

# FREE YOURSELF FROM CONFLICT

MOVING FROM THE PAIN AND REMORSE OF CONFLICT  
TO KINDNESS COMPASSION AND PEACE

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David B. Pauker  
Forward by Jack Healey

[www.ConflictFreedom.com](http://www.ConflictFreedom.com)  
Petaluma, CA

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## **FREE YOURSELF FROM CONFLICT**

...Appeals to the heart and spirit as well as the mind. David shows readers how to shift from reaction to reflection to problem solving. He gives us a clear and methodical process for getting under, through and past conflict. **FREE YOURSELF FROM CONFLICT** is a practical, accessible, well-written book that provides a way to engage with others more constructively.

Cinnie Noble

Founder, Cinery Conflict Coaching

...Amazing on a number of levels – and it's not just for business. David gives us the answer for what to do when a situation inexplicably spins out of control and there doesn't seem to be any way to bring it back without surrendering everything you care about – even when your three year old throws a tantrum in front of the supermarket candy display. He also gives us new ways to understand and cope with a world that every day seems increasingly chaotic.

Mark Silver

Founder, Heart of Business

...So inspiring I found myself reading parts to my friends. Because I have worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Africa and the U.S. to rebuild and strengthen communities under the most challenging conditions on the planet, I know this book is critically needed around the world for peace building, trauma, and post war reconstruction. David's simple

3-Steps enable people to turn a conflict or terrible situation inside out and get amazing results. This is a revolutionary presentation of a process that I know works.

Patricia Omidian, Ph.D.

Co-Founder, Focusing Initiatives International

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# Chapter 1

## SOME BASICS

I don't like that man. I must get to know him better.

-- Abraham Lincoln

Through experience I have learned that I don't have to be a victim of conflict. The secret is simple: *Don't try to win! Conflict is not a sporting event.*

It's possible to move beyond the contest of a conflict. The 3-STEPS in this book provide a remarkably effective method for uncovering the wisdom and opportunities hidden under the surface of a conflict, information you can use to increase the number and scope of available options, craft a solution that satisfies everyone's real interests, and even expand your own self-imposed limitations. Conflicts happen every day, and solving them can become as easy, natural, and life-affirming as breathing. In fact, genuine conflict solutions will clean the hurt from your heart.

## Free Yourself From Conflict

A friend named Sarah Taylor and Kayla, her stepdaughter, are good friends now. They fly halfway across the United States to be together. But before the friendship there were years of conflict, anger, and painful hurt feelings. The turnaround began when Sarah reached out with a simple act of kindness.

Sarah remembers the night when she was caught in another battle, shouting at fourteen-year-old Kayla, the oldest girl among her five stepchildren. Since marrying her husband Ben five years before, Sarah had become the only mother the girl could remember. Now, alerted by the slamming front door, Sarah had stopped Kayla tiptoeing to her room, once again more than an hour late for her curfew. Kayla's indifferent excuse was that "the movie ran long," and Sarah let Kayla know she'd had enough.

Ben heard the quarrel from the kitchen. He found Kayla standing at the top of the stairs, defiantly glaring down on Sarah at the bottom. "You know, Kayla," he said, "I'm a little out of practice fighting. Why don't you fight with me for a while instead of Sarah?"

Kayla thought about that for a few seconds. Then, she glowered at Sarah, and as she turned toward her room she pointed at Sarah and declared, "No, I have to fight with her."

Sarah was surprised by the intensity of Kayla's anger. But she also felt more like Kayla's mother than ever before because she knew it's the mother a teenaged daughter often fights with. She saw what happened as classic mother-daughter conflict,

After a while, Sarah went to see Kayla in her room. Sarah hoped it might help their relationship if she confessed her own feelings about being an outsider, a relative newcomer in a house with six others who were all members of a natural family. She found the girl lying in bed, crying with her head buried in a pillow. Sarah looked at Kayla, and finally, from the pain in her own heart Sarah asked, "Have you ever felt totally alone?"



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Kayla peered up from the pillow and whispered, “All the time.”

Sarah told me, “When Kayla looked at me with that tear stained face, I saw her in a hole of pain, darkness, and confusion, and my heart melted. I sat down next to her and folded her into my arms. And we held each other for more than two hours without moving.”

This experience did not end the conflict. But, by acknowledging her own pain, Sarah was able to feel Kayla’s. That allowed her to have more compassion for them both, and her compassion provided the ground for Kayla’s trust to grow. Sarah changed her relationship with the conflict, and she was able to provide Kayla with more patience, respect, and love.

You can take responsibility for your own wellbeing in a conflict and solve it. I am not saying you should hug the other person or reveal your deepest vulnerability in every conflict. But you can stop feeling trapped. You can learn to take control of your conflict story, change your relationship with the conflict, and find a genuine solution that meets the real needs of everyone involved.

Unfortunately, that’s not what most people do when they are faced with a conflict. Instead they choose an approach they think will get them through the problem with the least amount of bother, even though it probably hasn’t worked for them in the past. They may collaborate, compromise, capitulate. They may just avoid the problem. Or they might use the most popular style for resolving conflict: bullying the other person.<sup>3</sup>

These and other popular approaches for conflict may initially appear effective. But they usually just cover over the symptoms and fail to heal the real issues. As a result, they leave at least one party stewing even when they seem successful. The unresolved problems become magnified and flare up again to

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cause greater pain. Using these methods can be like making a purchase with a credit card – you pay later, with interest added. However, in a conflict the interest will probably be measured by pain, not by money.

That is what happened in World War II when more than 70 million people died.<sup>4</sup> That's certainly conflict on a grand scale. Yet, like most conflicts, its start was small, and there were opportunities to peacefully resolve the problem. But no one confronted it and the conflict exploded, spreading out of control.

One person who had several opportunities to put an end to the problem was Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of Great Britain in the late 1930s. He repeatedly denied the danger when he was confronted by Adolph Hitler's aggression. Chamberlain used every excuse to avoid involving Great Britain in "Europe's problem." The pain of the First World War – when almost half a generation of Britain's young men were killed or wounded – was still too fresh.<sup>5</sup> Despite England's clear treaty obligations, Chamberlain refused to oppose Hitler when Germany invaded Austria, the Sudetenland, and the rest of Czechoslovakia. Captured German documents and testimony at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals confirmed that if England and France had challenged Hitler on any one of his invasions prior to 1940, the Germans did not have sufficient military strength to resist a counterattack, and political forces would have driven Hitler from office.<sup>6</sup> Had Chamberlain moved to solve the conflict, there might not have been a Second World War in Europe. Three percent of the world's population would probably not have been killed.<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain wanted peace and was willing to pay any price for even the hope of it. In his mind he was solving the conflict by negotiating and compromising with Hitler, not capitulating and avoiding it.

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Like Chamberlain, most people endure the pain of conflict. They accept it as a price they must pay for a modern life. It's amazing people don't acknowledge the magnitude of positive health, personal, and social benefits that flow from eliminating conflict and contradiction. But conflict is popular. Some actually think conflict is a good thing. How can people not be into conflict – think about your favorite motion pictures, television programs, and video games. Conflict and territorial aggression are certainly a part of many popular sports like American football, ice hockey, and soccer.<sup>8</sup>

Human beings have an amazing capacity to live with physical, emotional, and psychological pain. In fact, a lot of people choose pain rather than change what they're doing, even when they know that choice will cause more pain. Study after study shows that when heart patients are told they must change their lifestyle or die within two years, only one patient in ten actually modifies her or his lifestyle. That's only 10%. It appears the other 90% prefer death to change.<sup>9</sup>

Change is filled with problems that most people fear: the adjustment, the inconvenience, the unknown outcome. This fear causes them to overlook or deny the possible good in change, and they end up marching in place.

They believe they have compelling reasons to use the old methods for dealing with conflicts. They are nervous about rocking the boat at work, at home, or among friends. They're worried about taking a risk, feeling vulnerable, or being hurt. They're anxious about losing control of themselves and the situation. They're afraid of their inner demons and the ugliness they see in conflicts.

Experience tells them there is nothing else they can do to solve their conflicts and improve their relationships. The workshops they have attended, the self-help books and

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magazine articles they've read – none of these were effective. Even the best advice from friends and relatives frequently has been too complicated and confusing.

But conflict takes its toll. The stress of it contributes to a variety of health-threatening conditions, including heart disease and premature aging.<sup>10</sup> Under stress, people are more likely to eat sweets and fatty foods,<sup>11</sup> while their bodies can gain weight at a rate that's twice what it would be under calmer conditions.<sup>12</sup> As conflict crushes their hearts, people continue to suffer, living in denial and feeling betrayed by those they trust. They grow frustrated, feel attacked, and become angry about circumstances spinning out of control.

In short, conflict separates almost everyone from their better selves, and keeps them from the richness life offers. It drains their resources and paralyzes them.

But you have a choice! Solving your conflicts can become an easy way to make your life better every day, and you'll feel the positive results.

Solving conflicts relating to workplace conditions is particularly important for doctors and nurses working in hospital intensive care units [ICUs]. New technologies that make it possible to prolong life to a greater and greater extent are causing stress and conflict to grow exponentially. However, one doctor addressed the problem with a simple solution, and as a result patient infection rates fell dramatically, and 60% fewer nurses wanted to leave their jobs.<sup>13</sup>

In 2001, Dr. Peter Pronovost, a critical-care specialist at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, was particularly troubled because procedures that save lives in ICUs have become so complicated that it is difficult to get them right consistently. In addition, nurses are constantly faced with contradictory imperatives for them to act or not act relative to such things as

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hospital regulations, demands of the families, lack of authority, and moral obligations.<sup>14</sup> As a result, doctors as well as nurses have become increasingly frustrated, conflicted by the changing medical systems and the complicated procedures to implement them. Approximately 50% of doctors and 40% of hospital staff nurses score in the high range for burnout as a result of job-related stress.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Pronovost saw the dilemma around complicated technologies was not unique to ICUs. For instance, large passenger airliners are filled with technology, so pilots use written checklists to make sure they have properly performed the complex preparation necessary to ready their planes for flight. This has produced an amazing record of safety. Dr. Pronovost prepared simple paper and pencil checklists that doctors and nurses could follow to get one complicated ICU procedure right and make sure they didn't forget anything. His positive results got the attention of the Michigan Health and Hospital Association. Within 90 days, the infection rate in Michigan ICUs fell by two-thirds. In the first eighteen months, Michigan's hospitals saved more than 1,500 lives and \$175 million.<sup>16</sup>

It seemed to me that what Dr. Pronovost is doing would also greatly lessen conflicts doctors and nurses have with people and circumstances at work. Since 40% of employee turnover relates to stress,<sup>17</sup> I wondered if he had tested for changes in job satisfaction. When I spoke with him, Dr. Pronovost said he conducted interviews with hospital staffs and used a psychological test that reflects job satisfaction and turnover. The interviews underlined the test results showing 60% fewer nurses wanting to leave their jobs. There was less conflict: Nurses, for example, said that when they saw something amiss, they felt freer to talk openly with doctors

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without provoking conflict. Both doctors and nurses described their work as more rewarding and joyful.

### ***There's more to conflict than you think***

As the experience of the doctors and nurses shows, conflict is more than disagreement and fighting. It is not a contest. Conflict is a process.

A useful definition of conflict can not only help build understanding, it may also establish the parameters of an advantageous solution. Current, popular definitions disregard internal motivating factors, consequences, and other elements that are important aspects of conflict. They merely describe it as a “struggle” or a “clash” between people over competing needs, values, desires, interests, or scarce resources. These definitions focus on the behavioral aspects of conflict, its outward actions. They are about power, and ultimately about winning or losing. These definitions ignore the inner reality of conflict – *conflict is fundamentally an internal process that often has external manifestations.*

I suggest a more essential, practical definition of *conflict* should be about you and the conflict's effects on you, and not about the other person or the situation. It should be a definition that encompasses both your internal and external realities, and one that also points the way to an understanding and natural direction for resolution:

**Conflict** is the *disharmony between what you want or think you want or think you should want and what actually is.* The conflict may be with people, things, circumstances, or parts of your self.

This definition is about your internal reality and your relationship with the external world. Your conflicts are

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ultimately about you – how you experience yourself and the world, and your ability to improve that experience.

When you are in conflict, the disharmony might feel like a discordant annoyance or a raucous anguish or something in between. But a conflict is your own disharmony. In music, disharmony is often used to create tension because the human brain and body organically respond to unpleasant sounds, and that tension is released when the music becomes more harmonious.<sup>18</sup> By its nature, disharmony is incomplete and unstable. It demands integration and harmonic resolution. The harmony of peace will naturally liberate the disharmony of conflict. If you get your self out of the way, your conflicts can often resolve themselves. The path for resolution starts in your internal world, and flows from disharmony to harmony, friction to freedom, conflict to peace.

Like most friction, conflict can be useful as well as destructive. For example, conflict can push you to question old assumptions, heal wounds, and discover more about who you are. For businesses and other organizations, conflict can break the paralysis of old habits, reveal hidden flaws in systems, and produce better agreements. Genuinely solving the conflict can generate good will and an opening to harvest valuable benefits that exist beneath the surface – including new information, creative solutions, and seeds for new opportunities.

Even across different cultures, the internal human nature of conflict is the same, though there are cultural differences regarding what is polite and varying approaches for better understanding. At its roots, conflict is about contradiction with what is, whether the contradiction is a battle in the world or within an individual's sense of self. For example, researchers in Finland performing a series of experiments with subjects in Finland, Sweden, and Taiwan found there is a 70% correlation

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between at least six basic and seven complex emotions with corresponding body sensations regardless of a subject's cultural roots and the representative paradigms of their native language.<sup>19</sup> Local cultures provide scenery on the stage where the conflict plays out.

Conflict starts internally within you. Another person may provoke something inside you, but it's your reactions that start the conflict. You are the source of your own conflicts. You may hold the conflict within you or express it, and there may or may not be external consequences. Conflict can be compared to a cancer. Its damage might appear to be localized, but its effects may actually spread widely throughout the body. Like a cancer, most of the damage and turmoil of a conflict is hidden inside you. What is going on outside is only a faint reflection of what's happening inside. Think about the ugliness and pain you see on the face of someone who is experiencing anger. That is only a dim reflection of the roots of suffering inside. Conflict, in fact, is primarily about your internal pain and how you relate to the external world through your pain.

When I worked in Hollywood, many projects stalled because skilled artists and craftsmen were paralyzed by conflict with other people or circumstances. In some instances, however, we were able to change inevitable failure into resounding success. The secret was that the successful artists took control of the conflict story and escaped from their victim mentality.

On one project, the company producing a film faced a \$6.5 million penalty if they didn't make delivery before the deadline. When I was consulted with two weeks remaining, company executives were already preparing to make the payment. The film's creative team was paralyzed by conflict.

But I saw that the team's relationships within their group were positive and constructive. I recognized that their conflict



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was with the circumstances. Team members were angry because they saw themselves as victims of a no-win situation. I helped them recognize that they had nothing to lose by throwing the rulebook out the window because failure was inevitable within the common wisdom and structures regarding how a film should be finished. They were able to look past their own thoughts and emotions, and their view of the problem shifted. They were able to disengage from the conflict and transform their relationship to it. They rewrote the story they were telling themselves and everyone else about the conflict from one of doubtless failure as victims of circumstances to a story about their power to achieve success as heroes who were agents for change. They rediscovered what was important and utilized daring solutions for the problems they faced. They even altered the way the story was told in the film to eliminate the need for some shots and optical effects that were not available. When their anger and fear had dissipated, they were able to recognize how the conflict was causing them pain and move forward to solve the problem.

That self-healing was important because the first step to a truly genuine solution for conflict is to begin by healing yourself.

When I use the word “heal,” I am not saying there is something wrong with you. There is no stigma in having conflicts. It is normal. In fact, it’s inevitable because you are human.

But conflict does hurt you, whether it feels like you have encountered the prick of a needle, a bullet, or a devastating explosion. The fragments from each conflict remain within you and scar tissue grows around them. In turn, those wounds from the past affect how you react to people and things around you now. So, your actions in the present are usually rooted in your past.

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You can, however, heal yourself. You can learn to dissolve those fragments from your past conflicts and the scar tissue that has built up around them. As you develop self-awareness to reach back and clean the effects of conflicts from your past, you can start to defuse the effects of each new conflict as it unfolds. In this way, you can take more control of your life and return to wholeness.

Then, conflict stops being a problem, and it becomes an opportunity.

By focusing on their opportunity to reach critical goals, rather than on the pain of the situation, the team working to complete the motion picture transformed their paralysis into action. As a result, team members enthusiastically delivered the project on time. They also developed more respect for each other, improved collaboration, and expanded capacities to accomplish other projects.

### ***You don't have to be a victim***

A healing approach to conflict begins with kindness and compassion, first for yourself and then later for the other person. You cannot effectively fight anger with anger, or any negative emotion with another negative emotion. A confrontation which does that only feeds the fire on both sides.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood that and rarely responded in kind. He took the strategic, long-range approach, working to change policies and structures that enable racism rather than focusing on immediate confrontations. He knew there are many kinds of power, and it's possible to be strong, to take control, without actually fighting.

That was clear on the morning of March 9, 1965 when Dr. King led approximately 300 protestors across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Two days earlier, in that same

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place sheriff's possemen and Alabama State Troopers had, without provocation, clubbed, stomped, and gassed approximately 600 marchers who were peacefully advocating voting rights equality. Pictures, stories, and television coverage of that event sparked outrage around the nation. The march organizers were determined to answer.

Dr. King and his companions faced those same troopers and possemen when they reached the end of the Pettus Bridge. In planning, the march organizers had pushed to move onto the highway and confront the police. But instead of provoking another brutal confrontation, Dr. King halted the marchers so they could pray and sing "We Shall Overcome." Then, their point made, they turned around. Later, Dr. King said, "I decided...I would lead our march to a confrontation with injustice to make a witness to our countrymen and the world of our determination to vote and be free....We disengaged then because we felt we had made our point, we had revealed the continued presence of violence."<sup>20</sup>

Just four months after Selma, the Voting Rights Act became law in the United States. Only three months before the marches in Selma, President Lyndon Johnson had told Dr. King it would be impossible to get such a law passed during that Congressional session.<sup>21</sup> But the police violence and Dr. King's peaceful response had given President Johnson the political capital he needed to get that law passed.

You can organically solve your conflict problems without confrontation by using the 3-STEPS I describe in this book. Initially, it may seem awkward; but like throwing a football or knitting, as you practice these steps can become as simple as 1-2-3:

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### **STEP 1 – *Grow Your Self-Awareness***

Defuse the natural reactions that keep you from acting with your maximum potential effectiveness in tough situations. In this step, I will show you five essentials you need to develop self-awareness that overcomes the fire of a conflict so you can be more engaging and effective. This approach will melt your anxiety, fear, worry, and anger; it will leave you calm, grounded, and able to follow through with the next two steps.

### **STEP 2 – *Control the Story***

Be a hero who controls the conflict story. Escape the victim-offender struggle. In this step, I will show you how to take control of the conflict story, provide you with two ways to avoid false perceptions that can trap you in a conflict, and explain how you can find opportunities that may be hidden within the conflict. This approach will transform your relationship with the conflict and enable you to take productive action.

### **STEP 3 – *Go Beyond Win-Win***

Find a genuine, effective, and lasting solution that satisfies everyone's real-needs – and then get everyone to adopt it. In this step, I will reveal two natural abilities you possess to help you solve any conflict, five categories of real-needs that are at the root of almost every conflict, and a five element process you can use to identify and actualize genuine solutions that lead to peace.

The 3-STEPS not only catalyze change, they provide a pathway through even difficult conflicts. They will help you develop an objective eye for your own internal process as well as the other person and circumstances. Therefore, much of this

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book is about exploring the nature of conflict – its patterns, flow, and how you can escape its traps. Then, with growing self-awareness and greater understanding of conflict you will be able to direct your actions to the core of the problem and most effectively utilize each step.

An example of what's possible is South Africa's peaceful transition from apartheid to multiracial democracy. There had been generations of oppression, fear, and mistrust. Violence continued until just days before the first national election in April 1994. In fact, so much could have gone wrong in so many ways for South Africa during that time – civil war, economic collapse, and genocide seemed probable. Many view this peaceful transition as a miracle.

How did this miracle come about? Through back channels, black and white representatives began to explore how they could proceed. The two principal South African political parties, which represented more than 80% of the people, recognized they had common values and a shared national purpose. They separated acts from individuals by recognizing that while what was done was horrific, individuals – even those who may have done harmful things – were not necessarily bad. Party leaders put aside their own defenses and doubts in order to establish meaningful connections.

As the circle of participants grew bigger, negotiators openly shared their concerns. They questioned their own assumptions and acknowledged the essential humanity of those who opposed them. They moved their focus from arguing about issues of the conflict to building a solution. They created forums that enabled their constituents to hear each other, and to discover what was important beneath the surface of their apparent problems. The talks teetered and stalled, but in their mutuality the parties found solutions.

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Real solutions come from getting underneath a conflict to identify and satisfy what's actually at stake for everyone – each person's real-interests. What someone genuinely needs in a conflict is normally hidden below their awareness – under their ego, fears, and defenses. People usually focus on what's obvious, so they miss the real point. Even if they get a settlement this way, everyone walks away believing they were manipulated. Egos may feel good, but agreements are unreliable.

In South Africa, the real-interests for the governing National Party were economic stability, the end of sanctions that prohibited foreign investment, open markets for South African products, and a place on the economic world stage.<sup>22</sup> The bottom-line for the ANC, which represented most of the country's black citizens, was a nonracial and democratic South Africa.<sup>23</sup> In the end, South Africa emerged as an open, liberal, democratic state with a market driven economy. Everyone got what they needed.

Like the leaders in South Africa, you don't have to betray your own interests or be indiscriminately permissive or give up healthy boundaries in order to solve a conflict. Instead of letting a conflict drive you into being your worst self, you can learn to utilize the conflict to grow and develop. It is possible to regain wholeness because a real solution heals the hurt caused by the conflict.

Even if you never intend to see the other person again, you can establish a healthy human connection with harmony between you. First, by helping yourself. That's what **STEP 1** and **STEP 2** are about. Then, after you have healed yourself and changed your relationship with the conflict by taking control of the conflict story, you'll be able to address the other person and solve the conflict. **STEP 3** is about doing that.

## First Exercise

### **CALMING YOURSELF**

#### *Purposes of this exercise*

This exercise will help you learn a method to calm yourself, even in difficult situations. It will also help you establish calmness as a way of being.

#### *Time for this exercise*

Start by doing this exercise for 5 minutes daily during the next two weeks. I recommend setting your intention to do the exercise at least five days out of seven, without missing two days in a row. If you say you are going to do the exercise every day, and then you miss one day, the exercise will begin to carry a conscious or unconscious association with failure. It will become easier and easier to skip doing it, and it will become one more thing that didn't work.

I want you to succeed. I think it's important to set achievable goals because success builds on success. You may even want to continue with the exercise after the two weeks are completed. If you do continue, gradually build to doing the

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exercise for 10 or 15 minutes each day. This exercise has improved the quality of life for many people.

### *Instructions*

It may be helpful to do this exercise as you listen to a recording of the instructions with quiet spaces that allow you to perform each step. You will find recordings for both beginners (short) and those more experienced (longer) on the Resources page at [ConflictFreedom.com](http://ConflictFreedom.com). It's even better if you record the instructions yourself because hearing your own voice makes the exercise deeper.

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with the bottoms of your feet flat on the floor or sit on the floor.

**HINT:** Pick a regular time each day, but don't be rigid about it. If you miss your time you can do the exercise later or earlier in the day.

2. Close your eyes. Put your attention on your breath. Watch yourself inhale and exhale. Don't try to change anything.

3. Become aware of any tension in your body. You might, for example, check your neck, shoulders, and abdomen. Don't try to change anything, just recognize the tension that's there.

4. What emotions are you feeling? Are you, for example, feeling anxious, afraid, needy, worried? Are you happy, peaceful, hopeful? Again, don't try to change anything; just acknowledge the emotions that are present.

5. Notice the activity in your mind. Are you thinking about work? About the morning's fight with your spouse? About what you have to do later? Don't judge yourself for anything you're thinking. Just recognize the thoughts are there.



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6. Begin to breathe deeply with long, slow, breaths. Inhale through your nose, if you can, and fill yourself with air. Let the breath fill your abdomen and rise to the top of your chest. Don't force your breath. Be gentle with yourself.

**HINT:** In the beginning, it may help to put your hand on your lower abdomen to feel the breath fill that place in your body first.

7. When you've finished your inhale, suspend your breath for a short pause.

8. Exhale slowly through your mouth. Let your body empty from the top of your chest to the bottom of your abdomen. Empty your lungs completely, but don't force it.

**HINT:** You should never feel out of breath.

9. When you've finished your exhale, suspend your breath for a short pause. You may recognize a quiet stillness in the pauses at the top of your inhale and the bottom of your exhale.

**HINT:** Breathe slowly and deeply throughout the exercise. As you gain experience, you may want to slow your breath more and increase the length of the pause at the ends of inhaling and exhaling.

10. Keep your attention on your breathing throughout the exercise. If at any time you become aware your mind has wandered, gently bring your attention back to your breathing.

11. Maintain this breathing for 3 minutes. When you have familiarity with the exercise slowly increase the time to 10 minutes and then to 15 minutes daily.

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12. At the end of the exercise, slowly bring your attention back to the world. For example, with your eyes still closed you might listen to the sounds around you, and then feel yourself touching the floor or the chair where you're sitting. Perhaps you become aware of the air blowing across your face. When you're ready, slowly open your eyes.

### ***Discussion for this exercise***

This is an exercise for developing your focus. It is also a way you can calm yourself even within stressful situations. Most people find that when they do the exercise regularly it becomes easier and its effects grow deeper. Even then, there will be times when the exercise is tough to get through. Be persistent.

Many people who regularly do just this simple exercise report remarkable results relating to their conflicts. For example, some people say they can use the exercise in tough situations to calm themselves and become more effective; others describe feeling less trapped by conflict situations; and still others relate to more easily finding options that lead to solutions.

Just focus on your breathing during the exercise. Don't spend the time thinking about everything that's going on in your life or how a conflict you had earlier could have gone better.

After you have experience with this practice, you'll be able to calm yourself in almost any situation with a few slow breaths – even in tense meetings or on tough telephone calls. When you take a step back from the fire of the conflict in this way, real solutions come more easily.

# STEP 1

## **GROW YOUR SELF-AWARENESS**

Human beings are by nature community animals, in need of contact with others to survive. Charles Darwin talked much more about the importance of benevolence to evolution than he did about survival of the fittest. Learn how and why conflict keeps us apart, how you can grow your self-awareness to avoid the pitfalls of conflict, and, then, how you can make a more essential connection to create an environment of trust and compassion.

## Free Yourself From Conflict

As the sun makes ice melt, kindness causes misunderstanding, mistrust and hostility to evaporate.

-- Albert Schweitzer

## Chapter 2

### FACE YOURSELF

#### *There is no love in conflict*

We all struggle with the stress and pain of conflict.

Fifty percent of all marriages in the United States fail, most because of conflict. Divorcing couples, who say they only want love and happiness, pay \$28 billion a year to dissolve their marriages, and that rarely solves their problems.<sup>24</sup>

Conflict is not just a problem in households. Every year, conflict paralyzes businesses and robs them of valuable resources. Workers in the United States spend more than three billion workplace hours dealing with conflict. They are paid almost \$400 billion for that unproductive time.<sup>25</sup>

Even your faith cannot keep you safe from conflict. In Fundamentalist churches, 18,000 pastors leave their assignment every year because of conflict and burnout. The estimated cost for their congregations is almost three-quarters of a billion dollars.<sup>26</sup>

What's going on? Why is there so much conflict?

## Free Yourself From Conflict

The answer, of course, is this: What you want at the core of your being is desperately important and you don't know how to get it.

What you crave so deeply is love. In a conflict, that need may be masked by fear, anxiety, anger, or another strong reaction. You may think you want respect, understanding, or justice. Whatever you think you want is just a desperate attempt to get love. Even in transaction-based disputes there is often an underpinning of other needs.

I have never seen anyone more cut off from love than Barbara Wilson when I met her. I had been asked to mediate the lawsuit she had brought against Sam Jenkins, her former business partner.

From a corner of the room Barbara demanded, "I want justice." She sat with her arms crossed and her feet pushed out in front of her like she was bracing for a sudden stop in a fast-moving car. She refused to discuss a settlement. "I want that son of a bitch to suffer." However, the dark circles under her eyes made me wonder who was truly suffering.

When I asked her about what she was currently doing, she said, "I haven't been able to focus on anything. All I'm dealing with is the lawsuit. If I'm with friends that's all we talk about. I'm not going to let him get away with it." She even admitted her marriage was failing because the lawsuit left no space for the relationship with her husband.

I pointed out that she would likely suffer much more than Sam if she were consumed with the suit for the year or more it would take to finish. Her lawyer reluctantly agreed that the lawsuit would cost her more than she could possibly win. Barbara still refused to accept the reasonable settlement Sam offered. She held onto the punishing lawsuit and her pain.

## STEP 1 – GROW YOUR SELF-AWARENESS

The person you harm most in a conflict is yourself. The real turmoil and damage of a conflict is hidden inside you.

Look beneath the surface when you find someone who's angry. You'll discover they intensely care about something. They are also afraid, and if you look deeper, you'll see their pain. Their internal voices yammering, negative judgments about themselves and the other person are contributing to feeling disconnected and unworthy of love.

Barbara wouldn't give up her demand for justice, even though she acknowledged her actions were "crazy." On the surface, she needed to show she was justified for feeling hurt. But more than anything, Barbara wanted validation and love. These needs were so strong Barbara was willing to destroy her life with the lawsuit she saw as the only way she could get them.

The turning point came after I talked with her for more than two hours, when she was able to forgive herself for feeling like a victim. She could start to appreciate herself, and that was beginning enough. She recognized that acknowledging Sam's apology meant getting on with her life and an opportunity to be happy.

The need for love is at the root of most negative emotions. It's even in extremes like racism. You might not believe racism could have anything to do with love. A racist's anger has become an all-consuming rage and hate. Racists have dehumanized the target and view the other person as an object they could squash as easily as a bug.

On the other hand, it's likely that they have an excess of love for their own race. In his groundbreaking book about prejudice, Harvard psychologist Gordon W. Allport said that self-love comes before hatred of others. When the values that are the object of that self-love become threatened, hatred may emerge. In time of war, for instance, "we stiffen our resistance

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### Chapter 1

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