

RECOVERY

The official newsletter of the RCORP Rural Center of Excellence on SUD Recovery at the Fletcher Group



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JOIN THE FRAY!

by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

"Is this a private fight, or can anybody join?" That old comedic line (supposedly Irish in origin) suggests a joy in conflict that escapes me, and likely you as well. Surveys show that most people dislike and will intentionally avoid situations that involve disagreement or confrontation.

But running from conflict has its own costs. Unresolved issues can fester over time, potentially escalating into larger conflicts. Suppressing feelings and needs can also lead to resentment, frustration, and a diminished sense of self-worth while depriving us of the opportunity to grow closer to others.

That's why we invited conflict resolution expert Sal Corbin to talk at our September 4 webinar. What better way to resume our monthly webinar series—and our newsletter—than by sharing the insights that can help you resolve conflict while developing the communication skills that can enhance both your personal and professional growth.

HOW TO PREPARE

To de-escalate and resolve any conflict, says Sal Corbin, you'll need a deep understanding of three things we like to think we understand but often prefer to ignore: the frailties of human nature, our own weaknesses, and the inner realities of others.

Understanding Human Nature

Whether we like it or not, conflict is ubiquitous and inevitable. So when you run from conflict, are you not running from life, and maybe even from yourself? If that's the case, it may be time to set aside the emotional inclinations and shop-worn assumptions that have made avoidance your default response to conflict. Embrace instead a commitment to learn what's needed to stay in the moment and grow, rather than run, from conflict.

Understanding You

What is it you want? "In any exchange, we all have an agenda," says Corbin. "It might be subtle, it might be loud, it might be direct, it might be soft. But we all have something we're hoping to get." To find out what that is, ask yourself: Am I here to win? To look good? To vent? To prove I'm right? To get an apology? To have the last word? Or do I really just want to disappear and get it over?

You'll also want to ask yourself what emotions and fears may be bubbling inside you. Corbin encourages people to "lead with the heart," but how can you do that if you're out of touch with your own feelings, particularly any 'triggers' within you created by past experience or trauma.

Understanding Them

It's also crucial to know what your counterpart wants. We can't literally "walk in another person's shoes," but empathy can allow us to vicariously understand another person's emotional backstory and, with it, their internal state and perspective.

As you do so, keep an eye out for common ground. It may be more readily available than you think. "Most people want the same things," says Corbin. "They just have different ways of getting it. Everyone, for example, wants to be safe in their community, but some people say more guns are needed while others say less. So it's not the 'what' that we typically fight over. It's the 'how.'"



WATCH THE VIDEO

To view our Sept 4 webinar featuring Sal Corbin, simply...

[CLICK HERE](#)



What Type Are You?

It's also helpful know where you and your counterpart fit into what Corbin calls "The Five Modes of Conflict Management."* Corbin uses animals to help identify them: a shark for those who like to dominate, a teddy bear for the obliging, a turtle for those who prefer to withdraw, a fox for those willing to compromise, and a wolf for those who enjoy collaboration (as a pack of wolves do when hunting).

Knowing your mode can help you to identify your own conflict management strengths and weaknesses as well as your counterpart's. "In time," says Corbin, "you can even learn to shift from mode to mode, depending on the situation, to get better results."

* Taken from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) self-assessment tool

YOUR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLSET

The first skill you'll need in your "Conflict Management Skillset" might surprise you. It's knowing when to walk. "Like any other relationship, conflict can be functional or dysfunctional," says Corbin. "That's why the first question to ask yourself is whether it's worth it." The term "good faith" applies here. Is the other party respectful, trustworthy, fair-minded, and willing to compromise? Or are they there only for the short-term goal of making a point or, worse yet, inflicting pain? "Some people just love to fight," says Corbin. "The trouble-makers and button-pushers can't wait to say no to your yes, red to your blue, up to your down. Unless you're in the misery loves misery camp, it's better to avoid them."

The Role of Empathy

Assuming your counterpart is acting in good faith, your most valuable skill is empathy—the ability to imagine how and why another person feels the way they do. By understanding and appreciating someone's experiences, struggles, and perspective before judging or offering an opinion, empathy helps discharge the negative emotional energy that might otherwise sabotage fruitful dialogue. Some fine distinctions to keep in mind: Empathy is not sympathy (the latter can seem annoyingly condescending), humility is not surrender, and acceptance (of how another person feels) is not agreement.

The Challenge of Active Listening

Active listening begins with the recognition that the conversation is more about the other person than you. Because that's counter to our nature, active listening requires extraordinary patience, mindfulness, and discipline. (Try *not* thinking of a reply while the other speaks—it's not easy!) The requisite communication skills include good eye contact; non-threatening body language and facial expressions; the reading of non-verbal cues (experts say as much as 65% of a person's communication is unspoken); the ability to tactfully mirror, paraphrase, and summarize so that the speaker feels validated; the adroit use of open-ended questions ("yes or no" questions tend to produce dead-end answers); and, above all, the withholding of judgment and advice. By tuning into the other person's inner world and stepping away from your own, you can create a safe space where they can open up, knowing they won't be shamed, criticized, blamed, or otherwise negatively received.

Listening With the Heart

For TV's Mister Rogers—the avatar of active listening—people (adults as well as children) are given full and undivided attention so they can feel seen, heard, and special. As the creator, showrunner, and host of the preschool television series *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Fred McFeely Rogers modeled active listening as a profound means of expressing love, building connection, and acknowledging another person's uniqueness by engaging with not only their feelings but their entire being.

A Bar Too High?

"Active listening is much more than just hearing the words. It's listening with your heart, as well as with your ears," says Corbin. "But I'm guessing most of us don't do a lot of that. Therapists like me do it in the office. But as soon as I take off my professional hat, I'm just yucking it up like everyone else. Because I'm a 'fix-it guy' I don't have a lot of patience. I want instant input and an immediate resolution. I should know better—I *do* know better—but it doesn't stop me from interrupting and cutting people off, which unfortunately shuts them down. While we're on the subject, I also can't stand people who are judgmental and hypocritical—my two biggest pet peeves. But that's exactly what I am if I don't catch myself."

WHAT TO DO IN THE MOMENT

Read the Room, including the mood of your counterpart. Mute and put away your cell phone and eliminate distractions, including any internal dialogue, so that you're completely present in the moment.

Read Yourself. Assess your own mood and stress level. "We all have good days and bad days," says Corbin. "On a good day, I'm gonna be your best friend, treat you to lunch, give you a hug. But on a bad day? None of that."

Stay Hopeful by thinking of conflict as an opportunity for growth and reconciliation.

Stay Calm. Don't let a rude remark or an irritating personality trait throw you off. "There are some things people do that we just can't stand," says Corbin. "The trick is not to show it or let it affect your judgment."

Don't Assume. A misguided assumption or unfair stereotype is the last thing you need.

Listen! Make sure you face the speaker with undivided attention. And once they start speaking, allow them to fully share their story without interruption.

Validate the speaker by saying "I hear you" or repeating back to them what they've said.

Ask For More. Don't abruptly change the subject.

Instead, when the speaker stops, ask if there's anything more they'd like to share. "I want you to tell me everything that's going on," says Corbin, "because the more you give me, the more I have to work with."

Offer Something. It would be great to suggest a plan of action that satisfies both parties. But even if you can't, offer something, even if it's only a commitment to be more aware of the other person's needs and aspirations.

Be Accountable. If you want the other party to take action, volunteer to take the next step yourself.

Soften the Blow as much as possible. "It's not what you say, it's how you say it," says Corbin. "Likewise, it's not what you do, it's how you show up."

Be Flexible. Each day, event, and person is different so don't be afraid to go with the flow. People can also tell when you're just reciting what you've said before so feel free to go off-script if it helps keep things fresh.

React. If someone's angry, ask why and clarify if it's personal or not. You always want to know where you stand.

But Don't Over-React. Don't take the bait and don't take things personally. "Never wrestle with a pig," says Corbin, quoting George Bernard Shaw, "because you'll both get dirty but the pig likes it."

Stay Calm. If negative emotions start to rise, call a time out to calm and center yourself using whatever skills you've developed for that purpose.



Lead With Your Heart.

Vulnerability is disarming. Provided you remain humble and respectful, it's okay to express heartfelt emotion.

Change It Up. The best de-escalation techniques also rehumanize. "I'll change things up by offering coffee," says Corbin. "Or I'll say, 'Hey, I could really use some fresh air. Want to take a walk?'"

There will be times when, one way or another, you'll need to create some open space for everyone to reset."

Laugh It Up. Humor, especially the self-deprecating kind, can be useful. It can also help you "feel the room." Laughter in response signals possibility; silence suggests a deeper problem. (Time to let someone else talk?)

The Go-To Question.

Corbin's favorite line is, 'How can I show up to support you better?' "I use it all the time," says Corbin, "because the sense of power and control it gives people is so engaging."

Know When to End. If it's clear your counterpart has lost interest, it's better to respectfully call it quits rather than feel annoyed and unheard.

Give Thanks. Gratitude works wonders. No matter how little progress has been made, thank your counterpart for their time, effort, and willingness to participate.