

## Dealing with Conflict

Conflict before, during and after a divorce is inevitable. Yet, if the conflict continues, you'll never reach an agreement. Over 95% of all divorce cases ultimately settle, so you'll deal with the conflict sooner or later. It's helpful if you can learn to deal with conflict in a way that won't make you crazy, and can help you learn to get along with your ex-spouse enough so that you can work out your settlement, share your children, and deal with the everyday problems that will arise in the meantime and afterwards.

The first step in understanding how to deal with conflict is to realize that in order to resolve conflict, you'll have to understand the other side's interests. They may have a POSITION, such as "I want the children on Wednesday nights" or "I want to keep the house" but until you understand WHY they want that you'll continue to have a conflict.

For example, perhaps the reason the parent wants the children on Wednesday nights is that he or she wants to be involved doing the children's homework. Maybe Wednesday night is not convenient for your or the children, but maybe there is another way that the parent can continue to be involved in helping with homework. For the spouse who wants to keep the house, maybe all he or she really wants is a secure place to live, or to be able to stay in the same school system. It isn't as much about "Wednesday night" or "the house" as it is about other, underlying issues.

To find out the other side's interests, don't get misled by the position they're telling you (Wednesday night, or keep the house). Ask questions instead:

Help me understand why that is important to you

Why do you want that?

What are you concerned about?

What are your goals for the future?

What could I do to make my proposal acceptable to you?

If you could have what you're asking, what would that accomplish for you?

What's the real problem?

What would be wrong with.....?

Why not do it the way I've suggested?

Listen, listen, listen to the responses, and then ask more questions. Repeat what the person has said to make sure you understand. They are giving you information—clues as to how to resolve your conflict. You don't have to agree with what they say, and you don't have to give in to their demands. You're not being "nice", you're being strategic.

Remember, to have an agreement, both sides must agree. You won't agree if your needs aren't met, and they won't agree if their needs aren't met. Understanding their needs is the first step to resolving the conflict, and working toward an agreement. When you ask questions to find out what the other person's interests are, rather than focus on their position, you begin to reduce conflict.

Many people are choosing to resolve their divorces as well as their post-divorce issues with the help of a Family Law Mediator. Most courts have mediators available free of charge. You can also get a referral to a private mediator through the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR), at [www.acresolution.org](http://www.acresolution.org) or by calling (202) 667-9700 or Email: [info@acresolution.org](mailto:info@acresolution.org) .

Mediation is a great way to work through your differences, and is typically much less expensive than court. When people have input into resolving their problems, and come to an agreement, there's a much higher rate of compliance with those agreements than when a Judge makes an order. Agreements made in mediation are both less expensive and more comprehensive than court orders, and they're more likely to be followed as well.

### **Taking Responsibility for Your Role in Conflict**

When you're in conflict, it's tempting to think that the other person is completely at fault, and that you are totally blameless. Yet who among us is a complete angel, 100% of the time? Resolving conflict is not about figuring out who is right or assigning blame to the guilty party. Resolving conflict is about moving forward and learning a new way to deal with each other in the future.

Part of your ability to move on depends on your ability to recognize that it takes two to fight. When you understand your role in the conflict, you can start to avoid the old behaviors that got you into the arguments of the past.

As a family law mediators, often the first agreement we help couples to reach is that the old way is not working, and that they'll need to try a new way of communicating and dealing with each other in the future. But change is not easy, and doing things a different way feels risky sometimes. People are naturally resistant to change. Yet, if you want to stay out of conflict in the future, it's

important to identify those behaviors in yourself that contributed to the conflicts of the past.

Think about your past conflicts—or current conflicts—and ask yourself:

What did I do to contribute to making this conflict happen?

How could I have handled this situation better?

Have I suffered because of my own actions?

Have others suffered? Have my children suffered because of my actions?

What is the most important lesson I've learned from this conflict?

Is there a way this conflict could improve my life?

What's humorous about my role in this conflict?

What would it take for me to let go of this conflict completely?

What would happen if I did let go of it completely?

Has the way I've communicated help the other person to understand?

What could I do to improve the way I communicate?

What skills could I develop in handling conflict?

What skills could I develop in responding to the other person's negative behavior?

You cannot control other people. Ex-spouses are particularly difficult to control! You can only control yourself, and how you deal with your ex-spouse or others with whom you have conflict. You alone have the ability to control how you react to disagreements, and how you'll react better next time.

We'd all like other people to read the questions above and to have them respond. It's more difficult to do it yourself, and to take responsibility for your part in an unpleasant situation. You are the key person in changing your relationship with your ex spouse, and how you deal with the inevitable disagreements between the two of you. When you change your own behavior, you also change the reaction that you get from your ex spouse, and that's the first baby step to learning to deal with conflict differently.

## **10 Tips For Dealing with Arguments**

1. It takes 2 to argue. You can always refuse to participate.
2. A certain amount of tension is to be expected when you're getting divorced. Expect difficult discussions, but they don't have to result in a fight.
3. Try to understand your spouse's viewpoint. Once you understand what he or she wants, you can begin to see how you might be able to help resolve the situation.
4. Evaluate your own goals. Are you entrenched in a position that may have another solution? If you want your children on Wednesday night for dinner, will Thursday do? If your goal is financial security, is one particular asset the key, or could another be substituted?
5. Use "I" statements. Begin every sentence with "I", rather than "you". Example: "I feel upset when I hear you say that I'm a bad father because I have to work so many hours" instead of "You are always accusing me of being a bad father".
6. After you explain how you feel, listen to your spouse's side of the story. Repeat what you heard, to make sure for yourself (and to convey to your spouse) that you understand how he or she views the situation.
7. Plan a time to have a discussion with your spouse about a specific issue that bothers you. Limit the discussion.
8. Choose your timing. The same comment may evoke a different response if chosen 1) when neither of you is tired; 2) when neither of you is already angry; and 3) the children or others are not in earshot.
9. Be prepared to say "I'm sorry" sometimes. "I was wrong" can go a long way.
10. Above all, let annoyances go and choose your battles wisely. They are too important to squander.

For more information, please read Chapter 3, page 72 and Chapter 6, page 170 in *Your Divorce Advisor: A Lawyer and a Psychologist Guide You Through the Legal and Emotional Landscape of Divorce* (Fireside 2001), available at a discount through [www.yourdivorceadvisor.com](http://www.yourdivorceadvisor.com).