you can get that information through word of mouth. Tons of folks are phenomenal mediators and have no certificates or formal credentials.

INTERVENING IN THE UNKNOWN

I remember vividly the first public violence I ever witnessed in person. I was walking home from school in the beginning of sixth grade and saw three girls who were a few years older than me following a fourth girl of the same age, yelling abuses and occasionally jumping on her and hitting her while she tried to continue walking down the street. I knew her, she was the older sister of a friend of mine, but I didn't know the girls who were following her. I asked the friend I was walking with what we should do, if we should go over there and try to get them to stop, and my friend's reaction stopped me in my tracks. She looked terrified and horrified that I would intervene and bring attention to ourselves, and not wanting to upset or embarrass her, we kept going home.

I was really embarrassed about this incident for a long time, ashamed that I didn't intervene and that I would just keep walking. I've long since forgiven myself and two things stand out to me as instructive in this early incident. The first is that I didn't know what to do and realized I had zero knowledge or skills to intervene in that moment. Despite the vague moral training of my schooling, I had no actual practice I could use in that moment to interrupt something happening right in front of me. The second was the recognition that to intervene for peace can put not only your physical body at risk, but also your social standing. I knew my friend was not afraid of me getting hurt, she was afraid of social retaliation for intervening in a "fight" where the person getting hurt was disliked. I share this story because I believe both lessons are still important to hold as we potentially enter into situations with conflict or violence

where we don't know the parties. There are more thorough resources on bystander training and violence intervention and I encourage you to investigate more if it's of interest beyond this shallow toe-dip.[95] The following section offers some brief suggestions for these challenging situations.

Checking-In

In cases where you are a witness to an escalated situation, it can be a good idea to make eye contact, and potentially exchange a couple words, with the person who is the target of someone's anger. It may be that they feel confident they've got the situation well in hand and don't want someone intervening. It can also be supportive to the person to let them know you see them and you saw what happened, even if the situation is over. In public spaces, like buses or trains, it can sometimes happen that someone says something abusive to a person and everyone looks away, busies themselves with something, or pretends to be on the phone, so having someone express empathy, even just with non-verbals, can be supportive. If something is going on for a while, you might also ask the person, "Hey, are you ok? Would you like some help?"

De-escalation Strategies

Like any other group of tools, de-escalation strategies are highly dependent on the person in front of you, so a strategy that works with most people, might not be effective or may even make things worse, in some cases. And like conflict skills in general, I think there are folks who have some natural abilities or tools they picked up when they were quite young for de-escalation while there are some of us who might need to learn and practice more. However, unlike other types of conflict where we're reaching for shared understanding or coming to some agreement or path forward together, in de-escalation work, the primary goal is keeping everyone as physically safe as possible. This shift in purpose can be really important to keep in mind, especially if you're someone who tends to get into power-

95 And if you're interested in bystander interventions, Right To Be! and Step UP! both have online resources available (Right To Be n.d.) (Step UP! "Bystander Intervention Program" n.d.). Additionally, many local Standing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) chapters hold bystander intervention trainings (Showing Up for Racial Justice n.d.).

struggles or right/wrong debates. To illustrate some stumbling blocks and stepping stools of de-escalation, let's look at the same scenario from two different angles.

Scenario: Kay and Pete are two, amongst many, customers in a long line of folks waiting to order food at a popular burger joint. Another person in the line, Isaac, is getting increasingly agitated. He's been looking over his shoulder into the parking lot many times, looking ahead of him in the line and motioning with his hand to hurry up to customers at the counter, even though they can't see him. He started audibly sighing while closing his eyes and tilting his head up and saying, "Come on! Let's go!" and "I have to go! Let's go let's go let's go!" Other customers in line near Isaac are starting to look at their phones or make small talk with someone near them to avoid engaging with him. When Isaac gets to the counter he speaks loudly and quickly, "Gimme two cheeseburgers and two fries and a large drink, let's go let's go let's go." The worker at the counter doesn't quite make out what he ordered because he says it very quickly and asks him to repeat himself. Isaac demonstrates even more escalation, yelling his order.

How to Make it Worse, with Pete: Pete notices that Isaac is getting more and more escalated as time passes in line and when he hears him yell at the worker, he decides to take some action. He steps out of the line and walks 12 feet or so to the front where the confrontation is happening and puts his arm on Isaac's to get his attention saying, "Yo my guy, you need to chill." Isaac flinches and motions abruptly with his arm to swipe Pete away from him. In doing so, Isaac inadvertently hits the person behind him who takes a giant step back saying, "What the fuck dude, watch yourself!" Then, Isaac yells at Pete, "I'm not your guy, mind your own fucking business!" and starts to turn back to the counter saying, "not today, nope, not today, I don't think so" while shaking his head. As he turns, Pete meets him face-to-face, the front of his body directly in front of Isaac's, lifting his chin and raising his chest up a bit and says, "You just hit someone, bro! You need to apologize to everyone in here and calm the fuck down!" "Get out of my face!" Isaac yells while grabbing part of Pete's jacket collar and pushing him away. Pete pushes him back and yells, "This guy is assaulting people, call the cops!"

Well, that escalated quickly. Let's unpack what went wrong here. Right from the start, there were a couple things Pete did that may have made things less safe in this situation. He touched Isaac while also telling him what to do, specifically to "chill." When we're in a heightened state, we're more likely to perceive others as a threat, especially if we don't know them. Touching Isaac may have increased the stress response in his already stressed body and triggered him to jerk away, consequently striking someone nearby. Statements or demands that feel like they are disregarding or threatening your autonomy can also increase our stress and escalation. On top of that, being told to "calm down" or "chill out" can increase our defensiveness and potentially sense of shame or embarrassment about how others perceive us. We are keenly aware of the possibility or actuality of being shamed or any signals that we're not accepted when we're in a heightened state. So the combination of being told to do something and being told specifically to "chill out" probably made things worse. After Isaac flailed away, Pete made things even worse by squaring up to Isaac who was trying to turn away and disengage. Meeting someone toe-to-toe, face-to-face, and chest-to-chest are frequently interpreted as warnings that physical altercations might be coming soon, as is lifting a chin in someone's face and puffing out your chest. Pete escalated the situation by signaling with his body in these ways that he was ready for a physical confrontation. Worse still, he again told him what to do and signaled that the group didn't like him or that he should feel shame by demanding an apology to the whole restaurant. Finally, the confrontation worsened when Pete started to yell, push Isaac, and demand that someone call the police. Even without knowing what happens next, this is enough information to know it wasn't an effective de-escalation since things got more heated and unsafe. Here are a few other actions to avoid if you're trying to de-escalate a situation and support safety:

- Making quick movements
- Making angry, judgemental, or disappointed facial expressions
- Blocking someone's exit or escape route and being in their personal space

- Using a lot of words, trying to process, or argue about a situation while someone is still really heightened

How to Make it Better, with Kay: Kay notices that Isaac is getting more and more escalated as time passes and when they hear him yell at the worker, they decide to take some action. They walk to the front of the line, near where Isaac is, but standing at a bit of a distance and leaning back on one foot, at an angle to Isaac. "Ah it's so frustrating how long stuff is taking today," Kay says, making eye contact with Isaac and talking to him like they're old friends. "I need to get the fuck out of here!" Isaac says, looking ahead and up at the ceiling but giving Kay a small glance as he finishes speaking. Kay nods in agreement and then says, "It's like, impossible to stand here anymore! Hey, want me to just wait and then bring your food to you when it's done? I have to wait for mine anyway, we might as well just have one of us wait! My name is Kay, by the way." Kay gives Isaac a little wave. He pauses for half a second and then tells Kay, "I'm Isaac. And nah, I'm good, they just need to hurry the fuck up!" His words sound harsh but his tone isn't as harsh and he's not yelling anymore. "I know, it takes forever. Are you more of a dog or cat person?" Kay responds. "Dog," Isaac says. "Can I show you this TikTok I just watched? This dog seriously cracked me up and I wanted to show someone," Kay says, smiling. "Sure! I just have to pay real quick." Isaac pays for his food and steps to the side with Kay to watch the video.

Let's see what we can learn from this scenario. To begin with, Kay goes near the situation but keeps their distance. Our sense of space is different when we're heightened or feel under threat and so it's a good idea to stand a few feet further away than we normally would. Kay also was careful with how they positioned their body; they didn't square up, they stood at an angle with their weight back on one foot. Standing a little off to the side and looking relaxed, even if we don't feel it inside, can signal to the other person that we're not a threat, we're not about to try to hurt them or get ready for a fight. Kay also used their words to express both empathy and familiarity with Isaac. Even though Kay doesn't know Isaac, talking to him like they're buddies might have helped him feel like he wasn't being shamed or judged. Kay affirmed what he was feeling and then offered something out of generosity, to wait in the line for him. Offering something kind to someone who is in crisis can help

them feel included and remind them of both your humanity and theirs. When Isaac didn't take the offer, Kay tried a different route, asking if he would watch a video on TikTok with them. This served two purposes, 1) it allowed Isaac to do something as a favor to someone else and 2) offered Isaac a distraction from his anger at waiting in line. When we sense someone is "on our side," as Kay was after empathizing and offering a gift to Isaac, we're more likely to want to help them or contribute to them in some way. Being able to do Kay the favor of sharing the video with them gave Isaac the opportunity to exit the situation while maintaining his dignity, to "save face." Sometimes, even if someone catches on that we are trying to distract them from a conflict, they might take the out anyway, as many of us are looking for an off-ramp when stuck in a situation that's escalating. We just won't exit if it looks like we'll have to do it with shame or humiliation. Here are a few other strategies to try if you're looking to de-escalate a situation and support safety:

- If two people are escalating one another, see if you can interrupt their eye line.
- Try to use simple language and explanations for things. It's harder to process complexity in language when we're very escalated.
- Ask for what you want to happen vs. what you don't want. For example, "Will you watch this video with me?" vs. "Will you stop yelling at the worker?"

None of these strategies are surefire ways to stay safe when intervening with a highly escalated person or situation and I encourage us all to check in with ourselves about our own resources and capacities before intervening. Many years ago, I was working as a sociotherapist in a group home setting in which staff were required to undergo certification in something called Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI).[96] During one component of the training, the facilitators offered a lens to think about intervention that could decrease the risk of violence. To paraphrase, "For violence to happen, you need a target, a trigger, and a weapon. If you take away one of those three components, your risk of violence is gone or greatly diminished." While I don't enjoy the weaponizing metaphor, I think there's a lot of

96 (Holden, Mooney, and, Budlong 2001)

value in thinking through what could be moved or removed in any particular situation that would lower risk. In the training, we went through multiple exercises imagining what we could do to lower the risk in a situation without laying hands on anyone. For example, if someone is escalated and seems to be really focusing their energy and anger on one person, it can be a good idea to have that person leave the space. In our example with Isaac, the trigger was waiting in line (it may have been something else but it's the most apparent one to those who don't know him), the target was the person working at the counter trying to take his order, and a weapon could be anything near him. Kay didn't remove any of these things but they did lower the intensity of the trigger and help shift Isaac's attention away from the target. Figuring out what might be effective in these situations can be really intense and overwhelming, especially when we're in an escalated situation. My two favorite strategies for practicing de-escalation techniques are through role-play and imagining what you would do when you see a heated situation on TV or social media. This will also help you to discern what level of risk and response you want to take on in escalated situations and give you more confidence that you know your own boundaries because you'll have tested and located them already.

Conclusion

I want to end by reviewing a few things that have come up throughout the book but I believe could do with some reinforcement.

MANY MODELS, MANY SOLUTIONS

I've often joked with friends that when someone comes to me with a conflict, I feel compelled to offer a number of ways to make it worse. There's something inherently funny to me about naming all the strategies I can see someone applying, including multiple ways to unproductively escalate a conflict. Just as there are many different ways to make something worse, there are a lot of ways to make something better. It might be that you've gotten through this book and basically nothing resonated with you and you can't see yourself applying any of it. If that's the case, I'm impressed with your commitment to make it to the end and also, no big deal! There are so many conflict resources out there to pull from. I'm of the mind that no singular model is going to be the end all and be all of conflict transformation and I'm not a fan of books or mediators that describe their way as *the* way. I think it's helpful to listen to a lot of different styles and ways of doing this work, experiment to find what works best for you, and keep learning and changing as you go.

Part of the reason I don't think any one model is going to settle all conflicts for us is that conflict is really nuanced. There's a lot happening beyond what we say or what can be captured in a book. If you have to choose between trying to stick to a model or the person you're talking to; always stick with the person in front of you. You'll learn a lot about what works and what doesn't work by just paying attention to how someone is responding to what you're saying and doing.

GET HELP

I truly believe we, as a species, are not meant to go through our conflicts alone. We're meant to have help from peers, family, colleagues, etc. It's important to be respectful when we talk with others about our conflicts so that we don't needlessly escalate something or spread rumors, but don't deny yourself the

support that could help transform a conflict. I've seen so many folks try to suffer in silence because they've been poisoned with the logic that talking with anyone about a conflict is talking behind someone's back. But left to our own devices, without the empathy and reality checking of good conversation, we often make things worse, either in our own heads or with the person we have conflict with.

PRACTICE

Just as I think we're meant to be in conversation and have support from others in conflict, I believe we're innately skilled at navigating conflict and finding ways to live peacefully. One of the many tragedies of our modern existence under systems of oppression is that we have been robbed of our confidence that we can do anything without some authority. We're frequently escalating things up to a parent, a boss, a cop, someone with the right diploma or certificate or title. It's like we're always waiting for the right person and the timing and circumstances. We think we're never good enough and our fear of doing something imperfectly leaves us frozen in inaction. I want to invite all of us into messy, imperfect, complicated, mistake-filled practice, learning, and play. Not only will we get more skilled at conflict work the more we do it, but we'll get our confidence back.

As I write this, multiple states are being torched by wildfires, another hurricane looks like it's about to hit in Louisiana and Mississippi, and after 10 days of protests the police chief in my home city of Rochester, NY, has just resigned. The world is on fire and flooding at the same time. It's full of conflict and at the very least most of us have been complicit in reaching this state. I say that not to rouse a sense of guilt, but to instead rouse our motivation. We're so much more powerful than we give ourselves credit for, but we have to be willing to try. Getting from where we are now to the world we want to create requires a lot of work and a lot of working *with* folks we don't automatically like and may have frequent conflicts with. I hope this book can serve at least some of us on our paths to do the work of transforming our world.

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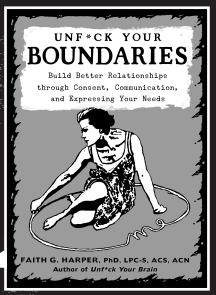

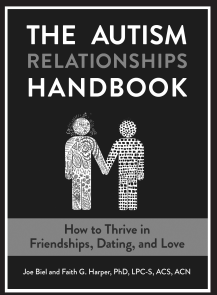

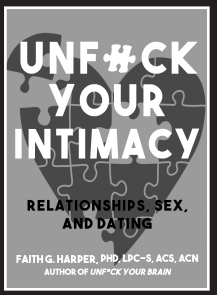

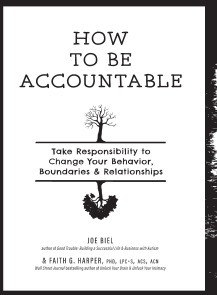

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