Beyond Blame

When Conflicts Can't Be Resolved

Jeffrey A. Kottler

When Conflicts Can't Be Resolved

Jeffrey A. Kottler

e-Book 2017 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Beyond Blame* by Jeffrey A. Kottler

Table of Contents

When Conflicts Can't Be Resolved

Even the most elaborate and well-thought-out plans do not always work. The process presented in this book for working through conflict by counteracting tendencies toward blame is quite effective for many—but not all—circumstances and situations. Despite your best intentions and most dedicated efforts, not all conflicts can be worked through.

Some Differences Are Irreconcilable

Some long-term internal patterns are irreversible, based on unresolved issues from the past that can never really be laid to rest completely. Even in the present, when two people feel strongly enough about something, when their whole belief systems are predicated on one particular opinion or action, even small changes are unlikely. A staunch Republican and Democrat are unlikely to agree on affirmative action policies or right-to- life issues. Two individuals whose most basic principles lead them in opposite directions are unlikely to find common ground in which to negotiate a truce.

Ned believes that human beings are basically evil and untrustworthy, that people have to be monitored closely or they will easily be led astray. Furthermore, people will lie every chance they get and are only out for their own interests. By contrast, Sidney believes in the basic goodness of humankind. He feels that, given sufficient support and encouragement, people will do what is right. Most people can be trusted; the ones who do evil things are the exception rather than the rule.

Now imagine that Ned and Sidney are in roughly equal positions of power —as friends, partners, co-workers, siblings, or committee members. Suppose an issue comes up related to what to do about a third person, whose actions will affect them both. Conflict between Ned and Sidney inevitably will arise, just as it does every time they discuss anything important, because their basic belief systems are polar opposites.

Ned: We've got to do something about this situation, protect ourselves as much as possible.

Sidney: Let's just see what happens. It will all work out for the best.

Ned: You can be so naive. Unless we assume the worst, and act accordingly, we are going to be shortchanged and vulnerable.

Sidney: If you continue to believe that, it will be so. I would rather give him the benefit of the doubt, just as I would like him to treat me.

Ned: I just can't go along with that. I *won't* do it. You can do whatever you want but I'm going to take some protective steps.

Sidney: Do whatever you need to do. I can understand that.

Ned: Damn, I hate it when you talk like that.

Sidney: I feel the same way about you.

This is a conversation that these two antagonists have played out a hundred different times in a hundred different ways. If anything, over time each has become even more firmly entrenched in his position, more thoroughly convinced that he is right and the other is wrong. When Sidney tries to uncover the underlying reasons for their conflicts, the sources of their antagonism, the roots of his own determination to take the positions he does, he concludes that he and Ned are so fundamentally different in their basic beliefs and values and in the ways they perceive the world that conflict between them is unavoidable no matter what they do. Sidney no longer blames Ned for the way he is, nor does he blame himself for the problems; he realizes, instead, that when two people feel as differently about things as they do, conflict is the logical result. In order to resolve their difficulties, one of them would have to abandon a position that is a fundamental part of his very being.

Every time Sidney commits himself to act differently, he comes up against the same wall, the familiar realization that their differences are irreconcilable. Each time he tries out different strategies for dealing with Ned, he discovers all over again that they rarely agree on what courses of action to take. That is not to say, of course, that Sidney and Ned cannot negotiate a truce based on the

awareness of their basic conflict. Given their differences in orientation, however, the best they can strive for is to reduce the intensity of their struggles so that they both stop allowing themselves to feel so wounded every time they deal with one another.

Applying the methods described in the book, Sidney accepts the fact that he cannot resolve his conflicts with Ned. Furthermore, he realizes that he does not even *want* to. As you will recall from the discussion in Chapter Seven on the positive functions of conflict, it is the act of struggling that helps you clarify your most cherished beliefs. Every time Sidney goes up against Ned in an argument, he may leave the exchange feeling frustrated and misunderstood, but he also likes the feeling that he now has a firmer grasp of what issues he feels most strongly about. Ned may be his greatest nemesis, but he is also one of his best teachers in the sense that he is provoked into achieving deeper levels of understanding about himself, about others, and about the world.

Even when conflicts cannot be resolved, when the disagreements between you and someone else are based on fundamental, core differences in your basic beliefs and styles, there still is much you can do to live with these experiences in such a way that they become instructive rather than destructive. The ability to do this is based on the particular meaning you decide to assign to the exchange. Note, for example, two different ways in which Sidney can decide to think about his interactions with Ned.

"What a pain that I have to deal with him! *[Exaggerating the degree of annoyance only makes things worse.]* Why can't he be more reasonable *[more like me]?* I have never known anyone who is so rigid, so unyielding in the positions that he takes. *[Blame. Judging others by your own standards.]* I dread the time we have to spend together. *[Expectations will dictate the results.]* I just know he is going to try to get me again. *[He is just defending his own beliefs in the same way that you are.]* These fights serve no useful purpose. They are a complete waste of time *[From this perspective, that is assuredly true.]*

Contrast the previous inner dialogue with one in which Sidney attempts to accept the inevitability of a certain amount of conflict with Ned but prefers to think differently about the meaning of these encounters.

"These interactions I have with Ned sure are interesting! *[Use of neutral word* interesting *to describe the experience.]* This is certainly an unusual experience for me to become so passionately committed during an exchange. *[Valuing the uniqueness.]* In a sense, we bring out the worst in one another, but also the best. *[A balanced perspective recognizing how conflict is instructive.] I* wonder what it is about our respective styles that seems to ignite such heated exchanges? *[Thoughtful reflection on the meaning of the behavior.]* I suspect there are some things I might do a bit differently so that I don't aggravate matters but still maintain the purity of my positions. *[A problem-solving mode with realistic goals.]* I certainly don't look forward to these arguments, but I recognize that after each one is over, I have learned something about myself and others that I could not have learned any other way. *[Conceptualizing the experience as constructive rather than destructive.]*

Even when you face individuals with whom it is clear that resolving basic conflicts is out of the question, you still can apply the methods previously described to reduce the suffering you experience and to make the best of the situation.

Agreement Is Sometimes Not Worth the Effort

Some conflicts are so complex, so enduring, or so ambiguous, that it is impossible to sort out all the variables involved, much less put together a plan for reaching consensus. When the cost of getting along in terms of investment of time and energy is greater than the perceived gains, it is sometimes better to accept a low-grade, chronic dispute as within acceptable limits of tolerance.

Madeline and Ernestine, although they feel a certain grudging affection for one another, have been bickering as long as they have been neighbors. Neither of them has experienced this kind of relationship before, since they both enjoy a wide network of friends with whom they get along fine.

Over the years they have tried to smooth out their differences. Mutual friends have attempted to act as intermediaries. At least once a month they meet for coffee or lunch; more often they speak over the fence. But each knows all too well that underneath the cordial pleasantness there is a major fight waiting to break out. Each time they have tried to figure out why they get on each other's nerves, they have only made things worse. Without explicitly saying so, they have agreed that it is no longer worth the effort to resolve their differences or to find out what is at their source. Instead, they tread lightly around each other, stay away from controversial subjects, and maintain an uneasy distance.

This attitude of "it's not worth it" also can be used as an excuse for avoiding the effort that is involved in making a relationship work. Still, it is up to you to decide with whom you are willing to tolerate a degree of conflict. It is one thing to avoid working through a minor dispute with a neighbor you do not have to see if you so choose; it is quite another to try to do so with someone with whom you live or work or to whom you feel close.

Madeline has decided that it is not worth her time and energy to pursue an intimate friendship with Ernestine, who is not a significant person in her life. She applies the method previously described in such a way as to keep this relationship in perspective: "Even when we are fighting about one thing or another, I try never to forget that our arguments are really not that important. It really isn't worth it for me to get all upset or lose sleep over this stuff. This really helps me shrug things off pretty quickly so that I don't hold a grudge the next time we run into one another."

On the other hand, Madeline is also in constant conflict with her husband of twenty-six years. They fight over who is lazier, who gets to hold the remote control, and—the most vicious of all their battles—who has betrayed the other most severely. Madeline has told herself in this case also that it is not worth the struggle to try and work on a more loving, cooperative relationship. But this time she uses this explanation as an excuse for avoiding the risks that would be involved in confronting her fears of intimacy. She finds it much easier to blame

her husband as a “stubborn old coot,” throw up her hands in exasperation, and tell anyone who will listen that nothing will ever change. And, of course, nothing *will* change if that is what she believes.

Madeline may be correct in her assumption that after twenty-six years together perhaps she and her husband will never get along like they did as newlyweds. She also may be correct in her assessment that continual conflict is a part of the way they relate to one another. Given that they have tried marriage counseling a few times, and that their children have tried without success to act as mediators, maybe arguing is simply one way that they express affection to one another. Many individuals who are afraid of the vulnerability associated with allowing themselves to become close to people argue as a way to keep others at a safe distance (remember the positive function of conflict as a regulator of distance?).

Madeline and her husband really do care for each other very much (I have it on good authority since, as one of their marriage counselors, I spent considerable time in their company). Fighting, bickering, and arguing have become ways for them to relate to one another in an intimate way (conflicts *are* intimate, after all) without having to risk getting hurt too badly. They learned long ago how to protect themselves during conflicts so that neither sustained any real damage. In fact, their fights are a lot more disturbing to others around them than they are upsetting to them. Madeline and her husband have learned

to accommodate themselves to a level of battle, not unlike citizens who lived in France during the Hundred Years War or in Vietnam in the twentieth century.

When Madeline used the excuse, “It’s not worth the effort,” what she really meant to express was, “I am afraid of doing anything different.” You must make a similar distinction in those situations in which it *appears* as if a conflict is not worth the trouble of addressing it. Are you telling yourself this in order to save yourself further aggravation, or rather to avoid the hard work and risks associated with confronting your fears? Only you can answer this question, but before you decide it may help you to get some input from others who know both you and the situation well.

Some Choices Are Mutually Exclusive

You will not be able to settle a dispute, at least immediately, with someone who is a competitor for the same prize. When two people are vying for the same goal—a promotion, a lover, an award, limited money or resources—and no compromise is possible, there is going to be one winner and one loser. This situation is quite conducive to conflict; in feet, competition is designed to maximize the struggle—spectators consider it entertaining.

In a situation where one person gets what she wants and the other person does not, conflict and resentment are part of the consequences, at least for a while. Christy and Marcel have been settled in their careers ever since they

were married. Christy has been offered a major promotion in another city, which she has decided she cannot pass up. Marcel must choose between joining her in the move, thereby setting his own career back many years, or staying where he is, thereby ending their relationship. For simplicity's sake, assume that they are not looking for a reason to split apart and that compromise is not possible.

No matter what the outcome of their decision, whether Christy takes the job or not, whether Marcel joins her or stays behind, conflict is likely to persist for some time. At least during an interim stage, they both will need to accommodate to a degree of tension and disagreement until they can resolve their differences.

The problem in these situations is often not that you did not get what you wanted but that the way you react *afterward* is conducive to continued suffering. So what if this time you were not able to get your way? Yes, I know, this time it was *really* important. You have *never* wanted anything so badly. The point is: what are you going to do about it now? You can't change what has already happened. You can't (I assume) redefine the win-lose situation to one in which both of you can get what you want. The bottom line is that you can't have what you want this time. Now you must decide how long you want to feel sorry for yourself and how much you want to castigate yourself or blame the other person for acting unfairly.

Even during conflicts in which the choices are mutually ex- elusive and you end up on the short end of the exchange, you still have tremendous latitude in how deeply you decide (and it *is* a decision) to feel wounded by the experience. In the example presented earlier, Marcel did pout for a while, hoping that Christy might feel sorry for him and call off her plans. Once he realized that there was little he could do to change her mind and even less he could do to alter what had transpired previously, Marcel decided that he would make the best of the situation. After he was able to let go of his resentment, stop feeling like a helpless victim, and get on with the options that were available to him, Marcel was able to negotiate with Christy some concessions that would make his transition easier. Just as important, he was able to negotiate with himself in such a way that he no longer felt like an embittered loser in their relationship.

There Is No Solution

When I am working with clients, I never ask, "What is your problem?" Instead I prefer the alternative term *concern* or issue. Using the term *problem* implies that there is a solution, usually a best one, just like we learned in math class. In the realm of human struggles, however, there is no guarantee that any particular difficulty has a solution, and especially not a "best" one that can be determined easily. Life is a puzzle, and sometimes pieces are missing, or the pieces we are given do not fit together properly. Even after we work so hard to

fashion together a finished puzzle, it may not remotely resemble what we thought it would look like.

There is stress associated with Jose's mother moving into the home he shares with his wife, Lopita. The mother has a progressive, degenerative nervous disorder that predisposes her to be even more demanding and irrational than is her usual formidable manner. The couple's otherwise serene life-style is disrupted in a significant way by the presence of the sick mother, who continuously lashes out at Lopita, demanding attention and criticizing her every chance she gets. Any attempt by Lopita and Jose to calm down the elderly lady, to respond to her inappropriate outbursts, is like trying to stop a hurricane —even if she wanted to alter her behavior, she would be unable to do so because of the degree of perceptual and cognitive distortion brought on by her disease.

Neither Jose nor Lopita has other family members who could help share the burden. Cultural values related to taking care of aging parents, in tandem with a tight financial situation, make it impossible to send the mother elsewhere; they have no choice but to live together. Harmony among them is out of the question.

They can partition off the house as much as possible. Jose and Lopita can also support one another as they try to enforce some limits. In spite of their best

efforts, however, they must live with a certain degree of conflict in their home. There is no solution to their problem other than to learn to endure the discomfort in such a way that they minimize its effects on their relationship.

Living with Futility

It is fruitless to assume that every interpersonal conflict can be worked through—that if only you were better prepared, if you knew more or were more highly skilled, then you could make things better.

I feel much this same way as I approach any new challenging therapy case. I assume that, given enough time and patience, anyone can be helped—if not by me, then certainly by someone else. It is a rude awakening for me every time I face an individual who does not improve no matter how hard I try to be helpful or what I do to try to make a difference. At first, I assume it is some inadequacy in me—if only I were smarter, better trained, more sensitive and perceptive; if I had attended more workshops, were surrounded by brighter colleagues; if only I were more skilled at what I do, then surely I could figure out what is going wrong and rectify it.

This misguided belief neglects to include the reality that: (1) No matter how talented and well prepared I might be, there is no way I can reach everyone all of the time. (2) Not everyone really wants to change, no matter what they might say. Sometimes the payoffs of their dysfunction and behavior are too

attractive or they just don't want to do the hard work that is involved. (3) Some people are not good candidates for therapy. They lack insight or motivation or sufficient patience to proceed through the process.

I have been told by supervisors and colleagues (even professional reviewers who edit my books) that I tend to inflate my own role in the process of helping someone else change—I don't have as much power and influence as I think I do.

There comes a time when we all have to come to terms with what is in our domain that we are in a position to do something about and what is out of our control. With respect to the former, there are quite a number of actions we can take, and internal guidance we can offer ourselves, that will reduce if not eliminate any conflict. As to the latter predicament of feeling futility and helplessness, there are things we can do to learn to live with that as well.

Part of learning to think more constructively about conflicts in your life is to recognize realistically what is within your power to change and what is not. As you have heard throughout the process described in this book, rather than blaming others for not cooperating with your preferences, it is far more useful to take inventory of all the things that you have tried that do not work and, rather than repeating them, try something else.

Flexibility Is the Key

The key to planning strategy in any human struggle, whether on the battlefield or the football field, whether it involves a political election, a debate, or an interpersonal dispute, is to plan an overall set of tactics for the engagement and then be prepared to improvise as the situation changes. Whereas previously we have concentrated mostly on what you can do inside your own head to conceptualize conflicts differently, or to understand the motives that drive your self-defeating actions, I would like to summarize some principles to keep in mind before you decide that a conflict cannot be resolved. This problem-solving strategy is based on several assumptions that are compatible with the method introduced to you in this book.

1. *A solution is possible that will be satisfactory to both parties*. As you have seen, this may not always be the case.

2. *This resolution can be negotiated within reasonable time parameters*. Pragmatic concerns do dictate what can be done.

3. *Both participants will have to give up something in order to achieve their mutual goals.* This implies that both participants are interested in compromise.

4. *Collaboration and cooperation are preferred over fighting for competing interests.* This assumption holds true only when both participants have accepted that they will not get all of what they want.

5. *The focus should remain on the problem at hand rather than on*

assigning blame as to who is at fault. Staying with the agenda is crucial to avoid lapsing into name-calling.

6. *The greater the flexibility in both participants, the more likely it is that a mutually satisfying resolution of the conflict will take place*. Flexibility must be evenly balanced in order for both people to end up feeling satisfied.

7. *An attitude of objectivity and systematic inquiry is more effective than personalizing the issues*. Stay calm rather than losing control.

8. *Participants operate as partners who are equally vested in making sure that both are pleased with the compromise that is worked out.* This may very well be the most difficult task of all between two people who are actively involved in conflict.

9. *Make sure that you deal with not only the present struggle but also the underlying issues from the past that are sparking such intense emotional responses.* If you have progressed through the internal process described earlier in this book, this task will make it much easier for you to address the whole conflict instead of just a few of its parts.

When a conflict cannot be resolved, it is most likely because the assumptions just described are absent. Therefore, if your intent is to try and work things out with someone, you will wish to review the rules under which you are operating. Before you attempt any active intervention, or decide whether to give up, it will be helpful for you to include in the last stage (described in Chapter Six on experimenting with alternative strategies) as many

of these assumptions as possible. In any negotiation participants must agree on the ground rules before they ever approach the problems at hand.

Although a problem-solving mode is preferred as a first choice, it is by no means the optimal style of conflict resolution in all situations. Andrew, for example, has tried repeatedly to negotiate in this style with his ex-wife, Marna, over visitation rights related to their children. During those times when he has demonstrated maximum flexibility, fairness, and cooperation, Andrew has consistently ended up on the losing side of the transaction. As long as they are unable to agree on the rules of their negotiations, which involve inflicting hurt on one another as much as any attempt to find a solution to their lingering problems, a cooperative strategy does not work very well.

In fact, no set of tactics seems to work well more than once. Each time they face one another at the bargaining table over who gets the kids for the holidays, protracted arguments left over from their conflicted marriage continue to dominate. In this situation, the best strategy is one in which the participants protect themselves as best they can. They will both try anything and everything to get the upper hand—threats, avoidance, manipulation, guilt, emotional blackmail—whatever works. The problem is that everyone loses: Andrew, Marna, and, most of all, their children, who are caught in the middle.

An outside mediator eventually helped them demonstrate more concern

for the present problem—parental sharing of visitation rights—than for acting out their resentments. There will be times when you, too, may wish to bring in a neutral third party to help you negotiate a resolution of a conflict. The strategies employed in mediation are based on principles that you may wish to adopt as your own operating guides. The following suggestions also may be incorporated into the way you think about approaching conflict situations.

1. *Work within an atmosphere of cooperation. If such a climate does not exist, do what it takes to create it.* In order to accomplish this, you will need to apply what you learned in the first few stages of the conflict resolution process—what undermines your trust, what buttons of yours are being pushed, and what are the origins (both in your past and in the history of your relationship with the other person) of these difficulties.

2. *Remain as flexible as possible in your approach, altering your style according to the changing circumstances.* Flexibility is possible only if you have fully worked through the resentments that have been getting in your way. When you have taken responsibility for your own role in the problem without blaming yourself or others (Chapter Four), you are much better positioned to address grievances in a flexible way.

3. *Make sure that strong emotions are dealt with before attempts are made to deal with the issues.* Your feelings must be processed internally before you attempt to express them externally. Only after you have sorted out what part of your reaction is the result of your own unresolved issues can you begin to figure

out the emotional issues embedded in the present struggle. Always look inward first, then look outside yourself for clues.

4. *Negotiate from a position of strength and trust. Only after the second betrayal should you resort to self-interest strategies.* Part of experimenting with alternative strategies (Chapter Six) involves starting out from one angle and then abandoning it only after you are sure it does not work. Starting from a position of trust rather than suspicion does not place you in as vulnerable a situation as you might think—unless you fail to make adjustments in light of evidence that your adversary is not trustworthy.

5. *Communicate clearly during the negotiations. Make sure that you are understood and that you understand what the other person wants.* In order to be understood, *you* will first need to understand what it is that you want. As you have already learned, that takes a considerable amount of self-reflection. It is equally important to get outside of yourself enough to be sensitive to the other person's preferences so that you may address them effectively.

6. *Block repetitive negative interaction patterns by changing the structure* (place, time, methods, control, climate, and so on) *of the negotiations.* This is part of any action strategy. Pay close attention to what you are doing, what effect it is having. Note what the other person does and what impact this behavior is having on you. Study the patterns of circular causality (mentioned in Chapter Two) so that you can identify what is maintaining the dysfunctional interaction. Then change what

you do in some way!

7. *Encourage a positive frame of mind in which you convey the commitment to work things out*. When you communicate your interest in resolving a dispute, especially in clear, explicit ways, you invite the other person to join you as a partner. Committing yourself to act differently (Chapter Five) involves conveying to the other person your determination to work things out. If he or she is not interested in cooperating with your efforts, so be it. But you have indicated your resolve that, one way or the other, you are going to leave the exchange satisfied with your own role in the process.

8. *Make it safe to disagree without jeopardizing the relationship or the outcome.* When you have successfully moved through the various stages, you will no longer feel personally threatened by the interaction. You have, after all, neutralized the noxious effects of the past. Resolving differences frequently involves taking risks (Chapter Five). That means disagreeing with one another, debating constructively, ironing out differences through honest dialogue. This can take place only when you can express yourself without undue fear of being offended or offensive.

9. *Stick with the agreed-upon agenda rather than letting yourselves become distracted by insignificant issues.* Whether dealing with conflicts in love, at work, or anywhere else, it is crucial that things not be allowed to deteriorate to the point where irrelevant, distracting issues are brought into the discussion. During productive conflict resolution, one or both of you will

sometimes be required to ask the questions: Are we on task? Is what we are doing right now helping us get to where we would like to be?

10. *Avoid, even the appearance of blame.* No surprise here. This *is,* after all, the main theme of this book. Interwoven throughout every stage in the book's process have been reminders as to how important it is that you move beyond blame if you are ever to resolve interpersonal disputes.

    There is nothing that will sabotage any strategy you employ more quickly than the mere suggestion that you are blaming the other person for the troubles. Equally detrimental is for you to accept blame that is directed toward you. This compliance tactic (perhaps even driven by the misguided belief that one person can be at fault in a conflict) will only encourage further fault-finding in the future. When either party in a dispute is feeling defensive, the inevitable consequence of blame, any strategy that is selected by a mediator or by yourself is doomed to fail.

Getting Help from a Professional

There comes a time when people may reach an impasse they cannot break through without outside assistance. It is not so much that professional help, in the form of a consultant, mediator, or therapist, is necessary in order to resolve difficult disputes, but it can make things progress much more quickly.

The same thing holds true with hiring any expert. Given enough time,

study, and motivation, you could certainly fill out your own tax returns, handle your own legal affairs, or hook up your own water heater, but often it is much more efficient to hire someone to provide assistance.

In the field of conflict resolution, getting help from a professional can accomplish several things you would find it difficult to do yourself. It can:

1. Bring an objective, neutral, unbiased perspective to the negotiations, the perspective of someone without a vested interest in the outcome. Theoretically, such a professional does not care how the dispute is settled as long as both parties are satisfied.

2. Introduce fresh ways of looking at your problems, sometimes even redefining them in ways that make them easier to solve.

3. Facilitate a more orderly, rational, purposeful approach to settling the dispute.

4. Help participants hear one another, understand each other's points of view, and respond to what each person has said.

5. Clarify underlying issues that are getting in the way of understanding or action.

6. Initiate more of a commitment to change on the part of all those concerned.

7. Present methods and strategies designed to disrupt usual dysfunctional patterns and force participants to discover

healthier ways of interacting.

8. Initiate adjustments in the "system" that control the ways that participants relate to one another. This includes realigning the distribution of power, the coalitions that have formed, the rigid boundaries that interfere with effective communication.

9. Suggest resources that might prove helpful to participants in their search for common ground. This could include readings, homework assignments, or prescribed tasks designed to facilitate better communication.

Ordinarily, we think of services such as those just described as being most appropriate for marital conflicts, divorce mediation, or child custody disputes. There is no reason, however, why a supervisor and subordinate, two friends, two partners, a parent and a child, might not also consult a professional to get some help.

"What I liked best about seeing a counselor to help us work out a new arrangement in our partnership is that it was safe for us to talk about things that really bothered us. If we tried to negotiate in the office, even with a third party present, one or the other of us would lose control and start screaming. If the counselor did nothing else, he was an impartial witness. Besides, his office had thin walls so he wouldn't let us raise our voices during discussions. I think that helped most of all."

Even an Amateur Can Help

Although professional assistance has the advantage of providing a truly impartial, neutral mediator, sometimes it is not feasible to have an outsider involved. Perhaps both parties are not amenable to seeing a counselor or consultant—it may be too expensive, or perhaps one person feels it is a sign of weakness to ask for help. It also can be difficult finding a person whom both people feel is qualified, competent, and trustworthy. In some situations, it is impractical to take the argument out of its natural setting and relocate it to a professional office.

For whatever the reason that professional help will not work, friends or associates often can provide support. Even if they cannot mediate the dispute itself, they can help in other ways. During times when you feel discouraged they can suggest alternative courses of action. They can offer valuable feedback on the situation or on your interpersonal style. Most of all, they can help prop up your confidence. No matter what the outcome of the conflict, it feels good to know that your most trusted allies will still be there for you.

This informal "amateur" help crops up in every organization and setting—in teachers' lounges, employee cafeterias, kitchens, and phone calls with friends. The key point is that when you are in conflict with someone, it is even more important than usual for you to be able to talk about what you find upsetting and to process it. If you don't have a safe place to nurse your wounds and build

up your strength and resolve, you need to recruit more supportive individuals in your life. You cannot fight alone and expect to keep up your morale.

Applying the Book's Methods in the Most Difficult of Situations

A woman calls me for a first appointment. Before I meet with her, could I please contact the referring therapist, who has a lot of family background that I might find useful? I tell her that I would prefer to meet her first to form my own first impression, but she makes her request a nonnegotiable condition.

She begins our first session with the question: "So what did the therapist say about me?"

"Nothing much. She doesn't really know you except through your children. She did mention that you may meddle a bit too much in their lives."

Before I know what has hit me, the woman is standing and screaming at me: "You call yourself a therapist? How can you take someone else's opinion…"

"Wait a minute," I try to interject. "I didn't say I took what she said at face value. She said she didn't know you."

"That's what you say, but you never should have contacted her in the first place."

"But you asked me to talk to her before I saw you."

"Hey, hotshot, you're the expert. Yow should know better. You should have told me."

Blame. Blame. Blame. I can hear it ringing in my ears. She will not look at how she has manipulated this situation so she can be a victim. She is trying to… Oops. Now I am trying to do it, too—trying to blame her for getting under my skin. I even try a little underhanded manipulation myself, giving her my best omnipotent "shrink look" and saying in buttery tones: "You seem to want to blame me for putting you in a defensive position regarding meddling in your children's lives. It seems to me that that comment would not bother you so much if it had not hit the mark."

I feel smug. Put her in her place, I did. But not for long. In another moment we are arguing again about something else. It is clear to me that this relationship will not work, although I feel muddled as to why. Sometimes you just can't sort out why and how you keep ending up in conflict with someone; the dynamics are too complex to understand fully. It is enough to realize that you must protect yourself since you are unlikely to be successful in getting the other person to change her behavior.

In twenty years of practice, this was the first client I ever "fired." I told her that I would not work with her. Even that led to an argument: the more I

insisted that our relationship was too conflicted to be therapeutic, the more she became determined that I was the best professional for her. She accused me of secretly admiring her manipulative abilities to protect herself, because she was far better at the game than I was: "What's the matter, Doc? Can't you take the heat? Just because I argue with you and don't accept everything you say, does that mean you can't work with me? Am I too threatening to your ego?"

She was not far wrong. I *did* admire her skill as a manipulator, all the while I was aghast at her impact on me. I might not have been able to do much to resolve the conflicts between us, but I surely could do a few things to limit the negative effects, not the least of which was to deny her access to me in the future. I also had considerable work to do in order to put this experience in perspective so that I could learn from what happened, as well as limit the lingering feelings that were most disturbing.

Yes, you know what comes next. I asked myself what it was about her, and the ways that she treated me, that got under my skin so easily. It did not take very deep excavations to figure out that she threatened my need for control (that is, after all, why I became a therapist in the first place). I also realized that because I could not immediately make sense of what she was trying to do, I became impatient, pushing her in ways for which she was not yet ready.

Armed with this awareness of both my personal and interpersonal issues

that were being triggered, I could more easily take some responsibility for what had happened. Perhaps this woman was indeed a very difficult person for most anyone to deal with, but I was fairly difficult myself—a fact I did not like to admit even to myself. This discomfort worked to my advantage in motivating me to do a few things differently. In this case, it was a moot point as to what I did with this particular woman (who, I gleefully reminded myself, I would never see again); what was most important to me was discovering the other conflicts in my life that had followed (and will follow) a similar pattern.

A few weeks later a colleague and I got into a dispute over some issue that seemed important at the time. Although he did not resemble the woman I just described in any obvious way, my feelings during the interaction felt very familiar. Indeed (surprise!), the same issues of control reared their ugly heads once again. This time, however, I was prepared. I even knew what I was looking for.

The solution in this particular situation involved more than a reminder to myself about what was taking place. I took the risk of bringing the matter out into the open by confronting the person about how resentful I felt at his efforts to control me. He, of course, had his own perspective on the situation, which was different from mine. Since we both were quite interested in resolving this dispute, we followed many of the assumptions described earlier in this chapter. Most helpful of all was the mutual belief that we could work things out, that we

were not going to stop the discussions until both of us felt all right.

It was interesting for me to realize that it was the so-called difficult client I described earlier who was actually responsible for helping me discover some painful aspects of my interpersonal functioning. During this time we have spent together, you will have noticed my strong preference to try and find some value, some constructive purpose, in even the most noxious of experiences. Because I tend to look for things that I can use to help both myself and my clients, you would naturally expect that I find exactly what I am searching for.

I am utterly convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that conflicted relationships are not the scourges of our lives but the price of admission we pay for living with other people. I do not deny that conflict is unpleasant, that it is uncomfortable, that it forces us to confront some very painful issues in our lives. But there is no better way for us to get closer to ourselves and become more intimate with others.

About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

On Being a Therapist (1993, revised ed.)

Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

Advanced Group Leadership (1993)

On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

The Compleat Therapist (1991)

Private Moments, Secret Selves:

Enriching Our Time Alone (1990)

The Imperfect Therapist: Learning from Failure in Therapeutic Practice (1989, with Diane Blau)

Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy (1985, 2nd ed., with William Van Hoose)

Pragmatic Group Leadership (1983)

Mouthing Off: A Study of Oral Behavior, Its Causes and Treatments (1981)

Recommended Reading

Ardrey, R. (1967). *The territorial imperative.* London: Collins.

Argyle, M., &. Furnham, A. (1983). Sources of satisfaction and conflict in long-term relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* August, 481-493.

Axelrod, R. (1984). *The evolution of cooperation.* New York: Basic Books.

Blalock, H. M. (1989). *Power and conflict.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Bulman, R., & Wortman, C. B. (1977). Attributions of blame and coping in the "real world": Severe accident victims react to their lot. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 35, 351-363.

Crosby, J. F. (1980). Responsibility for feelings: A multilateral approach to causation. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy,* October, 439-446.

Deutsch, M. (1973). *The resolution of conflict.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dudgeon, C. (1992). Thwart office terrorists with these tactics. *Chicago Tribune,* November 8.

Duncan, B. L., &. Rock, J. W. (1993). Saving relationships: The power of the unpredictable. *Psychology Today,* Jan./Feb.

Elias, M. (1981). Serum cortisol, testosterone, and testosterone-binding globulin responses to competitive fighting in human males. *Aggressive Behavior,* 7, 215-224.

Evans, P. (1992). *The verbally abusive relationship.* Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams.

Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (1993). *Working through conflict.* New York: HarperCollins.

Goffman, E. (1957). *Presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday.

Harris, M. (1977). *Cannibals and kings: The origins of cultures.* New York: Vintage Books.

Hart, B. H. L. (1967). *Strategy.* New York: New American Library.

Heitler, S. (1990). *From conflict to resolution.* New York: Norton.

Kottler, J. A. (1990). *Private moments, secret selves: Enriching your time alone.* New York: Ballantine.

Kottler, J. A. (1992). *Compassionate therapy: Working with difficult clients.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kottler, J. A. (1993). On *being a therapist* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kottler, J. A., & Blau, D. S. (1989). *The imperfect therapist: Learning from failure in therapeutic practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

LoPate, P. (1989). *Against joie de vivre.* New York: Simon &. Schuster.

Lorenz, K. (1966). On *aggression.* New York: Bantam.

Maynard, D. W. (1985). On the function of social conflict among children. *American Sociological Review, 50,* 207-223.

Maynard-Smith, J. (1982). *Evolution and the theory of games.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Mills, J., & Chusmir, L. H. (1988). Managerial and conflict resolution styles: Work and home differences. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 3,* 303-316.

Moore, C. W. (1991). *The mediation process: Practical strategies for resolving conflicts.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ogley, R. (1991). *Conflict under the microscope.* Aldershot, England: Avebury.

Patchen, M. (1988). *Resolving disputes between nations.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pruitt, D. G., &. Rubin, J. Z. (1986). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement.* New York: Random House.

Rapoport, A. (1960). *Fights, games, and debates.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Rice, P. L. (1992). Stress *and health.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Robarchek, C. A. (1979). Conflict, emotion, and abreaction: Resolution of conflict among the Semai Senoi. *Ethos,* 104-123.

Rubin, J., & Rubin, C. (1989). *When families fight.* New York: William Morrow.

Scott, G. G. (1990). *Resolving conflict.* Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Shantz, C. (1987). Conflicts between children. *Child* Development, 58, 283-305.

Shaver, K. G. (1985). *The attribution of blame.* New York: Springer- Verlag.

Sillars, A., & Parry, D. (1982). Stress, cognition, and communication in interpersonal conflicts. *Communication Research,* 9, 201-226.

Snyder, C. R., Higgins, R. L., & Stucky, R. J. (1983). Excuses: Masquerades in *search of grace.* New York: Wiley.

Soloman, M. (1990). *Working with difficult people.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Tennen, H., &. Affleck, G. (1990). Blaming others for threatening events. *Psychological Bulletin, 108,* 209-232.

Thomas, L. (1979). *The medusa and the snail.* New York: Viking Press.

Valles, P. (1992). I *love you,* 1 hate *you.* Tarrytown, NY: Triumph Books.

Weissberg, M. P. (1983). *Dangerous secrets: Maladaptive responses to stress.* New York: Norton.

Wetzler, S. (1992). Sugarcoated hostility. *Newsweek,* Oct. 12, 14.

Wile, D. B. (1988). *After the honeymoon: How conflict can improve your relationship.* New York: Wiley.

Wilmot, J. H., & Wilmot, W. W. (1978). *Interpersonal conflict.* Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown.

Witt, D. D. (1987). A conflict theory of family violence. *Journal of Family Violence, 2,* 291-301.

Zuk, G. H. (1984). On the pathology of blaming. *International Journal of Family Therapy,* 6, 143-155.