

## **GIVING AND RECEIVING CONFRONTATION**

Giving and receiving confrontation is challenging for many individuals. Many people are reluctant to confront others, either because they don't want to hurt or alienate a loved one, or because they are anxious or fearful about how the individual they are confronting will respond. Receiving confrontation can also be difficult. For many, being confronted triggers feelings of low self-esteem, inadequacy, or feelings of rejection or abandonment. For others, being confronted triggers inappropriate levels of anger and interpersonal conflict in response to the confrontation.

Giving and receiving confrontation can be made easier if individuals and couples embrace certain attitudes and viewpoints, and follow certain "formulas" for giving and receiving confrontation.

One of the first and most important ways of looking at confrontation involves recognizing the motivation behind the confrontation. If we see the confrontation as simply an angry attack, we are less likely to give confrontation, or to receive it well. The best way to look at confrontation is to see confrontation as a way of improving or healing an important relationship. If someone who is important to us is doing something that is interfering with the relationship by making us feel angry, unsafe, or distant, then it is an act of caring for the relationship to share with the other person how we feel about their behaviour. It is important that we not lose sight of this caring motivation when giving and receiving confrontation.

Many people believe that when confronting someone, the emotional tone needs to be angry and forceful. This is not the case. Confrontation is basically a process of increasing another's awareness of their own behaviour and its effect on others interacting with them. The image of a mirror is a helpful one to use. When we stand in front of a mirror, we are confronted with our reflection. The mirror itself is passive, it doesn't hit us over the head or attack us. In the same way when we reflect back to others their behaviour and its effect on us, we shouldn't be attacking the other person, instead, the confrontation should be gentle and respectful.

Of course, we don't always like what we see in a physical mirror when we are confronted by our reflection. This may also be true for what we see when we are confronted by another person's reflection of our "self". Sometimes the reflection triggers old feelings from our family of origin or past hurtful experiences, and it is easy to respond with old anger or old hurt feelings to the confrontation. In receiving confrontation, it is important to pay attention to old feelings that are being triggered that may distort our ability to receive the reflection in a constructive way or to see the confrontation as having a positive intent to improve the relationship. This process of recognizing the influence of our past experiences on our feelings is called "taking ownership" of our feelings.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that just as physical mirrors are subject to some distortion, the reflection we provide of another's self is distorted or shaped by our own personalities, values, family of origin history, experiences, and world view. "Reality" can be very fluid in interpersonal situations. This fluid quality of reality makes it important that the person giving the confrontation also take ownership of their own feelings and communicate using "I" messages that acknowledge that this is their own personal reflection of how they see and are affected by the individual they are confronting, and that others may see that person differently.

## Giving Confrontation

When giving confrontation, following a structured formula can help to ensure that your reflection is given in a positive and non-attacking way that has the best chance of being well received. The following six step formula provides a good guide for giving confrontation:

- 1) “When you \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Describe the *specific* behaviour that is bothersome for you (eg. “When you leave your dishes on the counter after I have cleaned up the kitchen.”). Focus on specific *behaviours*, and preferably only one at a time. Do not focus on personalities or use personality “labels” (eg. “When you act like a slob.”).
- 2) “I feel \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Describe your feelings in this situation using “I” statements to show that you recognize that your feelings are your own, that they may be influenced by your own past experiences in your family of origin or other situations, and that others may not feel the same way in response to the behaviour of the person you are confronting (eg. “I feel angry.” “I feel devalued.”). If you were devalued in your family of origin, then you may be especially sensitive to being devalued, and all of these feelings may not come from the behaviour of the person you are confronting.
- 3) “This is how our relationship is affected: \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Describe how the other’s behaviour and the feelings it generates affects your relationship with the other person (eg. “I don’t want to be around you.” “I am more depressed and unavailable.” “I get angry and attack you verbally.”) Describing how the relationship is affected makes it more than just your problem, and increases the other person’s motivation to change their behaviour and improve the relationship .
- 4) “It would be better for me if \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Provide the other person with some *specific* examples of ways they could behave differently that would make you happier and feel better about the relationship (eg. “It would be better for me if you would put your dishes in the sink when you are done dinner.”) People are often more willing to make changes in their behaviour if they have “doable” ways to make you happy, than if they just feel criticized without any constructive direction for change.
- 5) “This is how I think the change would improve things \_\_\_\_\_.”  
Describe how you would feel better or the relationship would be better if the person made the change you are requesting (eg. “I would feel grateful to you for the effort you have made, I would feel less taken for granted, and I would feel happier and closer to you.”)
- 6) “What is your response to what I am suggesting?”  
This opens up the discussion for feedback from the other person, and for negotiation and problem solving discussion if the solution or behaviour change you are requesting doesn’t work well for the other person or if they disagree with your reflection regarding their behaviour.

In most cases, if you are with a partner who loves you and cares about your happiness, this six part formula will be well received. Occasionally, people who are very sensitive to criticism may respond with anger and defensiveness no matter how carefully you phrase your confrontation. In this case, it often works well to say, “I’ve told you how I am feeling about the situation, why don’t you think about it and we can talk about it later.” This gives the person being confronted a chance to reflect on your message and hopefully to see the validity of what you are requesting and to either decide to agree to your request, or to suggest another alternative. It also interrupts any tendency for the confrontation to escalate into an argument as you try to force the person you are confronting to listen or “hear” you.

Sometimes, even with someone who loves and cares about you, and wants to behave in a way that makes you happy, the person you are confronting will find it very difficult or impossible to make the changes you are requesting because of their own unique personality or factors in their family background. For instance, an introvert may find it very difficult to be more socially outgoing; a person who grew up in an alcoholic family may find it impossible to accept even moderate alcohol use in a spouse; a person who was sexually abused may find it extremely difficult to make some changes regarding sexual activities or physical relationships. In these cases, you may have to accept and live with these limitations, or work to negotiate a compromise that each of you can live with. It is these situations where two conflicting sets of needs and issues converge that challenge both people in a relationship to confront their issues and grow personally and spiritually. At times like this, seeing a therapist can often be helpful in resolving impasses.

## **Receiving Confrontation**

Receiving confrontation is a challenge for many people. Most of us don’t like hearing about things we may not be doing well enough, or ways we may have upset others, and there is often a tendency to respond to confrontation with self-protective defensiveness, or even counter-attacks, based on the idea that “the best defense is a good offence”. Some people, especially those who have low self-esteem, poor assertiveness skills, or who have learned to dislike and avoid conflictual situations (perhaps because of growing up in violent or abusive homes), tend to respond to confrontation by giving in as quickly as possible to end the conflict, even if they don’t agree with the assessment and reflection of the person who is confronting them. The person who gives in too easily often ends up feeling depressed or harbours resentments that negatively affect the quality of the relationship in other ways. As you can imagine, when others are trying to talk to us about problems in our relationship with them, these types of coping strategies for handling conflict are rarely useful or helpful ways to respond.

The following ideas and strategies can be helpful in responding constructively to confrontation, and if these strategies are practiced, then receiving confrontation can become part of a useful and growthful problem solving process that can enrich our interpersonal relationships rather than leading to conflict and emotional distance. When someone is confronting you, try to remember and practice the following strategies:

- 1) Remember that the person who is confronting you is not just attacking you out of anger (although they may be feeling angry in response to your actions, and may even at times, in their

anger, say things that are hurtful). Ideally, they are talking to you as an act of love and caring for the relationship, because something is going on that is creating distance between you. Even if the person is coming across in an angry or attacking way, remembering this positive motivation can help to focus the discussion on constructive problem solving instead of it escalating to angry and attacking dialogue.

- 2) Try to keep yourself relaxed and emotionally centred as you listen to the person who is confronting you. Take a few deep breaths. Physically relax your body, unclench your teeth and hands. Picture any tension or anger draining down and out of your body and away into the ground.
- 3) Remember that the other person's reflection and viewpoint is influenced by their past experiences, and all or part of what they are saying and how they are responding to you, including some of their hurt feelings, may not be a result of what you have done or of your actions and behaviour. Avoid "personalizing" their feedback or reflection by seeing it as "all about you."
- 4) In most cases, the feelings each of you experience in response to the other's behaviour will be a mix of your issues and the other person's issues. The process of giving and receiving confrontation and discussing these issues is to sort out who "owns" what parts of the problem so that each of you can focus on changing the part of the problem you have "ownership" of. You can't change someone else, only yourself.
- 5) When you receive confrontation, take time to repeat back to the other person what you have heard. This process, called "active listening" lets the other person know they have been heard, thereby eliminating escalating behaviour aimed at getting you to "hear" them. It also makes sure that you have heard and understood the other person accurately. If there is confusion, the other person can clarify. Finally, this approach gives you time to calm down and centre yourself emotionally.
- 6) Ask clarifying questions to gather more information about the behaviour that the other person found upsetting and the feelings it generated. For example, if someone says, "You were talking disrespectfully to me," you might ask, "Can you tell me what I said that you felt was disrespectful?"
- 7) Express your caring for the other person, and your desire to improve the situation, for example, "I'm sorry you feel that way, I don't want you to feel that I don't respect you, and I really want to fix this somehow."
- 8) Reflect on the feedback you have received from the other person. Even if you don't agree with *everything* they said, look for any *parts* that may be true, and take "ownership" of those parts. For instance, you may say, "I don't disrespect you, but I *was* feeling angry. I think I had a right to be angry, but perhaps I didn't express my anger as appropriately as I should have." Apologize if an apology is appropriate. People respect someone who has the courage to apologize, and an apology won't diminish you.

- 9) If there are some changes you can make to your own behaviour that will help the other person to feel less upset, state your intention to make these changes, and follow through.
- 10) If, after reflecting on the other person's confrontation, you can understand why they feel upset by your behaviour, but the changes they are asking you to make are ones that are very difficult for you (perhaps due to your own personality, or powerful experiences in your past history or family of origin), then let them know that you understand their upset, and take "ownership" of your own behaviours by explaining something of the circumstances that make it difficult or impossible for you to make the changes they are requesting. Often people can live with certain behaviours if they can understand where they are coming from, and that they aren't personally directed at them.
- 11) If, during your discussion, you find you are feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of your own emotions, and are becoming angry or defensive, take a "time out" from the discussion to centre yourself, and reflect on the conversation. Let the other person know that you want to take time to think about what they said, and that you will talk further about their feelings when you are calmer. Don't simply use this tactic to avoid. If problems aren't dealt with and resolved, the feelings will only fester and grow, causing long term problems in the relationship. Return to the conversation when you are both more relaxed, and work toward finding a mutually agreeable solution to the behaviour that was upsetting.
- 12) If, after following this process, and taking time to reflect honestly on the confrontation you have received from the other person, you still don't think that you have "ownership" of this problem, then respectfully let the other person know that you don't see your behaviour as unreasonable or inappropriate, and invite them to take "ownership" of their own feelings and responses to your behaviour by asking them to reflect on whether their feelings and upset may be a product of their own past life experiences or family of origin dynamics. Let them know that you do want things to get better and the problem to be fixed. Often offering to discuss the problem with a therapist, minister, doctor, or a neutral third party who can help each of you sort out who has "ownership" for various parts of the problem is helpful at this point.

Giving and receiving confrontation is not easy for most of us, but following these guidelines can help make the process easier and the discussions more productive. Confrontations are opportunities for both personal and relationship growth, and talking about the things that upset us and create distance in relationships with those we care about is an act of love and caring for the relationship. Approaching confrontations in this manner can lead to enriched and more positive interpersonal relationships with those who share our lives and our closest moments.

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