

Managing conflict

Carers can find themselves in a position where there are different views about what is happening or what is a good idea.

It is possible for a carer to find themselves in conflict with:

- the person they care for
- other family members
- supports and services
- people who work for the government.

Conflict does not need to be a negative thing. Conflict can be the place where:

- positions are clarified
- perspectives are shared and
- new directions are established.

Unfortunately, conflict can also be the place where unnecessary things occur, eg, people can feel victimised, allies can become enemies, and precious resources can be eroded.

What we think (and feel) about conflict, and the skills we have learned, will be the most significant factor in determining whether conflict becomes a place of creativity or destructive.

It can be important to remember that partnership and clarity both rely on occasional conflict occurring. Often genuine partnerships need conflict so that individual views remain distinct and perspectives are acknowledged.

Constructive conflict is when all the perspectives are valued and a mutual outcome is reached.

Why does conflict happen?

Conflict occurs as a way for people to attempt to influence or achieve what they want. This may be to improve a person's understanding or to have things more the way they think they should be.

Conflict only tends to become messy when there are other elements introduced to this, for example:

Fear

- that a change will result in less than what people already have

Mistrust

- things are not as they appear

Misunderstanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ different ideas about what was meant/intended
Control issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ one of the individuals/groups is attempting to control or dominate what is happening
Unwillingness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a person/party is closed to input from others or will not even consider altering their behaviour/practices
Habit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ where an individual/group is so used to fighting for what they believe in that permanent conflict is created
Transference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ one of the parties is shifting emotions and responses from one situation to another (without realising it).

Unnecessary conflict can appear in a situation where there is:

- mixed expectation
- unclear communication
- stress
- a reactive culture present (in an individual or group).

Managing conflict

Carers can have many different and competing demands made on their attention and energy. It can be important to remember conflict can be a healthy and powerful place to learn and develop.

It is natural for people to see the world differently. Everybody carries their own perspective of a situation. People have differing skills to ensure that conflict is creative and constructive.

Some core principles of working in (and through) conflict to consider

- Everyone is entitled to their perspective.
- The way we approach conflict must value everyone.
- Respect is an active (not passive) state.
- Effective resolution is only possible when all parties have a willingness to clarify and resolve issues.

Approaches to managing conflict

1. NEGOTIATION

Negotiation involves us acknowledging that there are differences. We can then talk together and work together to clarify points of view, find places of understanding and come up with a way to work together that works for everyone.

Negotiation involves:

- figuring out what we are wanting in the situation, AND
- being open to what the other person wants.

2. MEDIATION

Sometimes it is useful to bring in a “third person” (often a person that is respected and who has a high degree of credibility). It is important this person is someone who is fair and has some skills in “working things out”. This person can bring more structure to the discussion.

Mediation does not involve the mediator making decisions about what an outcome should be.

When is negotiation appropriate?

When you need to work something out with another person and there is the potential for conflict. It is sometimes wise to negotiate when making an approach in order to obtain something new or different.

Am I ready to negotiate?

- Do I:
- know what I want?
 - know why I want it?
 - feel OK about working co-operatively?
 - think I am able to listen to the other point of view?
 - have some ideas/strategies?
 - have a back-up if the negotiation is unsuccessful?

Some key points

- **Looking for common ground.** How can my needs and the needs of the other party can be met?
- **Making sure I can stay constructive** – making sure everyone is heard, looking for what can be (not what isn't!).
- **Being flexible and creative** – this may mean new options can be discovered.
- **Remembering that the purpose** of negotiation is to maintain, or improve your relationship and reach a mutual outcome.
- **Keeping my integrity** – be honest about thoughts, feelings and facts.

Tips for effective negotiation

1. Find common ground

- Build connection and trust.
- Establish a clear purpose for the discussion.

2. **State your interest**

- Why you want a certain thing or outcome.
- Prepare yourself to the point where you can state this in one or two sentences.
- At this point it is sometimes better not to state **how** you would like this achieved as you have not got all the information yet. Listen to the other person.

3. **Listen carefully**

- Pay attention. Watch for non-verbal clues like body language.
- Silence is OK. It may be telling you the other person is willing to hear the other point of view. Silence can unsettle an aggressive response; giving them time to withdraw comments that were not helpful.
- Ask clarifying questions. Show that you are interested in their position and you want to understand it. This can be to your advantage if you want to propose something that meets their needs as well as yours.
- Reframe. Reframing means taking a statement and making it more positive. It is a deliberate strategy to encourage individuals to look more positively at a situation. It can be used as a mutual challenge. Here is an example, *“I can’t see the point in coming to these meetings. There is a lot of talk, but at the end of the day you will just do what you want to regardless of what I say. I think my time is wasted here”*.

Questions to ask yourself to help reframe might include

What am I wanting?

How could this be achieved?

Identify the possible positive outcome if the change is made.

Focus on what could be – not what isn’t.

4. **Explore options**

- Separate the person from any apparent problem.
- List possibilities.
- Ask the other person if they can see a way for you to achieve your aims.
- Volunteer how your ideas may meet the other person’s needs.
- Search for alternatives.

5. **Summarise**

- Ensure you are both on the same track.
 - Confirm any decisions made.
 - Check if there are any outstanding issues.
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6. Develop a workable strategy/outcome that meet both parties' needs

Keeping track of our behaviour in conflict

Many of us have learned approaches to conflict that make things worse (not easier). Below are some examples of unhelpful approaches and suggestions about how these can be replaced by more useful ways of doing/seeing things:

1. *Taking conflict personally; whenever anyone has a different view we take it as a personal attack.*

Suggestion

See conflict as part of the clarification and growth process.

- Be clear about personal boundaries.
- Be open to the views of others – there is no need for everyone to see things the same way.

2. *Attempting to change others.*

Suggestion

Take responsibility for “self”,

- Demonstrate how you believe things can be.
- Suggest alternatives and describe the potential benefits they may have.

3. *Reject the worth in a different view.*

Suggestion

Accept that people have different perspectives.

4. *React to what we see as the “problem”.*

Suggestion

Look for possibilities. Discover what could work well for everyone.

5. *Assume it should be easy to sort something out.*

Suggestion

The time and energy invested in resolving conflict will probably save considerable resources in the medium and long-term.

- Take the time to respond usefully.
- Invest focus and effort in identifying a positive outcome.

6. *Feel superior in our “rightness”.*

Suggestion

- Be open to other ways of seeing and doing things.
- Be prepared to find better ways.

7. *Pretend to be interested in resolution when really we are not willing to negotiate.*

Suggestion

Recognise that it is usually in everyone’s best interests to work co-operatively.

8. *Blame others.*

Suggestion

Try to create and keep a constructive approach.

The DESC approach

Adapted from Bower and Bower

Sometimes, when attempting to express our point of view, we can get caught up in being defensive or getting lost in what is not working for us. Below is a simple framework to assist us to stay ‘neutral’ and present “what can be” (not what isn’t) in a way that increases the chance of a positive result.

Packing your message and increasing your chances!

This is a framework for:

- combining your feelings about an experience
- thoughts you have about how you would like it changed, and
- the positive outcome when the change has been made.

In conflict situations you usually only have a couple of minutes to clearly state your perspective. This framework will assist you to do this in a constructive, and often successful, way.

Each step is **one sentence** only.

Describe the situation you wish to change.

Be as specific as possible using neutral language (leave out judgements, interpretations and generalisations), e.g. *“Yesterday we were going to meet at 2.30pm and you did not arrive until 3.15pm.”*

Express how you feel about the situation.

Briefly pause (take a breath) so the other party can understand and reflect on what you said, e.g. *“I feel frustrated.”* (pause)

Specify what you would like different.

Again, keep it descriptive and neutral. The other person knows what you are feeling so now is the time to give a clear suggestion for the circumstance to change, e.g. *“When we make an arrangement I would like you to be on time or let me know you will be late.”*

Consequences are the positive outcomes when the change has been made.

If possible, make the benefit mutual, e.g. *“Then I will feel appreciated and we can continue to work together positively”*.
