

Three Secrets To Dealing With Family Conflict

Without Shooting Yourself in the Foot



You're in the midst of a family conflict and you don't know what to do. You're tired of the same old arguments that drain your health and sanity. You want better relationships, less stress, and solutions that last.

How can you break the cycle and make progress?

These three steps can work magic. They're *skills* that every good negotiator learns over time:

- ◆ Recognize habits that don't serve you
- ◆ Check assumptions that may be derailing you
- ◆ Clarify your goals so others can hear you

If you want to move straight to "the solution," I get it. Everyone does -- including me! But here's why that doesn't work:

You've got to deal with yourself before you can deal with the other person.

Otherwise they'll just push your buttons and drive you crazy, and you'll stay stuck in pointless arguing.

This is the inner work. If you want to be heard and get your needs met, you've got to master yourself first.

This guide is a preview of the inner work I do with clients. (If you're curious about the outer work -- how to motivate another person to work with you -- see the link on the last page.)

To start, focus on a specific conflict and one family member. If your situation involves several people, no problem. Just start with the person you find *most* difficult to deal with. I'll call this person X.

Later you can come back to this guide and focus on another family member. Your answers to the exercises will probably be different for each person.

SECRET #1:

CONTROL YOUR HOT BUTTONS BEFORE THEY TAKE CONTROL OF YOU

What does X do or say that gets under your skin? Makes you defensive or angry? Makes you want to hang up the phone or leave the room?

As I often tell my clients and students, “Get to know your hot buttons well. They can cause you a lot more trouble than the other side can.”

A hot button is an intense emotional response to a stimulus. Each of us has our own unique set of buttons -- just waiting to be pushed.

These buttons are your Achilles heel. Once they get pushed, you're no longer in control. You're on auto-pilot.

- ◆ You can't think clearly.
- ◆ You can't make smart choices about what to do next.
- ◆ You may make the conflict worse without meaning to.

So think about your situation. What knocks you off-center? Maybe the subject makes you tense. But more likely it's the way X *behaves* that triggers you: not just what she says, but *how she says it*.

ACTION STEPS

1. Learn how your triggers work. Review your last conversation with X. What did she do, what did you feel, and how did those feelings affect your behavior?

2. Accept your hot buttons. They're part of you. The more completely you accept them, the easier they will be to control.

EXERCISE:

(See Example on p. 5)

A. It really pushes my buttons when X:

[List all the things X says, does, or fails to do that makes it hard for you to stay calm.]

B. When X does these things, I feel:

[Name all the emotions you can identify. Be as specific as you can.]

C. I feel this way because:

[How do you interpret X's behavior? What do you tell yourself it means?]

D. How I behave when these buttons are pushed:

EXAMPLE

When X does this:	I feel:	Why I feel this way:	How I act when this button gets pushed:
Cries	Guilty Anxious Helpless	I feel responsible for keeping X happy. I don't know what to do next. I want to 'fix it' and I'm failing.	Clam up and try to end the conversation. Do whatever X wants, silently fume for days.
Yells and screams, blames me	Angry Stressed out Scared Insulted Guilty	This is so unfair. I hate loud voices. I fear this will lead to physical violence. Did I screw up?	Yell back, blame X. Speak condescendingly to X as if she's a child. Tune out.
Repeats herself constantly	Impatient Bored Frustrated	X is wasting my time. X isn't listening to me. X thinks I'm too dumb to understand.	Tune out. Try to change the subject.
Interrupts, doesn't listen, insists she's right.	Furious Unheard Disrespected	X doesn't trust me or my judgment. X doesn't care what I feel or want.	Insist <i>I'm</i> right. Cave in just to get it over with, silently fume for days.

SECRET #2:

CHECK TWO ASSUMPTIONS. THEY'RE PROBABLY WRONG.

When we're in conflict, we tend to make strong negative assumptions about the other person. It's a natural survival instinct, but it doesn't help us solve complex problems.

Let's look at two common assumptions we tend to make when under stress: "X has bad intentions toward me," and "X is the problem."

Assumption: X has bad intentions toward me

When someone upsets us, we assume he *intends* to upset us. We think:

- ◆ He's trying to make me feel guilty.
- ◆ He's disrespecting me on purpose.
- ◆ He knows I can't stand it when he _____, and he's doing it anyway.
- ◆ He hates me.

What's most likely: X has no idea of his impact on us. He's completely focused on his own needs. *He's on auto-pilot.*

What's possible: Yep, he's acting this way on purpose. This approach has worked for him before, so why change? But that doesn't mean his intentions are evil. It may just mean he tends to behave this way when under stress -- and no one has given him a reason to change (yet).

ACTION STEPS

To check this assumption:

- 1. Observe X's behavior without taking it personally.** Assume it's a habitual response to stress.
- 2. Focus on the needs that might be driving the behavior.** What's important to X? Deep down, what does he want and why? For now, take your best guess.
- 3. Remember: you don't have to condone the behavior or agree with X!** Just try to understand where he's coming from. (Later, during the outer-work phase, you may be able to affect his difficult behavior, but that's not our focus yet.)

EXERCISE:

A. In terms of the real-world outcome, X says he wants:

B. X might want these things because:

[What needs and concerns might he be trying to meet, for himself and perhaps for others?]

C. X's worst fears in this situation are:

[Why does this problem cause him stress? What's his "nightmare" scenario?]

D. When we talk about this, X probably wants me to:

[What might he want me to understand or acknowledge -- even though I see things differently?
What might he wish I would do, or stop doing?]

Assumption: X is the problem

When we're in conflict, we tend to think, "If X would just be rational, or behave like a normal person, or do what I ask, everything would be fine!"

What's more likely: We are contributing to X's behavior in some way. For example, we may be:

- ◆ Clamming up, withdrawing
- ◆ Not listening
- ◆ Insisting we're right
- ◆ Giving advice when it's not wanted
- ◆ Pushing *his* buttons without realizing it

ACTION STEPS

To check this assumption:

- 1. Review your answers to #1D: "How I behave when my buttons are pushed."**
- 2. Think about how X might (mis)interpret your behavior.**

EXERCISE:

A. I probably haven't helped the situation by:

[Hint: If you still draw a blank, imagine what X might say if he were asked.]

B. How my behavior may have upset or confused X, despite my good intentions:

SECRET #3:

CLARIFY WHAT YOU WANT SO OTHERS CAN HEAR YOU

People under stress typically forget to figure out what they want and why. This is a huge strategic mistake. If you don't know what you want, how are you going to get it?

Clarity is power because:

- ◆ People want to know where you're coming from. If they have to guess, they get anxious and defensive.
- ◆ When you express your goals in positive (or at least neutral) terms, others are more likely to think, "That sounds reasonable." And maybe: "I want that, too."
- ◆ When you express what you want in emotionally compelling terms – the "why" – people are more motivated to trust you and work with you.

Let's look at three types of goals, relating to:

- ◆ The **outcome** of this conflict
- ◆ Your **relationship** with X, and
- ◆ Your **next conversation** on this topic



ACTION STEPS

1. Start with the outcome of your real-world practical problem. What are your goals and why?

Don't focus on your ideal solution ("I must get A, B and C"), but on the needs and concerns you're trying to meet. For example, you might want:

- ◆ To be treated fairly (according to *your* view of what's fair)
- ◆ Freedom to _____
- ◆ Financial security, or a solution you can afford
- ◆ Information from X that will help you stop worrying about _____

You might also want things that benefit others:

- ◆ A solution both you and X think is fair
- ◆ Equal treatment for your children regarding _____
- ◆ Peace and closure; no more fighting on this issue
- ◆ A solution the whole family thinks is fair

Keep asking, "Why do I want that?" See how deep you can go.

Does this conflict have a symbolic meaning to you? Do you want recognition of something intangible? Figure it out. Sometimes conflict persists because *both* sides want recognition and don't think they're getting it. For your part, you might want acknowledgement of:

- ◆ Your role or status in the family
- ◆ Your expertise
- ◆ Your hard work or generosity on others' behalf
- ◆ A principle you value

You know the saying, "It's not the money, it's the principle"? If this resonates with you, name the recognition you want and put it on the list. You don't have to share this goal with X; you can decide that later. But this task will help you understand why this particular situation is hitting a raw nerve with you, so you can gain more control in future conversations.

EXAMPLE

Suppose you and your father are running a family business. The two of you are fighting constantly and you can't take it anymore. Your ideal solution is, "Dad retires so I can become CEO."

Why do you want that?

Maybe you say, "I want my father to get off my back and stop micromanaging me." That's a great goal, but it's framed in the negative. Translate it into positive or neutral terms: "I want freedom to run the company my own way."

Now you're describing independence and autonomy: goals almost everyone can understand.

Now, why do you want autonomy?

Maybe you want to expand the company and your father doesn't.

Great. Why do you want to expand?

Maybe you want to become a bigger player in the industry. Maybe you crave a new challenge or the chance to prove yourself as a leader. Maybe you want to make room in the business for your children or otherwise secure the family legacy.

Anything else? Symbolic or intangible interests?

At the deepest level, you may want recognition from your father that you've done well enough to step into his shoes.

2. Think about what kind of relationship you want with X.

Most of us want family relationships based on trust and respect. These are longterm goals that go way beyond the immediate problem.

Why bother to identify such goals? Because they'll shape your strategy. Down the road, during the outer-work phase, you'll have the option of expressing these goals directly to X. For example: "It's important to me that we trust each other." Or, "It's important to me that we be able to talk through our differences and solve problems together."

This powerful move will enable you to:

- ◆ Convey good intentions for the conversation, which X may find reassuring
- ◆ Remind them of goals they probably share
- ◆ Guide the process of *how* you talk to them
- ◆ Address relationship issues directly, if you choose to do so

3. Choose your goals for the next conversation on this topic.

Most people think the goal is to "solve the problem." Not so fast! The "solution" is your destination at the end of the road. If past conversations haven't gone well, you've probably veered off the road -- maybe into a ditch. Your next task is to get the conversation back on the road. A good road. Keep in mind: *until people feel heard, they're not ready for problem solving.*

Some good purposes:

- ◆ Re-open the lines of communication; build trust
- ◆ Understand each other's points of view
- ◆ Move toward problem-solving

Less good purposes:

- ◆ Get X to admit they're wrong
- ◆ Dump the problem on them
- ◆ Vent your frustration & make yourself feel better

You can also set a practical goal for the next conversation. Think about a "next step" – gathering information, exploring options, consulting an expert -- that might help move things forward. If your next conversation with X goes well, you can suggest that step and see if X agrees.

EXERCISE:

A. My goals for solving this problem:

[The underlying needs and concerns I'm trying to meet.]

B. My goals for this relationship:

C. My goals for our next conversation on this topic:

[Possibly including agreement on a "next step," not too scary to X, that might help move things forward]

CONGRATULATIONS!

You've completed this preview of the **inner work**. You've identified habits that don't serve you, checked assumptions that can derail you, and clarified what you want in an emotionally compelling way.



WHAT NEXT?

Thank you for downloading this guide.

If you'd like to explore your situation with me, I'm here for you.
Let's talk and see how I can help.

BOOK A DISCOVERY SESSION

Want a preview of the **outer work**? Get my full guide: "Break the Impasse in Your Family Conflict." It includes four steps to engaging with family members so everyone – including you – feels heard, understood, and ready for problem-solving.

GET THE FULL GUIDE