

Stages of Conflict

We start in relationship and harmony with another person with **No Conflict**. This level involves open communication, and people feel free to express different opinions as they arise.

Latent Conflict occurs when a difference emerges that is interest-based. Interests are desires that have no impact on a person's self-concept (e.g., What book should we study in small group?) During latent conflict, the issue hasn't been raised with others.

Problems to Solve occurs when a person decides to express their concerns—people remain fairly focused on the problem and their interests. Concern is shown for the other person and the relationship.

Problems to solve become a **Conflict** if personal needs are not being met (e.g., the need to be heard or respected). Personal needs are defined as basic human desires that are tied to things such as *self-esteem, values, power, perceptions and feelings*. Suddenly the needs take precedence over the original problem.

The next stage is **Help**. Here one might ask someone else for help (or might complain bitterly about how they have been treated.) The effectiveness of getting help depends on who the person turns to—it's much more likely to make a difference if the helper is a *neutral* third party who can focus on resolving the conflict.

When help is ineffective, one or both parties will likely proceed to **Fight or Flight**. They try to either defeat or escape. The violations of personal needs have to be addressed in order to mediate the conflict effectively.

Depending on the outcomes of fight or flight, the conflict may progress to **War**. The conflict has a life of its own at this stage, and sustaining the conflict becomes more important than resolving it. We most commonly see this happen in fierce rivalries, divorces or political/religious wars, and only rarely in small groups.

With each stage, the relationship is further severed, and people move further and further away from each other.

(Adapted from William A. Donohue, *Managing Interpersonal Conflict* and Dudley Weeks, Ph.D., *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*.)

