



Identifying Dysfunctional Cycles in Conflict Management

Rare is the family who adopts a healthy paradigm for conflict management. Instead, most family members learn “strategies” that have been passed down to them from parents who also lacked healthy paradigms for conflict management.

As a result, family members use a range of strategies that are not constructive, such as:

- Blaming and retaliation
- Disempowerment
- Resentment collections
- Lack of confidence around boundaries
- Reactivity

To be clear, it is quite common for family members to use one or all of these strategies, so there’s no need to panic if you find that you use every single one of them. The good news is that the Internal Compass can be used to solve each of these dysfunctional strategies.

Which of these strategies do you recognize in yourself or your family? You will likely find that everyone resorts to each of these strategies every once in a while, though certain family members might adopt certain strategies more often than others.

01. Blaming and retaliating

Blame works like this: When one person feels justifiably angry or hurt, they blame the offending party. This person then feels defensive and retaliates by listing all of their grievances. After all, it is human nature to try to protect yourself when your back is pushed against the wall. Now, we have two parties who are blaming each other for all their wrongdoings.

Generally speaking, people in this type of conflict might feel a little bit of relief for getting things off their chest, but no true solution is found—or it is found after much mud has been thrown. These sorts of conflict-resolution models often end in both parties feeling worse about the relationship.

Blaming and retaliating might sound like this:



"You didn't do the dishes, again. I always do them, and you treat me like an assistant!"

"What are you talking about? I take you out to dinner. I take you on vacations. When was the last time you did something nice for me?"



02. Disempowerment

Disempowerment happens when family members begin to believe that they are less important than other family members. They feel unimportant and dismissed. Whereas people who are collecting resentment (see next page) believe that they deserve better, people who feel disempowered have given up. They are often withdrawn. They might seem easy going when, in reality, they feel powerless to act on their own behalf.

Someone who feels disempowered might have this conversation inside their head:

"I better go ahead and do these dishes. No one else will. I guess this is just my lot in life."

03. **Resentment Collections**

When families do not have healthy models of conflict resolution, one or more members of the family might feel like there's no purpose in attempting to address conflict. After all, if nothing gets resolved, why bother?

When this happens, much is left unspoken. If a family member's boundary is violated, or if they have a need that family members are not helping them meet, they might not voice the concern, but they will feel resentment.

While at first the little rocks of resentment might feel like pebbles, the pebbles of resentment will eventually build to feel more like a giant boulder than a few pebbles. It might look like this:



Very often, we can see when family members are collecting resentment because they tell narratives about the other family members.

- "My husband is sexist. He just leaves all the housework to me even though I also work a full time job."
- "My kids are entitled. They will never be able to clean up after themselves. They just think I'm their personal maid."
- "My wife is never happy. It doesn't matter what I do. No matter how hard I try, she is unhappy."

These narratives might be true, at least in part. Then again, they might not be. Either way, they reinforce the dynamics leading to the conflict because they are problem-focused rather than solution-focused.

04

Lack of Confidence Around Boundaries

When a person (usually a parent) feels unsure of whether their boundaries are appropriate and fair, they are often wishy-washy. Something that is acceptable one day might not be acceptable another day. Inconsistency is the key word in these types of conflict. You can recognize scenarios in which there is a lack of confidence around boundaries when you see a family member who gets “walked all over.”

Parent: "Please come help me clean the kitchen."

Child: "Not right now. I am busy watching TV."

Parent: "Sigh. I'll just do them myself."



05.

Reactivity

Reactivity is the term we use for people who feel at the mercy of their emotions. If they feel angry, they let you know! They often say and do things they end up regretting because they are flooded with such big emotions that they lose control.

Reactive people tend to overreact to normal or even benign conflict. This often happens when a person who does not yet have a healthy paradigm for conflict resolution is overwhelmed or when they have high levels of stress and anxiety.

A reactive person might sound like this:

"Why are there @#\$%&! dishes on the @#\$%&! counter when I just cleaned? You guys are pigs! It's @#\$%&! disgusting! Clean up after yourselves! @#\$%&!"

Instead of...

Blaming and retaliating

"You didn't do the dishes, again. I always do them, and you treat me like an assistant!"

"What are you talking about? I take you out to dinner. I take you on vacations. When was the last time you did something nice for me?"

Feeling disempowered

"I better go ahead and do these dishes. No one else will. I guess this is just my lot in life."

Use the Internal Compass ...

Focus on what you need, using an "I statement"

- *"I need someone to do these dishes."*
- *"I need to feel like a respected member of this family. I have been spearheading kitchen cleanup for a long time, and I think it's time for someone else to take over."*

If you are on the receiving end of someone who is blaming you, do your best to look for their true need, and then validate your commitment to the relationship.

- *"I hear you saying you are upset that I am not helping you with the dishes. I imagine that makes you feel resentful and belittled. I love you and want to help find a solution."*

Here's the important part: Now is not the time to bring up your grievances. Break the cycle by refusing to retaliate. Instead, review the rules of engagement and ask your family member to set a time to discuss the solution.

- *"Can we take a minute to cool off, and then revisit our family's commitment to having healthy conflict? I'd like for us to review the Rules of Engagement and sit down in five minutes to talk when both of us feel a little calmer. Does that work for you?"*

Commit to getting your needs met, even if other people will not help you.

1. *"I need someone to do these dishes."*
2. *"I need to feel like a respected member of this family. I have been spearheading kitchen cleanup for a long time, and I think it's time for someone else to take over."*
3. *"I have asked politely several times, using "I statements" and completed an Internal Compass. I've followed the Rules of Engagement, but the truth is that my family isn't helping me. How else can I get my needs met?"*
4. *"I know. I will hire someone to help me. Since that's going to come out of my own pocket, I will cut back on my children's allowances and/or let them know that they will be responsible for paying for their own cell phone bills. That way, I get my needs met without feeling resentful."*

Instead of...

Collecting resentments

"He never helps me with the dishes. It's so annoying. But if I say something, it's going to turn into a fight. It's not worth it. There are only a few dishes. I'd rather just do them myself than get into an argument about it."

"Oh look. More dishes. Big surprise."

"Oh, for crying out loud. What am I? A servant? I do everything. I do all the grocery shopping, the cooking, the cleaning. I drive the kids around. I help them with their homework. No one respects me. This is infuriating."

Lacking confidence around your boundaries

Parent: "Please come help me clean the kitchen."

Child: "Not right now. I am busy watching TV."

Parent: "Sigh. I'll just do them myself."

Use the Internal Compass ...

Complete an Internal Compass and follow this script:

1. Describe the emotion you are feeling (resentment),
2. Explain how it is impacting your behavior.
3. Then, state, in positive terms, what you would like to feel.
4. Use an "I statement" to describe what you need.

"I am feeling resentment toward my family. It's making me be a little bit short with everyone, and I'm snapping at you. I would like to feel loved and respected so that I can focus on all of your wonderful qualities and be less snappy with you. To that end, I need someone else to take over kitchen duty."

Commit to getting your needs met, even if other people will not help you.

Remind yourself that unmet needs are the root of all conflict. Your boundaries are in place to help you live a high quality of life. When your boundaries are repeatedly violated, you will feel resentment.

"I'm asking you to help me clean the kitchen because I want to feel respected, and I am worried I will begin to feel resentful if you continue to watch television without helping me. I'd like you to pause the television show and come help me. (Or, "I'd like you to set a reminder and come clean the kitchen when the show is done.") If I have to continue harassing everyone in order to get help, I will hire someone to help me, and I will pay for that out of your allowance."

Instead of...

Reacting in outbursts of anger

"Why are there @#\$\$%&! dishes on the @#\$\$%&! counter when I just cleaned? You guys are pigs! It's @#\$\$%&! disgusting! Clean up after yourselves! @#\$\$%&!"

Use the Internal Compass ...

Complete an Internal Compass as often as possible!

The best remedy for emotional reactivity is this: Train your brain to notice the relationship between your thoughts, your emotions, your body, and your behavior. When your brain learns this cycle, you can interrupt the outbursts because you will take notice: "Uh oh. I'm starting to feel anger build. When that happens, my behavior tends to be something that I later regret. I need to find a way to take care of myself right away. What do I need to feel better? I think maybe I need to step outside and walk around the block so that I can calm down. Then, I will come home and speak to my family when I have calmed down. I will clearly set my boundaries and make sure my needs are met through some other method than screaming in rage at my family."

When you do at Internal Compass, you become more mindful. Beyond that, once you have completed an Internal Compass, you can speak from a place of needs and outcomes rather than from a place of hostility and anger.

Internal Compass™

TRIGGER _____
Use the Compass with one stressor or trigger at a time.

THOUGHTS

I feel _____ emotion because... _____

EMOTIONS

What emotions do these thoughts bring up?

INNER WISDOM

What do I **need** to feel better?
What do I need from this other person and what do I need from myself?

ACTION STEP

What is an action step I could take towards getting this need met and taking care of myself even if no one else will help meet this need?

BEHAVIOR

How are these thoughts and emotions affecting my behavior?

BODY

Where do I feel these emotions in my body?



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Remember these important points ...

01. *Unmet needs are the root of all conflict.*

What lies on the surface (e.g., dirty dishes) is almost always covering some deeper need (e.g., to feel respected). When you dig deeper than the surface and identify your underlying need, you can almost always find ways to communicate with your family about your needs.

02. *Take control of your own needs.*

Ultimately, it is up to you to make sure that your needs get met, even if your family members cannot or will not help you. In making sure your needs are met, you will feel less anger toward your family.

03. *Balancing needs is important.*

Everyone in your family, including your children, has needs that are important. The best families balance each others' needs so that everyone feels cared for and valued.

04. *That said, families have a hierarchy.*

Parents are in charge and set the tone for how the family functions. Though listening to your children and acknowledging the needs of your children is critical, so too is being the ultimate decision-maker.



"Mom, I need privacy. I don't want you to come into my room."

"That makes sense. I understand that you don't want me poking around in your room. I can agree not to come into your room without knocking, but I do need to be able to come into your room. I also need to know that you are safe. In fact, keeping you safe is my number-one job as your parent, so if I ever have concerns about your well-being, I may go into your room without telling you. Let's try to balance your need for privacy with my need to keep you safe by agreeing that you will come to me with the big stuff. That way, I will trust that you are disclosing accurate information and I will be able to give you the privilege of privacy."

