

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Handling Family Conflict Well

Strong, supportive family relationships can be as important as a healthy diet and regular exercise. However, the needs of family members change constantly. Loving, healthy family relationships are built and maintained through positive conflict resolution, ongoing communication and shared quality time.

Domestic Dilemmas

All families experience conflict from time-to-time. Conflict in and of itself is not a problem, however, the way in which families resolve conflict can be problematic. Signs of problematic conflict resolution vary, from experiencing frequent arguments to laying blame to not discussing issues as a means of avoiding conflict. Conflicts occur at all stages of couple or family relationships, and often occur over some of life's most central challenges such as managing money or raising children.

Managing Money

Holding differing opinions on what to spend on, how much to spend, how much to save and how money is divided up amongst family members frequently creates conflict. When differences prevail, partners may criticize each other’s spending habits or go out of their way to keep spending secret from one another.

To minimize differences, it can be helpful to set priorities by planning in advance. A clearly outlined budget is an excellent tool for pre-determining what, when, how and why money will be handled, and who will handle it. For those who find the notion of a budget restrictive, defining some guiding principles or rules can lessen the likelihood of conflict. Some examples of guidelines are:

- One partner manages expenses related to household repairs while another manages insurance needs.
- Purchases over 100 dollars will be discussed and mutually decided upon.
- 100 dollars per month is available to each partner for 'no questions asked' purchases.

Seeking professional assistance can establish a framework for effectively handling money conflicts when they arise. A counselor can help couples clarify their values and beliefs and what money means to them, and how these beliefs underlie their struggles. Or a financial counselor has the expertise to provide a range of money management solutions.

Raising Children

Child rearing presents significant rewards and overwhelming challenges at each stage of a child's development. Demands of work, financial pressures, and trying to keep up with household tasks often heighten this stress. When parents hold different views, conflicts often occur. One common scenario is one parent who is seen as too easy going and the other as too strict and rule-bound.

It is not necessary that parents or caregivers always agree on how to manage every situation. It can be helpful though, to discuss and agree upon some basic rules and expectations of children. When situations arise that are not addressed by the rules, focus on arriving at a solution that best serves the interests of the child. Giving children a unified solution will minimize confusion for the child and the opportunity for conflict between parents.

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Resolution

Challenges and family problems are inescapable. Most often, families are able to resolve day-to-day challenges and are stronger and closer as a result. Consider the following:

- Do family conflicts usually reach a satisfactory end?
- Is your approach to conflicts usually positive, starting with how you feel? For example, “I feel important when you listen to me…”
- Are you specific about issues at hand and constructive when you criticize? “You didn’t make your bed this morning. If you need more time, we can…”
- Can you negotiate and agree on a compromise, even if you disagree on an issue? “I don’t agree, but I’ll try for a week because I understand your reasons.”
- Are you able to pick your battles and let go? Perhaps a small purchase or a child getting an earring isn’t important enough to hang onto and keep bringing up.

Seeking Help

When a family problem persists or when efforts to resolve the problem are not getting the desired results, families are encouraged to seek the assistance of a professional counselor. Counselors deal with a wide range of family and parental issues and can help families explore strategies for resolving problems. They can also identify community resources and support groups.

Should family problems of any sort escalate to the point where violence ensues, families are urged to seek professional assistance immediately. The likelihood of recurrence is high when alternative problem solving strategies are not available.

Conflict resolution between partners and amongst families is critical for a healthy and supportive home life. Conflict resolution and good communication don’t happen overnight. Fortunately, professional counselling can help couples and families develop productive strategies for resolving conflict.