Conflict, a disagreement or struggle between two or more people, is an inevitable aspect of all relationships. The closer two people become, the more likely they are to experience conflict. Learning to deal successfully with conflict is part of maintaining healthy relationships. When conflict is mismanaged, it can harm the relationship. But when conflict is handled in a respectful and positive way, it provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between two people. You can keep your relationships strong and growing by learning the skills of successful conflict resolution.
Conflict in Relationships

Respond to this question:

Is all conflict bad and should it be avoided? Explain.

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of all relationships: dating…family…work…marriage…the list goes on and on. Conflict is neither good or bad. To try to avoid conflict for the sake of harmony in a relationship may seem like a good idea, but it usually only postpones an issue/disagreement. Sometimes it can result in a bigger problem later on.

Think about a time when something was bothering you but you tried to ignore it in order to preserve the relationship. Did the issue go away? How did avoiding the issue affect the relationship?

Think of someone with whom you have had the most conflict. What relationship do you have with this person? What is your level of closeness?

Sometimes we get stuck on the idea that closeness means the absence of conflict. This idea can set us up for disappointment. Believing that a good relationship is one in which there is no conflict is a false and unrealistic expectation. Expectations, when unfulfilled, cause disappointment. And disappointment in relationships can be related to your expectations about what should happen within those relationships.

Think about a time when conflict within a relationship happened as a result of expectations. How did that affect the relationship? How would an attitude of “conflict is normal” have helped?
Attitudes and Strategies to Address Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of life. It occurs in relationships too—especially close relationships.

In the box, draw (or write words to describe) images and feelings that come to mind when you think of being in conflict with someone.

If these images are negative, most likely they represent the thoughts and behaviors people choose in response to conflict, not the conflict itself.

Describe a recent conflict you have been in (with yourself or another person). Did an underlying sense of unfairness cause the conflict?

Avoidance is a very common way people try to deal with conflict. What have you noticed tends to happen when you or others avoid disagreements or other negative issues?

10 Steps for Resolving Conflict

1. Set a time and place for discussion.
2. Define the problem or issue of disagreement.
3. Talk about how each of you contributes to the problem.
4. List past unsuccessful attempts to resolve the issue.
5. Brainstorm new ways to resolve the conflict.
6. Discuss and evaluate possible solutions.
7. Agree on one solution to try.
8. Agree on how each individual will work toward this solution.
9. Set up another meeting to discuss your progress.
10. Reward each other as you each contribute toward a solution.

Choose a conflict you were recently involved in. At the left, circle the steps you completed. Then put an X by those you didn’t try.

How could you have more successfully resolved the conflict using these 10 steps?
Anger!
It often precedes and follows conflict.

What does the following quote mean to you?

“Consider how much more you often suffer from your anger and grief, than from those very things for which you are angry and grieved.” —Marcus Antonius.

Anger is a powerful experience that is related to conflict. Everyone feels anger from time to time.

Give an example of a time when you were angry. How did you feel? Were you also negatively affected?

Have you ever found yourself reacting out of anger and later regretting something you did? Give an example.

1-2-3 What to do about anger

You have three choices when it comes to anger: react to it…forget about it…or manage it.

React to anger Some people operate with the idea that the best way to deal with anger is to “let it all hang out.” But really, who benefits from angry reactions? Is it healthy or fun to react with anger or to be on the receiving end of someone’s anger?

Think of a time when you either reacted with anger or were on the receiving end of someone’s angry outburst. How were you affected? How was the relationship affected?
Forget about anger

Some people have a very different reaction to anger: instead of an outburst, they repress it. A person may not even be aware that they are angry or that they are repressing or “stuffing” their anger away.

Think of a time when you repressed your anger. How were you and your relationships affected?

Myth or Fact?  
Anger is often behind conflict. Place an ‘M’ next to the statements below that represent a myth, and an ‘F’ next to those that represent facts.

- Anger is a feeling, with psychological components.
- Aggression leads to further aggression, not resolution.
- Women get less angry than men.
- The nonexpression of anger leads to increased risk of heart disease.
- Anger always leads from frustration.
- Most anger is directed toward those close to us, not toward strangers.
- TV violence, active sports, and/or competitive work releases anger.
- Venting (by yelling or pounding pillows) releases anger and therefore ‘deals with it.’
- Anger is universal among human beings.
- Depression, shyness, and suicide are expressions of anger at oneself.
- Some people never get angry.
- The venting of anger—catharsis—is of value only when it sets the stage for resolution.
- Aggressive behavior is a sure sign of an ‘angry person.’

More false beliefs about anger.

1. **Anger is caused by others.** Think of a time when you were angry and you blamed someone else. Looking back, was your anger really caused by the other person, or was it a choice you made in response to something the other person did that you did not like?

2. **The best way to deal with anger is to “let it all hang out.”** What are some other risks to letting anger become so visible?

3. **Anger is a beneficial emotion.** How do you react when people are very angry?

4. **You’re a wimp if you don’t get angry.** How have you resisted reacting with anger, and what was the result for your relationship?

   “An argument is always about what has been made more important than the relationship”—HUGH PRATHNER. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Manage anger

What does it mean to “manage anger”? The goal is not to eliminate anger, but to acknowledge the anger, understand its source, reduce the impact (both emotional and physiological), and learn to control its effects on yourself, others, and your relationships.
5-step plan for approaching anger.

Here is a simple 5-step plan to help you when you find yourself getting angry. This plan takes into account the other tips we have been looking at.

1. **Identify the problem.** Start by noticing what you’re angry about and why. Put into words what’s making you upset, so you can act rather than react. Ask yourself: “What am I feeling and why?” Think back to your list of triggers.

2. **Think of possible solutions before responding.** Ask yourself: “What can I do?” Think of at least three things.

3. **Consider the consequences of each solution.** Ask yourself: “What will happen with each of these options?”

4. **Make a decision.** Ask yourself: “What’s my best choice?”

5. **Check your progress.** Ask yourself: “How did I do? Did things work out as I expected? If not, why not? Am I satisfied with the choice I made?”

Think about the last time you got angry. Consider the five questions above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify the problem. I was angry because…</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three possible solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would have been my best choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you make that choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did things work out?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity” —Albert Einstein

What do you think this quote means? How can conflict be beneficial to a relationship?

Write or illustrate your own rules for Fighting Fairly.

Give an example of a time when you used fair fighting or dirty fighting. What are the possible consequences of using fair fighting vs. using dirty fighting techniques?
Seeking and granting forgiveness

All relationships will experience times of conflict, hurt, and letting each other down. Building a healthy relationship means learning to forgive and to seek forgiveness when necessary. It doesn’t mean excusing bad behavior or hurtful words or actions, but it does mean not allowing those things to create a wedge in your relationships.

Give an example of a time when you had to forgive someone.

Is it easier to ask for forgiveness or to grant forgiveness? Explain.

6 steps for seeking forgiveness

1. Admit what you did was wrong or hurtful.
2. Try to understand/empathize with the pain you have caused.
3. Take responsibility for your action and make restitution if necessary.
4. Assure the other person you won’t do it again.
5. Forgive yourself.

6 steps for granting forgiveness

1. Acknowledge your pain and anger. Allow yourself to feel disrespected.
2. Be specific about your future expectations and limits.
3. Give up your desire to get even, but insist on being treated better in the future.
4. Let go of blame, resentment, and negativity toward your partner.
5. Communicate your act of forgiveness to your partner.
6. Work toward reconciliation (when safe).

Which step is the hardest? Which is the easiest? Which do you think is the most important?

Give an example of step #3. How can you do step #4?