

Healthy Communication & Conflict Resolution

Tennessee Domestic Violence Shelter Best Practices Manual / Section II



Conflict Management and Resolution

“Supporting conflict resolution between shelter residents is an important part of domestic violence intervention work. Helping [survivors] better identify the roots of conflict with other shelter residents and reinforcing how to resolve conflict in respectful and productive ways can go a long way to building a truly supportive, nurturing and empowering shelter environment. When conflicts arise between advocates and shelter residents,

shelter staff must ensure that their response does not reinforce the power and control dynamics that are at the core of domestic violence.” (*Conflict Resolution Tools for Domestic Violence Shelter Staff*, VAWnet.org)

Group living is particularly challenging when you are sharing communal space with strangers who are living in real fear of, and healing from, the trauma of domestic violence. While advocates working in shelter programs are expected to build a community and manage a household of survivors from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, many may not receive the necessary training to resolve the types and intensity of conflicts that may arise within the shelter.

The first major challenge in conflict resolution is identifying the root causes of the conflict. Resolution can only be achieved after all causes, current and resurfacing, are identified.

After a cause is identified, the next step in conflict resolution is to gain an understanding of the impact on the individual. In a shelter setting, understanding the root causes of problems can help advocates positively address the situation, promote healthy communication and understanding between residents, and aid in the ability solve current conflicts and prevent future ones.

Learning how to deal with conflict, rather than avoiding it, is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can cause great harm to a relationship, but when it is handled in a respectful, positive way, conflict provides an opportunity to strengthen the bond between two people. By learning skills for conflict resolution, you can keep your personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

Definition of Conflict

Conflict can be described as a situation when two or more individuals have incompatible goals. Everyone needs to feel understood, nurtured, and supported, but sometimes their goals may be or seem conflicting. Opposing goals and need for comfort and safety create some of the most severe challenges in our personal and professional relationships.

Twelve Approaches of Conflict Resolution

Win win approach- How can we solve this as partners rather than opponents?

Creative response- Transform problems into creative opportunities.

Empathy- Putting oneself in the shoes of the other for the sake of greater understanding.

Appropriate assertiveness- Apply strategies to attack the problem not the person.

Co-operative power- Eliminate "power over" to build "power with" others.

Managing emotions- Express fear, anger, hurt and frustration wisely to affect change.

Willingness to Resolve- Name topics that you wish to resolve, be willing to hear the needs of others.

Mapping the conflict- Define the problems and identify each person's feelings, values, and needs.

Development of options- Design creative solutions together.

Negotiation- Plan and apply effective strategies to reach agreement.

Mediation- Engage in dialogue to work toward agreement.

Broadening perspectives - Respect other's values and differences.

Reframe "for me to be right, others must be wrong" thinking.

For more insight on these 12 methods, see the Conflict Resolution Network's *Conflict Resolution Toolkit* at <http://www.crnhq.org/CR-Kit.aspx?rw=c>

The needs of all sides play important roles in the long-term success of most relationships and deserve respect and consideration. When you can recognize the legitimacy of conflicting goals and become willing to examine them in an environment of compassionate understanding, it opens pathways to creative problem solving, team building and improved relationships.

Tips for managing and resolving conflict:

1. Listen for what is felt as well as said. When we listen we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us when it's our turn to speak.

2. Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or "being right". Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.

3. Focus on the present. If you're holding on to grudges based on past resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.

4. Pick your battles. Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy.

5. Be willing to forgive. Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.

6. Know when to let something go. If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

5 Steps of the Mediation Process

1. Convening- getting all parties to the table
2. Opening the mediation- going over confidentiality and other basic information
3. Communication- sharing the stories of all sides
4. Negotiating- working toward agreements
5. Closing & writing the mediation agreement

The mediator will

- Remain non-judgmental
- Listen actively
- Act impartially
- Encourage the expression of feelings and values
- Seek out underlying needs and interests

Role of the mediator

- Mediators help people communicate their own needs and interests, clarify issues, and negotiate their own agreements.
- Mediators do not take sides, they are neutral facilitators
- Mediators are impartial and have no stake in the outcome of the process

Mediation

Mediation is a way of resolving disputes when two people who disagree with each other call upon a third party to assist in solving the problem. The mediator fills the role of the third party and must remain impartial. A mediator manages the interactions between parties and facilitates open communication. Mediation can be an effective tool to assist advocates in working with shelter residents that are in conflict.

Mediators use various techniques to open, or improve, dialogue and empathy between disputants, aiming to help the parties reach an agreement.

Elements of Successful Mediation:

Those in conflict:

- Voluntarily take part
- Are prepared to be open and honest about the situation and their part in it
- Want to work cooperatively with the other party to find a solution
- Feel that they are in a safe environment

When mediation is not appropriate:

- If a resident feels coerced to take part
 - When this happens, the intervention is set up to fail.

Provide clear information about mediation, including the benefits of the process. Emphasize that the process and outcome reached are under the control of the participants.

- If a resident feels unsafe or threatened
- If the mediator loses their neutrality

Key Elements of Mediation:

- Impartial Facilitator
- Voluntary (on the part of all residents)
- Confidential
- Informal and Flexible
- Collaborative



- Focused on future, not past actions
- A successful mediation resolves the conflict and achieves a 'win-win' for all parties

De-Escalation Tips

- **Be Empathic and Nonjudgmental**

When someone says or does something you perceive as weird or irrational, try not to judge or discount their feelings. Whether or not you think those feelings are justified, they're real to the other person. Pay attention to them. Keep in mind that whatever the person is going through, it may be the most important thing in their life.



- **Respect Personal Space**

If possible, stand 1.5 to three feet away from a person who is escalating. Allowing personal space tends to decrease a person's anxiety and can help you prevent acting-out behavior. If you must enter someone's personal space to provide care, explain your actions so the person feels more secure.



- **Use Nonthreatening Nonverbal Communication**

The more a person loses control, the less they hear your words—and the more they react to your nonverbal communication. Be mindful of your gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Keeping your tone and body language neutral will go a long way toward defusing a situation.

- **Avoid Overreacting**

Remain calm, rational, and professional. While you can't control the person's behavior, how you respond to their behavior will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or defuses. Positive thoughts like "I can handle this" and "I know what to do" will help you maintain your own rationality and calm the person down.

- **Focus On Feelings and Values**

Facts are important, but how a person feels and what's important to them are key points. Some people have trouble identifying how they feel about what's happening to them. Watch and listen carefully for the person's real message. Try saying something like "That must be scary." Supportive words like these will let the person know that you understand their feelings, this may make them comfortable enough to be more expressive.

- **Set Limits**

If a person's behavior is belligerent, offensive, or disruptive, give them clear, simple, and enforceable limits. Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences. A person who is upset may not be able to focus on everything you say. Be clear, speak simply, and offer the positive choice first.

- **Choose Your Battles**

It's important to be thoughtful in deciding which rules are negotiable and which are not. For example, if a person doesn't want to shower in the morning, can you allow them to choose the time of day that feels best for them? If you can offer a person options and flexibility, you may be able to avoid unnecessary conflicts.

- **Allow Silence For Reflection.**

We've all experienced awkward silences. However, even when it is uncomfortable sometimes it is the best choice. It can give a person a chance to reflect on what's happening, and how he or she needs to proceed. Silence can be a powerful communication tool.

- **Allow Time For Decisions.**

When a person is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them a few moments to think through what has been said and made decisions. A person's stress rises when they feel rushed. Allowing time brings calm.

(<https://www.crisisprevention.com>)

Resilience

Resilience is the process of adapting or 'bouncing back' in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. Being resilient doesn't mean that someone is not experiencing sadness, anger, grief, anxiety, or other difficult emotional and physical responses to stress. Advocates know that emotional and physical signs of trauma are common in survivors of domestic violence, and the path to healing takes time. Resilience is a common trait shared by survivors of trauma who are successful in their healing.

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or don't; it involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone. People do not all react the same to traumatic and stressful life events. An approach to building resilience that works for one person might not work for another. People use varying strategies.

Ways to help survivors in shelter build resilience:

Making connections & building support systems. Often abusers isolate their victims from family, friends, and other supportive individuals as a method of exerting their control over victims. An important part of healing and regaining independence for many survivors is rebuilding or creating new support systems. Advocates can help survivors identify safe and supportive individuals in their lives, and refer them to peer support opportunities, like support groups, book clubs, women's centers, or even things like yoga classes or other special interest groups.

Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems; instead move toward manageable goals. Advocates can help survivors recognize the work they are doing toward healing and empowerment. Advocates should help survivors to identify the goals that are most important to them, such as housing, education, work, learning new skills, etc., and help them to identify smaller steps to

take to reach their goals. (For example, employment may be the survivor's priority, the steps included may be updating or learning to create a resume, practicing interview questions, job skills training, applying for multiple positions, accessing transportation for interviews, etc.) Recognize and encourage the hard work and progress as each goal is met. Small celebrations make big impacts!

Accept that change is a part of living.

Shelter living is a huge change and adjustment for most survivors. It is often a scary and difficult transition, and can often be seen as another trauma or punishment. All of these emotions are normal and valid. Validating how

difficult the transition to shelter can be, having open discussions about the challenges of communal living, and helping survivors to navigate this change in their lives is an important role of shelter advocates.

Everyone is different and will respond differently to the process of building resilience. The keys to successful resilience building are empowerment, respect, and encouragement.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. With great change comes the opportunity for self-discovery and growth. Many survivors have been discouraged, or even outright forbidden, from exploring their interests, learning new skills, or engaging in any growth or change that is normal to adult life.

Organizations can provide opportunities for survivors to explore old and new interests and skills.

Organizations can reach out to community members- seek out individuals who would be willing to volunteer to teach a class for shelter residents (e.g. yoga, knitting cooking, resume writing). Encourage survivors who have particular skills or interests to teach classes for their fellow residents, or to create a book club, knitting circle, or other activity of interest.

Nurture positive self-view. Advocates should encourage survivors to develop confidence in their ability to solve problems. Advocates should encourage and empower survivors to make their own choices regarding goals, priorities, and next steps. ("That's a great choice," "It sounds like a good plan, how can we help you?", "What are your thoughts/concerns/next steps?")

Maintain a hopeful outlook. Advocates should strive to be positive and encouraging when talking about the future, modeling an optimistic outlook for survivors who may have difficulty believing that anything good can come in the future.

Encourage self-care. Advocates should encourage survivors to pay attention to their own needs and feelings. Advocates should offer opportunities for relaxation and self-care, such as quiet areas, books to read, movie nights, adult coloring books, and a soothing physical environment. Advocates should talk with survivors about self-care and think about offering self-care opportunities throughout the week (examples include: 'facials' with inexpensive, individual face masks, pedicure party with inexpensive nail polish and nail stickers, baking a sheet of 'break and bake' cookies, coloring in adult coloring books) (*Adapted from American Psychological Association, Road to Resilience, Comas-Diaz, et al.*)

Psychologist Edith Grotberg, Ph.D., believes that everyone needs reminders of the strengths they have. She urges people to cultivate resilience by thinking along three lines:

- **I Have** (e.g. strong friendships, role models, a good job, skills, etc.)

- **I Am** (e.g. a person who has hope, cares about others, is proud of myself, a loving parent)
- **I Can** (e.g. grow, heal, communicate, solve problems, build good relationships)

Advocates can encourage survivors who are discouraged or who are working on resilience to make their own 'I Have, I Am, I Can' lists as reminders of their strengths.

(Adapted from Hara Estroff Marano, Psychology Today, 2003; 2016)

Resources

De-escalation tips-crisisprevention.com

American Psychological Association's 'Road to Resilience' Toolkit-
<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

The Art of Resilience, Hara Estroff Marano, Psychology Today, 2003; 2016

Conflict Resolution Tools for Domestic Violence Shelter Staff: <http://vawnet.org/sc/conflict-resolution-tools-domestic-violence-shelter-staff>

The Consensus Building Handbook: A comprehensive guide to reaching agreement (1999). Susskind, L., McKernan, S., and Thomas-Larmer, J. (Eds). Sage Publications

The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide (2000) Mayer, B., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,).

The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and practice (2006) Deutsh, M., Coleman, PT. and Marcus, E.C. (Eds). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in (1991) Fisher, R, and Ury, W. 2nd Ed. A Penguin Book,

The Conflict Resolution Network: <http://www.crnhq.org>

Conflict Resolution Skills, <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm>