

Resolving Conflict in the Family

Session One

Definition of Conflict

For many people, the word conflict conjures up negative images of fights and strained relationships. It arouses feelings of anger, anxiety, and even depression. These images may be so uncomfortable that people would rather avoid or deny conflict completely. Denial of conflict however, only increases conflict, leading to more negative feelings. This cycle continues to evolve unless it is handled effectively.

Conflict really means disagreement with someone else. Couples may disagree on how to bring up their children, parents may disagree with their children on discipline issues, etc. These disagreements, stemming from their different perceptions, result in a conflict.

Denial of Conflict

Denial of conflict is very widespread in society. Most people would like to put on a facade of not having any conflicts at all. This is completely unrealistic, but it is the image many would like to portray. Many people believe that a loving and functional family is supposed to be in harmony all the time. When their own family differs from this vision, they believe it is not a normal family.

The result of these false images is that people undergoing severe conflicts think they are the only ones suffering thus. They believe that the rest of the people around them, at least most of them, are living happier lives than them. This creates an unhealthy dissatisfaction with life.

Another result of denial of conflict is that people do not seek help and advice from others. Families who may get help from outside, and may be able to solve their problems, deprive themselves of this assistance because of the fear of being labeled as dysfunctional. Advice from others can sometimes be very helpful. A person outside the relationship sees things more objectively, and may be in a better position to suggest a solution. Seeking advice from appropriate people is liked in Islam, and has been recommended by the Masumin (a). The following Hadiths stress its importance:

1. *The intelligent one is the one who combines the intelligence of others with his own.*
2. *The fruit of seeking advice is awareness.*
3. *Advice gives life to the hearts.*
4. *The best gift is good advice*

The Holy Prophet (s) himself understood the importance of good advice, and its impact on the heart. He often would ask Jibra'il to advice him, and tell him something that would enlighten his heart. Of course, advice should be sought from people who are worthy of giving it and who can be trusted completely.

Positive aspects of Conflict

Human beings do not like difficulties, and are averse to dealing with feelings of unpleasantness. However, there is a lot of hidden good in unpleasantness. The Holy Qur'an reminds us often of the good that lies in dealing with unpleasant events. Allah says: *And We will most certainly try you with somewhat of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits, and give good news to the patient.* (2: 155). A hadith of Nabi Isa (a) says: *Surely you cannot reach what you want except through patience at what you dislike.* Imam Ali (a) says, *With patience, one's desires are attained.*

Sometimes we dislike something a great deal, but Allah knows that there is eventual good in it for us. He says; . . . *it may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you, and it may be that you love a thing while it is evil for you, and Allah knows while you do not know.* (2:216)

Conflict allows human beings to mature, mentally and emotionally. Children who come from families who try to resolve their problems have a better chance of succeeding in relationships. Positive management of conflict is a great factor in showing people that the world is not all smooth and easy, but that it can be handled and managed effectively. Discomfort and unpleasantness is a part of life. It lays the ground for character development.

Responding to Conflict

Most people respond to conflict differently. There is no one style that is right all the time. Different situations require different approaches. Sometimes however, people get accustomed to responding in a particular way, and it becomes a habit. It becomes the common response to all situations of conflict regardless of whether it is an appropriate response or not.

To be able to handle conflicts more effectively, it is necessary to analyze one's response to conflicts. The following are believed to be some common responses to conflict.

1. Avoidance. Some people respond to conflict by avoiding it completely. They would rather deny that a conflict exists, and push it under the rug. It is often very unpleasant to accept that there is a conflict in a close relationship. Thus it requires strength of will to confront it and work on solutions.

Avoiding conflicts is useful to a certain degree when the conflict is minor, and does not require a lot of intervention. If a parent picks on minor issues, and is constantly raising a fuss, the result could be quite disastrous. According to Imam Ali (a), one who constantly nags and scolds creates a lot of resentment. He says in a hadith, *Excessive scolding sparks the fire of stubbornness.* He also says, *Do not constantly reproach someone, for it creates resentment, and leads to hatred.* Avoiding is thus a useful approach when the issue is not very significant. Avoiding is also useful if time is needed to think and plan a

strategy. Then confrontation of the conflict would be only delayed rather than completely avoided.

Avoiding conflicts completely only serves to increase conflicts. When a solution is not reached, both parties in a relationship may suffer from frustration and resentment that could build up to high levels. Such repressed feelings are not healthy for a good relationship.

2. Accommodation. Sometimes a partner may feel that he or she is ready to accommodate the other, and is willing to submit to the wishes of the other. This is appropriate when the person knows that he is mistaken, or when achieving harmony is the biggest priority. Sometimes, insisting on one's own wishes and desires is not worth the havoc it creates on the relationship.

Accommodating all the time is not healthy, especially when one partner feels they have to give in all the time. It can lead to a lot of resentment. To feel that one has to sacrifice all the time is not constructive for a good relationship. The thoughts and desires of both partners need to be considered for a working relationship.

3. Collaboration. This is when the partners try to solve the conflict by addressing the issue and exploring alternatives. They acquaint each other with their personal views, and listen to each other. This approach empowers both parties, and decreases tension and resentment. It should be done with a genuine respect for the other party, and a willingness to listen to and consider their views.

Collaborating should be done when both parties are in a state where they are reasonable and willing to listen. It should not be done in moments of emotion and anger, or when time is limited and tension is high. For collaboration to work effectively it has to be done regularly.

4. Compromise. When all other approaches to a conflict fail, the partners need to reach a compromise. Both sides agree to let go of something, in order to reach a solution that may be acceptable to both. A compromise is never completely satisfactory, but in the situation, it is the best possible way to avoid an escalation of conflict.

When the disbelievers argued with Holy Prophet(s) about the truth of his mission, Allah sent down the following verse; *Say, O people of the book! Come to an equitable proposition between us and you, that we shall not serve any but Allah and that we shall not associate any with Him, and that some of us shall not take others for lords beside Allah, but if they turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.* (3:63)

A compromise is a middle ground between what the two parties want. It may not completely solve the problem, and the issue could still need further attention. This is especially true if the compromise fails to satisfy either party, and the conflict still seems to simmer at a lesser degree.