

Responding to family conflict

Conflict is a normal part of all relationships including those in your family and it's something we all experience at times. Family looks different for different people. Family might include your biological family member(s), caregivers, partner, step family, housemates or close friends. Family conflict can occur between any of these people.

There are lots of different reasons family conflict occurs. We are all different and our unique experiences in life shape how we communicate, what we value and how we live our lives. Conflict can occur when others have different values, communication styles or believe things should be done in different ways or, we just misunderstand what someone means.

Family conflict can be more common at times of increased stress like isolation due to COVID-19 and this can affect the whole family or individual members. Other things such as job changes or loss, exams, health concerns, moving house and new or changing family members can also have an impact.

Dealing with family conflict

Conflict feels different for different people. Some people don't like conflict and will try to avoid it or please everyone. Others may try to defend themselves quickly as a way to protect themselves when they sense conflict. Others don't mind conflict and feel confident in being able to express their perspective, hear others and respond to family conflict.

If family conflict is occurring on a regular basis it may start to have an impact on family member's stress, mood, how they feel about themselves and impact on their relationships even when the conflict is not happening.

Family relationships are important to us and can make us feel great when they are good and not so great when they are struggling. It is important to respond to family conflict in a calm and considered way that can hopefully lead to a mutual solution where everyone feels heard.

Understanding and managing yourself

When understanding and responding to family conflict it is important to take some time to think about what it is that you are feeling and thinking. When we are feeling angry or hurt we can say or do things that we don't mean to the people we care about. It can also be really hard to talk about our feelings as it makes us feel vulnerable.

It is a good idea to think about what you are upset about so that you can communicate that clearly to your family members. It might be a good to go to another room or in a quiet space somewhere to do this.

Some good things to think about and ask ourselves include:

- **Is this what I am really upset about?**
Sometimes we have had a bad day or are feeling tired and overwhelmed about other things but our family member says something that makes us feel overwhelmed and we react in the moment. Other times it is not so much what has been said or done by the other person but it's more their body language or facial expression that's making us feel upset. It can also be something small that has happened that brings up feelings associated with something bigger that we have experienced before.
- **What do I want the other person to know?**
It's good to think about and understand what the most important thing is that we want to let the other person know so that we can communicate this clearly.

It's also important to think about how you want to respond to family conflict. This might be how you would like family conflict to be resolved or thinking about helpful ways of responding to other members of the family.

Some ideas include:

- **Taking a 'you and me vs the problem' approach**
If you think about the problem side by side rather than 'you vs me' you are more likely to get a good outcome for everyone.

- Letting the other person know that you care about them, even though you may have different perspectives. Experiencing conflict with family doesn't mean we don't care about them. It is good to let the other person know this too.
- Noticing your own physical reactions when experiencing conflict like a tense body or fists, fast thoughts, heart beating or tight chest. These are often the first signs that you are starting to get upset. It's understandable to be upset but this can make it harder to communicate clearly,
- Acknowledge the experiences or feelings and take time out when required. If we notice ourselves getting upset, we can let the other person know this and that we need to take some time to calm down before talking.
- Responding and repairing after conflict. If things don't go to plan that's okay. It's good to go back to the person, apologise and let them know that you would like to be able to try again. This can be hard to do but important for our relationships.

Remember that you are not always going to get all of this perfect, no one does. It can be really hard to take this approach with family members if you do not usually express feelings like this.

Timing

It is really important to think about when to have conversations in responding to family conflict.

When people are upset or angry their logical brain goes offline and we respond with our emotions instead. This is when we can end up saying things that we don't really mean. When we are in these moments of emotion it is good to try to take some time out, go for a walk or get some fresh air rather than talk to the person we are feeling upset with.

If this is happening for you or the other person is still trying to talk to you about it, you could say:

- I am feeling really [angry, hurt, scared, sad] right now and I need to take some time out. I really want to talk to you about this but I am hoping we can talk about this later when we are both calm.
- I can see you really [angry, hurt, scared, worried, sad] right now. I would really like to talk about it but feel like it would be good if we took some time to calm down first so that we can both listen to each other properly.

Communication is key

Communication is really important when responding to conflict. It can be the difference between people feeling heard, supported and understood in relationships or feeling further apart. Often what we are trying to say can get missed by other people depending on what is going on for both us and them at the time.

Some tips for good communication

1. Acknowledge and summarise what the other person has said.

This shows you're interested and listening to the other person. When we feel our perspective has been heard and understood we are more able to listen to what the other person has to say.

2. Use 'I' statements to communicate.

Using 'I' statement helps us to own what we are saying rather than giving a sense of blame that can happen with you statements.

3. Think about your non-verbal communication like, facial expressions, nodding and body language.

Non-verbal communication is as important, if not more important than what we are saying. If we say all the right things but our facial expression says something different the other person won't hear what we are saying.

4. Be prepared to negotiate.

It is important to go into conversations prepared to listen to the other person's perspective and see if we can find an agreement that works for everyone.

If you are not sure how you might start the conversation, here are some ideas:

- I can hear that you are feeling really [hurt, sad, scared, worried] about
- I am sorry I got angry with you. I was feeling
- When ... happens, I feel I would like it if you could ...
- I really care about you and can see that this is impacting on us both. How about we take some time together to think about how we could do this differently?
- How do you think we could do things differently?

How do I know if it is more than family conflict?

It can sometimes be hard to know the difference between what might be family conflict and what might be domestic violence. Domestic violence can occur to anyone in any relationship and it is never okay.

Domestic violence can take different forms including harming someone physically, verbally, sexually, psychologically, emotionally, economically, spiritually or legally.

Domestic violence can make you feel scared, confused or anxious a lot of the time in your family relationships.

If you are having any of these experiences or think you might be experiencing family violence it is important to talk to a professional about what you are experiencing. These are some places you can go to for help:

- 1800 Respect. <https://www.1800respect.org.au/> 1800 737 732

If you are ever in immediate danger call the police on 000.

Other useful headspace links:

- <https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/understanding-anger-issues-in-children/>
- <https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/building-a-healthy-relationship-with-your-young-person/>

References:

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- 1/4/20 <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>
- 1/4/20 <https://www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au/services/familyviolence/what-is-family-violence/>
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