



Quiet Pathways

## Mini Course- Dealing with conflict

The idea of conflict makes most introverts feel extremely uncomfortable. We will do a variety of things to avoid dealing with anything that may cause conflict. This works in the short term but often leaves us feeling resentful overtime.

As introverts, we are often calm and agreeable people, and this helps with groups getting along better. I'm guessing you have been in situations where your quiet, calm presence has had a positive impact on a group of people.

However, if we are always agreeable and calm, there will be a downside to this because there will be times when we don't agree. If we continue to agree with things that don't feel okay for us, it has a great impact on how we feel about ourselves and others.

The issue that then shows up is, how do you speak up when you don't agree? For many introverts, this doesn't come naturally. Just the idea of speaking up can fill us with dread and keep us awake at night.

I used to be there. I know how frustrating it can be to feel the anger but find no words to express it. Or expressing the anger only to be ignored.

What I have learned is that as introverts we need to learn the skills to deal with conflict, and we can be quite successful at this. This might be hard to believe right now, but I know from personal experience just how much this can change and have seen my one-on-one client's experience success as well.

This worksheet will follow along with the audio, allowing you to go deeper into understanding how you deal with conflict and the beliefs and thoughts that contribute to your behaviour.

**Please note: Before I go any further, I want to mention a disclaimer that the content of this course is intended for general information purposes only and not a substitute for individual therapy. Not all of the advice may be right for you, so take what is helpful and leave the rest.**

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**Sections:**

1. Define conflict/difficult conversations
2. Internal problems (internal chaos)
3. External problems (external chaos)
4. Long term consequences to us and long term relationships
5. Internal solutions
6. External solutions
7. What to expect from others
8. Summary

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## **Definition of Conflict/difficult conversations**

These are conversations that you want to start or conversations that others want to have with you that deal with a disagreement or potential disagreement.

### **Small Issues**

It can be small issues such as:

- Wanting more help with housework
- Telling a parent that you won't be coming for dinner on Sunday.
- Asking your neighbour to park their car in a different location.

### **Medium Issues**

It can also be medium issues such as:

- Asking for a promotion
- Applying for a position in a different department
- A friend forgetting that they were meeting you for coffee so you sat at the coffee shop on your own.

### **Massive Issues**

Or massive issues such as:

- Ending a relationship
- Quitting your job
- Standing up to a family member
- Returning to school
- Pursuing your business idea.

Conflict isn't always an argument. It also includes any conversation where someone else might disagree with your choice. Or you are voicing your concern for how others are treating you or someone else.

### **Example:**

You want to quit your safe, well paying job to go back to school or pursue a business idea but you can already hear what your parents or partner will say. They might tell you that it makes no sense, that it's too risky, that you won't be successful. If you disagree with them, it will lead to conflict. And maybe worse- self doubt.

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### Exercise #1

1. **Make a list of the conversations you are avoiding.** A good indication of this is noticing how you censor yourself to avoid certain topics as you don't want to have that particular conversation. Another indication is the conversations that you continue to replay over and over again in your head.
2. **From the list, notice if you see the items as small, medium, or massive.** It will also be helpful to notice your feelings you have towards these items. It may be that the issue would be considered small but your internal reaction says it's a massive issue.

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## Internal Problems

This is what occurs inside of us that often no one sees or even detects is happening. This is an interesting thing because it's so big, and chaotic, and overwhelming; but yet unseen.

Here are some examples of what it can look like:

### **You discover that you are upset about what was said days or weeks after the incident**

- This is frustrating because the moment has passed so you find yourself ruminating on what was said and what you wished your response has been

### **In the moment you know you're upset but can't imagine actually saying it out loud.**

- This is also frustrating because it feels like the words are locked inside with no way to get them out

### **During difficult conversations, mind goes blank**

- In this scenario you start speaking your thoughts but as soon as the other person disagrees or raises their voice just a bit, your brain empties out- no thoughts and can only seem to agree to what the other person is saying. You walk away feeling disappointed in yourself and have thoughts that no one ever listens to you so why should you bother

### **You don't speak up for what you want as you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings.**

- For this, you know what you want to say and know that it's fair what you are asking but you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings so you don't say anything

### **You become very angry and blast the person- the person had no idea that there was a problem.**

- This is often the consequence of the above. You just couldn't keep it inside any longer
- It has now created chaos because the person had no idea that you were upset
- It might be that now you look like the bad guy and it becomes about your behaviour- not what they were doing
- This increases your frustration which reinforces the thought to not speak your mind

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**Our thoughts impact our actions which then makes it important to look at your thoughts that do with conflict. Here are some examples:**

- We make excuses for the person- he was tired, she's been stressed, they do this to everyone, he didn't mean to yell, she must of just forgo. With this we are trying to convince ourselves not to be upset so we don't have to address the issue which helps us ignore our unwanted feelings
- We get mad at ourselves- why didn't I speak up, why did I say that or do that, I'm such a doormat no wonder people treat me like this
- It's also important to look at what we believe about disagreements- which really means looking at what we need. The worksheet will go into more depth to help you see how your beliefs about conflict-which really means asking for what you need gets in the way

### **Overall result**

- You have avoided at times and have engaged at times but neither made any impact on the situation
- You are left feeling that there's no point in trying again
- The problem with this is that it leaves you in a state of agitation

### **Exercise #2**

1. **Take some time to reflect on how you deal with conflict from the list above.** Write down the ways that you avoid difficult conversations.
2. **Take some time to notice what your thoughts are.** Do you blame yourself? Do you blame the other person? Be curious about your response.

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### External Problems

This section looks more at our actual behaviors when we avoid conflict. Here are some examples:

- One super power we have is that we can be in severe internal chaos with no one seeing a thing. Because of this we can come across as nice and pleasant, all the while in our head having an epic argument with this person.
- We avoid this person- take lunch at a different time, make sure we don't sit close to them at the staff meeting, don't return calls/texts/emails for days or weeks
- At Sunday dinner we stay busy with helping or on our phone to avoid conversations or we keep anything we share high level- never really opening up about anything
- We isolate ourselves- we avoid the lunch room at work, we keep ourselves so busy that we don't have time to get together with family or friends
- We forget to follow through on something we agreed to do for the person we are upset with

When we enter into conflict this can be what we look like:

- Appear agreeable
- Zone out and agree to whatever is said
- Start to disagree but then are talked out of your opinion
- Lose it and blast the person- this might be yelling, throwing something, slamming fist- you are out of control and then after feel incredible shame about this. If this has happened at work may worry about losing your job. If this has occurred with your intimate partner he/she may threaten to leave, or your family might avoid you- I see this most often in male clients.

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### Exercise #3:

For this exercise, it will involve being reflective on how you have reacted to conflict, either in avoidance or when conflict is actually happening.

1. **Reflect on conflict that you are avoiding. In what specific ways do you notice the avoidance?** Do you stay away from others to avoid conversations? Do you agree with almost everything that is being said to you (even if you don't actually agree)?
2. **Reflect on conflict where you have been engaged. In what ways have you responded?** Was your mind blank? Were you able to respond for a bit and then your mind went blank? Were you agreeable even when you could hear yourself disagree with this person? Or have there been times when you unexpectedly blasted the person?
3. **Reflect on how the other person responds to you.** What do they do when you agree? What do they do when you first disagree then agree with them? What do they do if you blast them? Their response is helpful to know as it will be part of your pattern in how you deal with conflict.
4. **This exercise may be a bit more difficult because you might start judging yourself. If you can, stay in a place of curiosity, meaning wondering why you might have acted in this way.** When you get to the section on solutions, it will open up new ways to do this.

### Long term consequences to you and your relationships when conflict is avoided

This is a very important section. When we avoid conflict, in the moment we feel relief which reinforces the behavior of avoiding. This short-term solution does not take into consideration the long term issues that are likely to occur.

#### You

This is a really important section to reflect on. The more you are aware of the negative impact to you and your relationships it will help you push past your comfort zone.

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### **Resentment towards the person we are avoiding addressing the conflict with**

- Start doing 'accidental hurting' such as forgetting to follow through on things you agreed to do
- Avoid the person (what does this look like in a marriage/friendship/sibling/parent/co-worker/boss/employee)
- End relationship abruptly

### **Constant anxiety over the issue**

- Censoring what you say to avoid the topic
- Ongoing imaginary arguments in your head
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating

### **Self-loathing for not addressing the issue**

- Avoiding an issue that negatively impacts us, sends a message to ourselves that we don't matter as much as others
- This can increase feelings of not liking ourselves as well as frustration that we are impacted by things that we wish we weren't

### **Depression**

- It feels like everyone else matters but you
- Feels like no one cares about you as the person/people continues to act in ways that are hurtful

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### **Feel invisible**

- It seems that no one notices that you are struggling nor do they check in with you.
- If you are able to contain your feelings well, it may be that no one notices if you seem a bit off.
- You may be spending time with people who don't actually care about your feelings as long as they are getting what they need. With this, even if they did know how you were feeling it is likely that nothing would change. This can reinforce the feeling of being invisible; that you don't matter.
- You may be spending time with people who care deeply for you but have no idea that you are struggling. In this situation, this might be more about you not knowing how to show up in a healthy relationship.

### **Exercise #4:**

Take some time to reflect on the above and then journal about the following:

- How does avoiding conflict keep my relationships functioning?
- How does avoiding conflict have a negative impact on the relationship?
- How does avoiding conflict have a negative impact on you? To help with this, think about a difficult conversation that you are avoiding. By not addressing it, does it make you feel defeated, invisible, irritated, frustrated?
- Notice what you do instead of talking about what you are upset about. Do you disappear from people, become very busy, drink more than usually, snap at people?

### **Your relationships**

This section looks at the quality of your relationships and how avoiding conflict impacts them. In some cases, avoiding the conflict allows the relationship to continue longer but likely with a huge consequence to yourself.

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### **Conversations have no depth**

- To reduce the chance of conflict, keeping the conversation superficial is one way to do this.
- With others you only share safe topics such as work, what your kids are doing, ect.
- The consequence for this is that the relationship is often more fragile. When conflict eventually arises it can be difficult to work through it.

### **You make plans on your own**

- With your partner, you don't include him/her in your plans. If you have an introverted partner as well it may be that you both are living more like roommates.
- You don't reach out to family or friends, choosing to do things on your own as it's easier even if it is lonely at times.

### **You share only what you think others want to hear**

- This is a bit of repeat for what has already been said but in this example, the motive is different.
- You are only talking about what others want to hear as a way to keep yourself out of the relationship. It's keeping just enough of a connection to maintain the relationship but if it failed you would be less hurt.
- It can also be that we do the above while still feeling deeply connected to the person.

### **Exercise #5:**

Take some time to reflect and journal on the following:

- How do you maintain distance in your important relationships? This might be keeping thoughts to yourself as you worry it might cause conflict if you open up.
- Is there a part of yourself that no one really knows? If so, what worries do you have if you were to open up about this? For some quiet people it often is keeping their creative side hidden or don't share just how deeply they feel about things.

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- How does it benefit the relationship?
- How does it harm the relationship?
- What evidence do you have that tells you it's best to keep your thoughts to yourself?
- What evidence do you have that tells you it's safe to open up a bit more?

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## Exploring the Solutions

### Internal Solutions

This is my favorite place to work with people as this is where the change starts. When we change our thinking, we change our behavior. This is what makes changes sustainable.

Our thoughts determine our actions. Many of our thoughts never make it into awareness so we are often left wondering why we act in a certain way. So much of our actions are determined by thoughts we are not aware of.

When it comes to conflict, you might struggle with wondering why you just sat there and didn't do anything or say anything. This is really frustrating.

This can also be embarrassing when it's witnessed by others- example being laughed at or bullied in junior high or high school.

If we want to change our behavior, we really need to change our thoughts. And to change our thoughts, we need to become more aware of them.

The first place to start is to look at what you have learned about conflict from your family.

The next step is to look at the thoughts that have formed from this. It's common for introverted people to have thoughts that they shouldn't upset others or something bad will happen- relationships will end, ect.

These thoughts stop us from speaking up.

The next thing to look at is feelings that go with the thoughts. It's important to make space to notice how we are feeling. These feelings, if not addressed, will get in the way of speaking up.

A skill that introverts often need to learn is how to tolerate uncomfortable feelings when dealing with conflict.

The next step is to look at the actions we want to take. This can be deciding not to address the issue all the way to confronting someone or making a choice that benefits you that others won't like.

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## Exercise #6

### 1. Journal about the following:

- What did you learn about conflict growing up?
- Were some people allowed to upset in your family and others not allowed to?
- Was conflict avoided as much as possible?
- Was there conflict all over the place?

### 2. Thoughts

- What thoughts do you notice at the idea of conflict?
- How do you talk yourself out of being upset with someone?
- How do you justify others' behaviour so you don't have to address the issue?
- What are your thoughts when someone tells you they are upset at you? Do you beat yourself and have negative thoughts about yourself or have negative thoughts about the person? Do you feel embarrassed, shameful, angry?
- What are your thoughts that tell you something bad will happen if you bring up something or tell someone you disagree with them?

### 3. Feelings

- When you think of conflict, what feelings do you notice show up?
- Notice how uncomfortable it is to name this.
- What are your internal indicators that something is bothering you just a bit?
- What are your internal indicators that something is bothering you an average amount?

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- What are your internal indicators that something is bothering you a tremendous amount?
- Do you react the same to all three levels?

#### 4. **Actions**

- From #2 where you wrote out your thoughts that are connected to conflict, go back to this and see if there are any thoughts you disagree with as well as thoughts you would like to change.
- An example: They will leave me if I get upset with them- change to-What I need is also important so I need to share that I disagree
- At first this exercise will seem overwhelming. Even the thought of speaking up for what you need will likely send you into internal chaos.
- As you notice your palms sweat, your heart race, your thoughts go all over the place, notice that you are safe. Notice that it's your thoughts right now that are causing this reaction.

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## External Solutions

This is the easiest part in that it is quite simple but difficult to actually do due to the internal chaos that happens.

What I do know is that these techniques work and the more you use them, the easier it gets. It may never be easy to deal with conflict but you can get to a place where you are no longer shut down and can articulate what you need in a tense situation without backing down.

- 1. Decide what you are going to address:** may be best to start with a smaller issue. Write out what you are going to deal with.
- 2. Notice any thoughts and feelings that try to pull you away from following through:** Write out the thoughts and feelings that show up at the thought of addressing the issue.
- 3. Set a time to address the issue:** Commit to a time when you will address it, otherwise it becomes too easy to talk yourself out of it.
- 4. Notice any thoughts and feelings that try to pull you away from following through:** Write out the thoughts and feelings that show up at the idea of committing to following through.
- 5. Let the person know that you need to talk to them about something important:** This can be done by text, email, or over the phone. The reason for this is that it helps you prepare yourself and the person for a difficult conversation. It also makes it difficult to back out.
- 6. Notice any thoughts and feelings that try to pull you away from following through:** This might be where your arguments against this start to get louder as it will feel like you moving too close to danger. It can be helpful to remind yourself the consequences to yourself and the relationship if it's avoided.
- 7. Follow through with the conversation:** At this stage you will stick to one or two points. If the person brings in other issues, continue to go back to the one or two points. This keeps the conversation focused which can help with your overwhelm as well as increases the chances of a resolution.

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- 8. Notice any thoughts and feelings that try tell you that you made things worse:**  
When you first try the above, it might not go smoothly for you. Learning anything new is awkward. Take some time to notice any thoughts that you tell you that you made things worse and see if you can challenge these thoughts.
- 9. Take time to reflect on what went well:** You might be tempted to skip over this one, especially if it seemed there wasn't any success but it's important to look at what you did well. As stated before, our brain will continue to do things the same unless we interrupt the process. A way to interrupt the process for how we deal with conflict is to do things differently and notice what worked well.

As you heard, I suggested that you take time to notice your thoughts that will pull you away from following through. This is because our brain is wired to do things exactly the same. When we bring awareness to this, it helps us change our behavior.

When you are in the conversation stick to a few points that you want to address. If the person strays from this, bring it back to these points. This helps your brain remain focused as you are not trying to deal with more info which keeps the overwhelm to a minimum.

It's also important to slow down your breathing. The slowing down brings you back to being calm. When we calm, we think more clearly and can better hear what the person has said.

When you first start doing this, it might not work great because it takes practice and you are also managing old thoughts and feelings connected to conflict.

### **What to expect from others**

This can be a tricky one as we are not guaranteed a positive outcome from this.

The most common way people respond is:

1. Listen to you and work to change their behavior.
2. Listen to you and change their behavior for a short period of time and then resume old behavior.
3. Tell you why you are wrong and do nothing to change.

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It might seem a bit strange that I would include this as it can sound like a bit of doom or gloom but it's important to me not to present a false idea that all will be well. Humans struggle when hearing negative feedback about themselves so don't always respond in a kind manner and I think it's important to be aware of that.

If you don't get a positive response, take some time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about this. I also strongly suggest that you don't take this as a sign that you did something wrong. I like to look at it as information. How people respond when we aren't agreeable is very important to know and it helps us decide how to manage the relationship.

### Summary

- Dealing with conflict is something that doesn't come natural to us so we need to learn the skills to do this. Otherwise we will continue to be walked over or we will avoid relationships
- Our thoughts and feelings have a huge impact on our willingness to look at issues and address them
- We often have a strong reaction when we are dealing with conflict- empty brain and overwhelm
- To start addressing this we need to start with ourselves first- looking at our thoughts and how to change this
- We also need to increase our tolerance for others being upset with us without changing our behavior
- Also important to be aware that others might not always be happy with us becoming more assertive
- And you can do it. This is a simple process that will likely feel complicated due to big feelings.

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