

The Nature of Conflict

The front-page headline of today's newspaper is about growing tensions between countries. The sports page tells of a brawl at last night's hockey game, while the "metro" section contains details of an argument between a driver and a pedestrian. Despite their differences, these stories have something in common. All are about conflict.

HEALTH TERMS

conflict

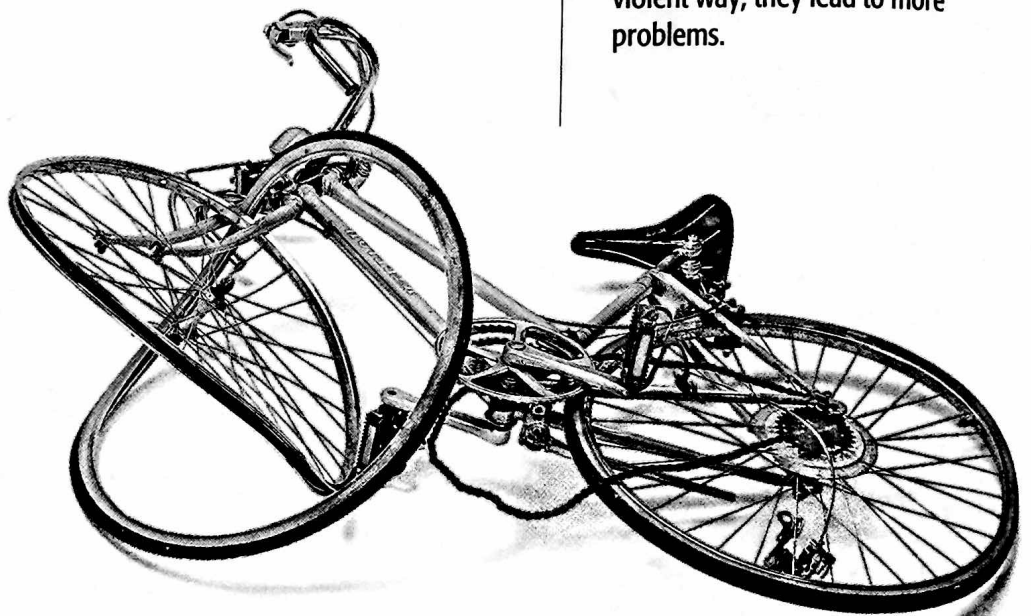
interpersonal conflicts

internal conflicts

escalate

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Conflict is a normal part of life.
- There are common physical and emotional signs that indicate a conflict is building.
- There are times when it is wise to ignore a conflict and times when it is not.
- When conflicts are handled in a violent way, they lead to more problems.



Types of Conflict

Conflict is *any disagreement, struggle, or fight*. Conflicts are a normal part of life. Whenever your wants, needs, wishes, demands, values, or beliefs clash with someone else's, a conflict is almost certain to arise. There are two major types of conflicts—*interpersonal conflicts* and *internal conflicts*.

- **Interpersonal conflicts** are *disagreements between groups of any size, from two people to entire nations*. Conflicts of this type can start over minor issues, like the disagreement between the teens in the chapter-opening story. They can also affect the lives of entire populations, such as a dispute over whether to spend community funds to build low-income housing.
- **Internal conflicts** are *struggles within yourself*. Such conflicts, which can be common in the teen years, often involve mixed

emotions. For example, a teen casting the lead role for a class play might feel “torn” between feelings of loyalty to a close friend auditioning for the part and a responsibility to select the best actor. Sometimes, internal conflicts arise over what might appear to be a good choice at the moment but what may not be best for you in the long run. In such cases, knowing how to use an effective **decision-making model** can ease you safely through the conflict with your health and self-esteem intact.

Whatever the nature of a conflict, learning to recognize conflicts when they occur, being aware of how conflicts build, and knowing how to deal with them effectively are skills that have a direct and lasting impact on your total health and well-being.

How Conflicts Build

Conflicts can begin in many ways and for many different reasons. Among these are power, property, authority, jealousy, loyalty, space, and territory. Some conflicts start innocently, such as when one person accidentally bumps another’s lunch tray. Others are the result of an act or remark that provokes another person—a wet towel snapped in a locker room, for example, or a racial slur. Either way, a “fuse” is ignited.

At this point, one or both parties can choose to walk away and allow the situation to drop. All too often, however, a conflict is permitted to **escalate**, or *grow into a situation that is unhealthy and even unsafe to all parties concerned*. This may result from a lack of communication, a misunderstanding, or gossip.

Learning to identify the warning signs that a conflict is brewing can help you “put out the fire” before it rages out of control. Some of the warning signs that conflict is building inside of you are physical. Others are emotional.

Warning Signs

PHYSICAL

a knot in the stomach
faster heart rate
a lump in the throat
cold or sweating palms
a sudden surge of energy
confrontational—or
“fighting”—body language,
such as clenching your
fists or gritting your teeth

EMOTIONAL

feeling concerned
getting defensive
wanting to cry
wanting to lash out
wanting to escape
not feeling valued

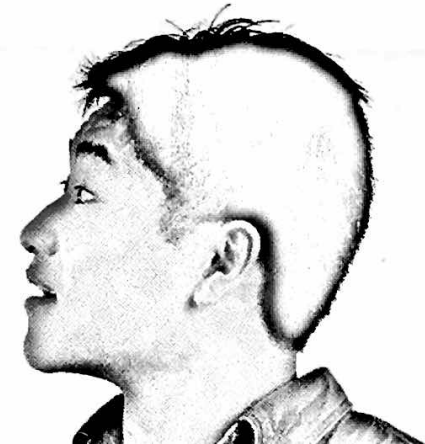
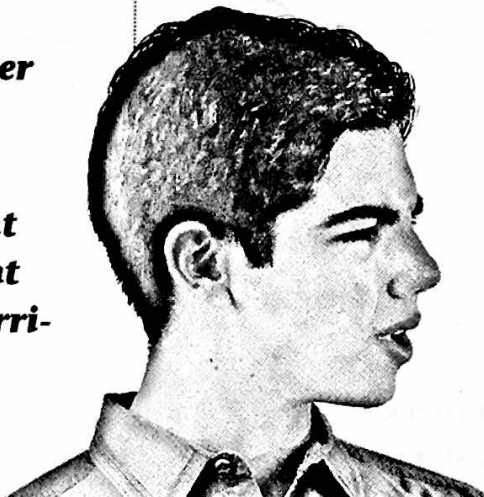
Recognizing Conflict

Although conflict is an unavoidable part of life, there are healthful and unhealthy ways of responding to it. The first step is to decide whether the problem is something that really deserves your time and energy. You can identify the problem and its source by asking yourself the following questions:

- What is *really* bothering me and why?
- Is this a minor, a chronic, or a major problem?

► **Conflicts are often over territory, space, property, and power.**

ACTIVITY *Recall one recent conflict you witnessed that involved two teens and territory, space, or property.*



- What is triggering the conflict?
- Are there hurt feelings or other unexplored emotions lurking beneath my anger?
- Have anyone's rights been violated?
- What is my part in the problem?
- Does this conflict involve my personal values or beliefs?
- What is at stake here?

Responding to Conflict

When a conflict arises, you can either face it or ignore it. In deciding on which course of action to take, the two most important points to remember are the following: (1) Your personal health and safety should be your primary concern; (2) walking away from a volatile or dangerous situation is a healthful, mature choice—not a sign of being a coward.

Sometimes teens jump into conflicts too lightly. They think that doing so may provide a thrill or prove to those around them that they are tough, cool, or unafraid. These same teens may also believe, wrongly, that getting out of a conflict is as easy as getting in. Unfortunately, once you become embroiled in a real-life conflict, you may find that there is no turning back.



Talk the Talk

Some conflicts build because feelings or tensions are kept inside too often or for too long. For example, if someone keeps calling you by a nickname that you hate, but you never say anything about it, your resentment may build toward the person without his or her even knowing it. To avoid letting feelings build up inside you:

- Talk about what's troubling you.
- Practice speaking up and telling others how you feel.
- When you feel hurt or offended, let the other person know, but use "I" messages.