

Life Skills 25
Series 1 - Self-Development
Lesson 5 - Dealing with Conflict



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Dealing with Conflict

What Conflict Is

Conflict is the tension people feel when they are pulled in two directions. Conflict may be a mental struggle that occurs when one person wants two different things. Conflict may also arise between people or groups when they have opposing wants or needs.

Internal conflict usually involves having to make a hard choice. When this happens, you may feel tension or stress. For example, you need your car to go to work. However, you don't have enough money to pay for insurance and gas too, and pay your other bills (rent, power, day care).

The situation above creates an internal conflict, because you are forced to choose between keeping your car going and being able to pay your other bills on time. As another example, suppose you want to go to a movie with friends, but you also need to study for a test. Having to make this hard choice (friends vs. school) is a good example of an internal conflict. These conflicts come from opposing wants or needs within the same person.

Conflicts also occur between people. We call these **interpersonal conflicts**. They could occur when two people want the same thing, and only one can have it. (Junior and Sis both want to borrow Dad's car at the same time.) They also might occur when two people want to do two different things (Dad wants to watch TV, but Junior wants to toss the football together outside.) Such conflicts can create frustration and resentment, and may lead to anger and aggression. Interpersonal conflict can sometimes have serious negative effects on people and their relationships. Therefore, it is very important to learn how to deal with interpersonal conflict.

For most people, at least half of each day is spent at work. It is not surprising that conflict often occurs there. For example, say your boss criticizes you for not completing a task on time. However, your boss did not tell you when she expected you to finish that task. You want to please your boss, but you also want to know what's expected. You may feel that you have been criticized unfairly. This situation could create a conflict between you and your boss.

How would you handle this conflict? While it is important to let your boss know how you feel and why, it is just as important to do so in a way that minimizes the conflict. Instead of becoming angry or resenting your boss, you can learn to deal with this conflict in a positive way.

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Imagine that you are getting off work at 9:00 p.m. You had plans to see a movie at 9:15, but the person who is supposed to replace you does not show up on time. The work rule says that someone has to be on duty at all times. You continue working past 9:00 but really feel angry. Your replacement finally arrives 45 minutes late, and you miss the movie. To make it even worse, your co-worker offers no apology or explanation for arriving late.

You feel quite frustrated at missing the movie, and that is understandable. The conflict with your replacement may cause you to let your feelings show without thinking of the consequences. "Flying off the handle" or giving your co-worker "a piece of your mind" may make you feel better for the moment, but it will likely cause the conflict to worsen. Behaving this way usually has negative consequences for everyone involved. What you say and do to other people will affect your future relationship with them.

Positive Ways to Deal with Interpersonal Conflict

Solving situations in a smooth and effective way is conflict resolution. **Conflict resolution** means finding a good way to clear up, work out, or reduce conflict. There is not a perfect solution to every situation, but there are some general rules to follow. These rules will help you resolve most of your conflicts and minimize negative consequences.

Before you try to resolve a conflict, make sure your information is correct. Look back at the example above. Suppose that the person relieving you had told your boss yesterday about being 45 minutes late to work. Then, your boss got busy and forgot to tell you. This might explain why your co-worker offered you no apology. Would this information affect how you should handle the conflict?

Would it be fair for you to be angry with your co-worker? This is a good example of **misdirected conflict**, which is when the wrong person is affected by a conflict. This can happen when there is missing or incorrect information. Misdirected conflict can create unnecessary flare-ups, so an important first step in conflict resolution is to check out the facts. Gathering accurate information when conflict occurs is called **fact-finding**. It can help you avoid misdirected conflict caused by incorrect information.

It is not easy to deal with conflicts calmly, but it is very important to do so. You may have very strong emotions at the moment. The more you practice, the better your conflict resolution skills will become. The following rules will help you to deal with conflict.

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Positive Ways to Deal with Interpersonal Conflict

1. **Avoid reactions that cause negative emotions.**

Shouting, name-calling, accusing others, and slamming doors will only make the situation worse.

2. **Pick the right time and place to discuss a conflict.**

You should discuss the problem in private. It is more difficult to be open and honest when others are present who are not involved in the conflict.

3. **Stick to the issues involved in the conflict.**

Talk about the conflict you are trying to resolve, not what happened last month or the other things that are bothering you.

4. **Be willing to compromise when that is the best solution.**

Conflicts can usually be solved if both parties are willing to compromise. Give in a little and meet the other person halfway.

5. **Be willing to withdraw when that is the best solution.**

Sometimes it is best to let the other person have the last word. Very few conflicts are worth the risk of losing your job or a friendship.

6. **Use a calm tone of voice and neutral words.**

Do not put the other person down. With practice, you can learn to lighten the situation and help end the disagreement in a positive way.

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Positive Ways to Deal with Internal Conflict

Dealing with internal conflict is challenging. Everyone has to make choices. If the choice is clear (for example, eating ice cream vs. eating rotten eggs), you won't feel much conflict. Choice creates real conflict when each option has its own set of benefits or comparable effects. Remember our example above, where you must decide whether you will go to the movies with a friend or study for your upcoming test.

There are no strict principles to guide you in settling all internal conflicts, because different decisions depend on very specific situations. However, many times you can make smart choices more easily by examining the good and bad effects of both options over a period of time. In other words, it might help to look at both long-term and short-term costs and benefits of the two options. You should also consider the flexibility of each option. One option may be more flexible than the other because it will still be available to you in the future.

In our example, of course you would enjoy going to the movie. You also will have the opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your friend. However, consider how many more chances you will likely have in the near future to see the movie. Also think about how your friends might understand your situation. They would probably be willing to wait a couple days to go with you to see the movie. This option is clearly quite flexible, because this is not your only chance to see the movie. The benefits of seeing the movie today may now seem less significant. If you go now, you may worry about your test the whole time.

Look at your other option. Your test is only two days away. You only have one more night to study. Your math teacher doesn't care what you do with your time, and the test was announced weeks ago. This option is not very flexible. You won't get a second chance at this test.

Now consider the benefits of getting some studying done. You have the short-term benefit of being prepared for your test and being confident you will succeed. If you study some tonight, you also have the short-term benefit of needing to study less tomorrow night. You will obviously be more prepared to do well, and will most likely get a better grade. What are the long-term benefits of studying tonight? Consider the effect on your final grade at the end of the semester. This test could be just what you need to push your grade from a "B" to an "A." Would this be worth getting your studying done now?

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A final trick that many people use is to reward themselves with the movie after successfully studying for and passing the test. When you look at the effect of options over time, and the flexibility of your options in this way, it seems easier to settle internal conflicts arising from choices you have.

Dealing with both types of conflict can be challenging. Use what you've learned in this lesson to help you when conflicts arise. You will be able to make decisions more easily and limit the internal conflict that comes from tough choices. You will also limit the negative consequences of interpersonal conflicts, and you will be able to preserve and strengthen your relationships with others.

REMEMBER: Everyday life brings many situations that have the potential to cause interpersonal and internal conflict. Conflict is very common. The better you learn to deal with these conflicts, the better life can be.

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Dealing with Conflict

Important Terms to Learn

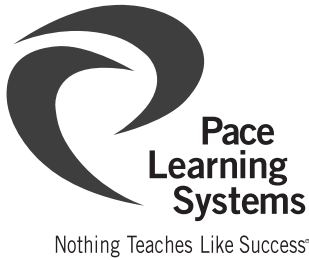
Conflict	Feeling of tension created when a person is pulled in different directions by opposing needs or desires, either within themselves or from others
Internal Conflict	A conflict or struggle caused by having to choose between opposing desires
Interpersonal Conflict	A conflict between two people. This can occur if two people want the same thing but only one can have it, or if two people want something different but only one can have their way
Conflict Resolution	The process of working out a conflict by taking actions that reduce the negative feelings caused by conflict
Compromise	To give in to part of the other person's desires or opinions in an effort to end a conflict
Withdraw	To back away from the problem and let the other person "win," or change your opinion, in order to limit the potential negative effects of conflict
Misdirected Conflict	When the wrong person is drawn into conflict because of bad information
Fact-finding	Finding accurate information as a first step in resolving conflict; fact-finding helps to avoid misdirected conflict

Worksheet 1: Terms and Definitions

Match each term with the correct definition.

1. Conflict _____
2. Withdraw _____
3. Compromise _____
4. Fact-finding _____
5. Conflict Resolution _____
6. Interpersonal Conflict _____
7. Misdirected Conflict _____
8. Internal Conflict _____

- A To back away from the problem and let the other person have his/her way, or change your opinion, in order to end a conflict.
- B A disagreement or problem caused by opposing needs or desires.
- C To give in to part of the other person's desires or views.
- D Working out a conflict so that there are few negative feelings.
- E Conflict occurring within a person.
- F Conflict occurring between two or more people.
- G The wrong person is involved in a conflict because of bad information.
- H Accurate information gathering which helps to avoid misdirected conflict.



End of Lesson Sample

We appreciate your interest!

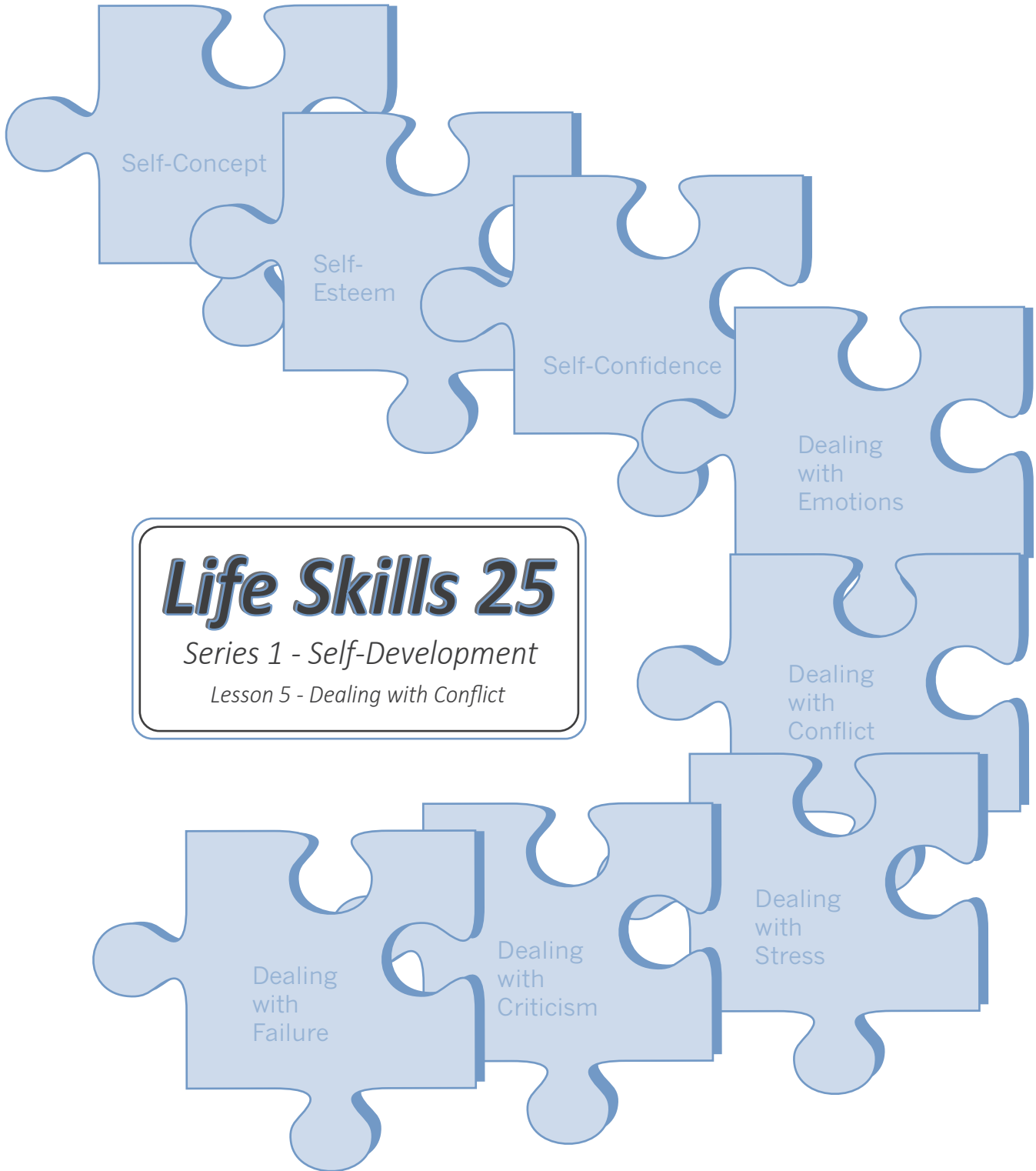
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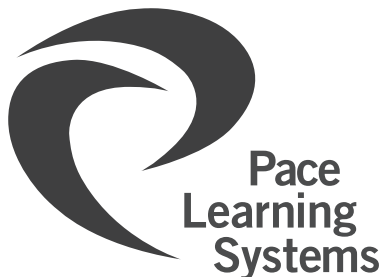
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