Chapter 1 - Introduction

Conflict occurs when people (or other parties) perceive that, as a consequence of a disagreement, there is a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.

There is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally difficult circumstances. The people in the dispute (also known as disputants) tend to perceive limited options and finite resources available in seeking solutions, rather than multiple possibilities that may exist 'outside the box' (Healey, 1995).

Therefore, conflict can be defined as a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns (Mayer, 1990). Conflicts, to a large degree, are situations that naturally arise as we go about managing complex and stressful life situations in which clients are personally invested (Ury, 1988).

Recognising when a client may benefit from conflict resolution skills training

Conflict comes about from differences between individuals; their needs, values and motivations. Sometimes through these differences individuals can complement each other, but at other times there will be conflict. Conflict is not a problem in isolation, it is how it is dealt with that determines whether it resolves or escalates (Helpguide, 2006).

Conflict can endanger relationships, but if handled effectively, it can provide opportunities for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between two people. Since relationship conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them (rather than avoiding them) is crucial (Bercovitch, 1984).

As a counsellor, recognising and managing conflict is also an essential part of building emotional intelligence. By being able to teach clients the skills needed for resolving conflict you are assisting them to keep their relationships strong and growing.

An unresolved or ignored conflict can engage large amounts of our attention and energy. It is not always easy to fix the problem that ignites a conflict, but it can be of great benefit to provide clients with the skills to manage conflict effectively.

How does childhood attachment assist counsellors in recognising conflict?

It can be helpful for counsellors to understand the client’s childhood experience of the attachment, formed with their primary caregivers in early childhood. This can affect clients as adults, as it creates expectations of how others will respond to them in the future (Hater, 1990).

People who grow up believing their needs will be met are resilient and able to remain focused, relaxed, and creative in challenging situations. People who grow up without such expectations will fear conflict, and will not trust themselves in conflict situations.
The aim of conflict resolution is to encourage clients to preserve their relationships and help them grow, by being able to confront and resolve conflicts promptly—without resorting to punishing, criticism, contempt or defensiveness (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

**Types of attachments**

Attachments developed in our formative years can be broadly categorised as either secure or insecure. Individuals who experienced mostly secure attachments with primary caregivers are likely to exhibit a secure response in the face of conflict. Similarly, individuals who experienced mostly uninvolved or insecure attachments are more inclined to display an insecure response in the event of conflict (Hater, 1990).

**Secure** responses to conflict are characterised by the capacity to recognise and respond to important matters; readiness to forgive and forget; the ability to seek compromise and avoid punishment; and the belief that resolution can support the interests and needs of both parties.

In contrast, an insecure response to conflict is characterised by an inability to recognise and respond to important matters; explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions; feelings of rejection, isolation, shaming, fear of abandonment, and the withdrawal of love; an expectation of bad outcomes; and the fear and avoidance of conflict (Hater, 1990).

For many, attempts to deal with conflict result in:

1. avoidance or withdrawal – eg. let's not talk about it
2. anger and verbal or physical aggression
3. emotional blackmail – eg. you never, you always
4. inappropriate use of power – eg. while you are living in my home you will ....
5. passive aggression – eg. not talking to one another
6. compromise and giving in – usually leaving at least one person aggrieved

Not one of the above results is an ideal way to end conflict.

**Chapter 2 - Values to consider preceding conflict resolution skills training**

When considering working with clients who might benefit from conflict resolution skills training it is important that the counsellor demonstrates the skills through practical application, such as role-play. This ensures the client can translate understanding into action and facilitates learning.

Additionally, conflict resolution training will not be effective if a client learns the skills but is afraid to apply them (eg. because their communication style is passive). A counsellor will need to recognise these factors and modify their training accordingly (eg. include assertiveness training in the process) (Healey, 1995).

**The basic values a counsellor needs to be aware of**

Every client has distinctive viewpoints that are equally valid (from where they stand) as the other party involved in the conflict. Each person's viewpoint makes a contribution to the whole and requires consideration and respect in order to form a complete solution.
This wider view can open up the communication transaction possibilities. It may require one party to change their mind chatter that says: "For me to be right, others must be wrong" (Axelrod, 1984).

Encourage your client to consider how the problem or the relationship will look over a substantial period of time. Looking at the conflict or problem in question in terms of a longer timeframe can help clients become more realistic about the consequences of the conflict as well as exploring options to resolve the conflict (Axelrod, 1984).

Clients experiencing conflict tend to respond on the basis of their perceptions of the situation, rather than an objective review of it. This is where having a counselling intervention can benefit the client in overcoming their subjective frame of reference.

Subsequently, clients filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender, and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions (Healey, 1995).

As in any problem, conflicts contain substantive, procedural, and psychological dimensions to be negotiated. In order to best understand the threat perceived by those engaged in a conflict, all of these dimensions need to be considered.

As counsellors we can assist clients to develop healthy, functional and positive coping mechanisms for identifying conflicts likely to arise, the consequences, as well as the strategies in which clients can constructively manage their conflicts. New opportunities and possibilities may be discovered which in turn will transform the personal conflict into a productive learning experience (Healey, 1995).

Creative problem-solving strategies are essential to the application of positive approaches to conflict resolution. The client needs to be able to learn how to transform the situation from one in which it is 'my way or the highway' into one in which they entertain new possibilities that have been otherwise elusive (Ury, 1988).

Chapter 3 - Different Degrees of Conflict

It is not uncommon for a minor conflict to escalate into a major crisis without even those directly involved noticing the signs along the way. People often ignore the early signs of conflict as they do not seem important enough to deal with. Some people work on the ‘peace at all costs’ principle, however, this often has enormous long term costs (Webne-Behrman, 1998).

The first step in the art of resolving conflict is to look for conflict indicators. If a client can learn to recognise the early signs then they can often save a situation from escalating into something more serious and more difficult to manage (Healey, 1995).

Discomfort- is an intuitive feeling that something is wrong, even though you may not be able to put your finger on it. Sometimes it can be a sense that you did not say all you needed to about an issue, that there may be ‘unfinished business’. It is important to pay attention to these feelings. Ask yourself, ‘Is there something I can do about this?’ If there is, act on it as soon as possible. If there isn't stay alert and look for another opportunity to do something about it.

A minor conflict incident – is when something minor happens that leaves a client feeling upset or irritated for a while. Often these incidents seem so minor it feels unreasonable to make a fuss, and it is soon forgotten. At least it appears to be.
Misunderstanding - the lack of clear communication and/or rapport often lead to people making unwarranted assumptions about a person's motives or situation. Sometimes misunderstanding arises because the situation raises a touchy issue and perceptions of the problem become distorted. Often the person who reacts emotionally or defensively to a situation is unaware of the past, unresolved conflict which triggers these emotions.

Tension – is the client recognising any tension that may distort their perception of another person. The relationship becomes affected by negative attitudes and fixed opinions or positions. The relationship suffers and almost any incident can cause a significant rift (Webne-Behrman, 1998).

Chapter 4 - What are Conflict Resolution Skills?

Conflict resolution skills enable clients to bypass personal differences and to open up to possibilities. The skills of conflict resolution can draw clients closer to other people, as they are able to jointly search for fair solutions and balanced needs. It can often involve a powerful shift from adversaries to co-operative partners. In this shift each person benefits (Axelerod, 1984).

Skills of conflict resolution

There are a range of communication skills that a counsellor can teach a client in the counselling process. Each is discussed below:

1. Win Win Approach

The Win/Win Approach is about changing the conflict from an adversarial attack and defence, to one of co-operation. It is a powerful shift in attitude that alters the whole course of communication (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

Encouraging your client to address each person's underlying needs means that they can build solutions that acknowledge and value everyone's needs, rather than denying or opposing them (Axelerod, 1984).

Have your client ask questions like:

- "Why does that seem to be the best solution to you?"
- "What's your real need here?"
- "What interests need to be served in this situation?"
- "What values are important to you here?"
- "What's the outcome or result you want?"

The answers to these questions can significantly alter the agenda of the discussion. It allows for co-operative problem-solving, it can lead to opportunities for the client to take responsibility, be assertive and to say what they need to (Axelerod, 1984).
In summary, the win/win approach involves strategies of:

- consideration of underlying needs
- recognition of individual differences
- openness to adapting one’s position in the light of shared information and attitudes
- attacking the problem, not the people (Helpguide, 2006)

2. **Withdrawal**: If you physically or emotionally withdraw from a conflict, you no longer have a say in what happens. Withdrawal can allow a problem to grow out of proportion. It can be used to punish someone. It can leave the other person angry and helpless (Stress, 2005).

3. **Suppression**: This is often the ‘peace at any cost approach’. Suppression can be positive if it gives a client time to think about how they will respond. However, suppressing a conflict means you don’t discuss the main issues and communication is cut off (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

4. **Win/Lose**: This approach is often prompted by a need to protect oneself from being wrong. Win/lose is a power struggle where one person comes out on top. While it is sometimes necessary, it is rarely a long term answer (Healey, 1995).

5. **Compromise**: Compromise seems fair, everyone gains something, but no one gets everything they would like. This potentially leaves everyone feeling at least a little dissatisfied (Healey, 1995).

6. **Creating empathy and the role of active listening**: Creating empathy is about considering rapport and openness between two people. When it is absent, people are less likely to consider their needs and feelings. The best way to teach clients to build empathy is to help the other person feel that they are understood. That means being an active listener. There are specific listening activities relevant to different situations - information, affirmation or inflammation (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

7. **Assertiveness**: The essence of assertiveness is being able to state your case without arousing the defences of the other person or denying their or your rights. The secret of effectiveness lies in saying how it is for you rather than what they should or shouldn't do. For example, “The way I see it...” attached to your assertive statement can help (Lloyd, 1998).

When you want to state your point of view helpfully, the "I" statement formula can be useful. An "I" statement says how it is on my side, how I see it.

Clients could use "I" statements when they need to let the other person know that they are feeling strongly about the issue. Others often underestimate how hurt, angry or put out they are. So it’s useful to say exactly what’s going on for them - making the situation appear neither better nor worse (i.e. your "I" statement should be "clear").

(Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).
Chapter 5 - Applying conflict resolution skills – a summary for counsellors

Client's behaviour occurs for a purpose. They are looking for ways to belong, feel significant and self-protect. When people perceive a threat for their self-esteem, a downward spiral in communication may begin (Ury, 1988).

To assist clients to break the spiral, counsellors can act to support their real needs without supporting their destructive faulty beliefs. The table below describes this cycle (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficult Behaviour (and the faulty belief behind it)</th>
<th>The downward spiral</th>
<th>Exploring and applying better alternatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Attention (“I only belong when I am being noticed.”),</td>
<td>You feel annoyed and react by coaxing. They stop briefly, and then resume behaviour and demands, perhaps in a new way.</td>
<td>Avoid undue attention. Give attention for positive behaviour especially when they are not making a bid for it. Support their contribution and involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Plays (“I only belong when I am in control, when no-one can boss me!”),</td>
<td>You feel provoked or threatened and react by fighting or giving in. Their aggression is intensified or they comply defiantly.</td>
<td>Disengage from the struggle. Help them to use power constructively by enlisting co-operation. Support their self-worth and autonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Revenge (“I am significant only if I make others feel hurt like I do.”)</td>
<td>You feel hurt by them, and retaliate. They seek further revenge more strongly or with another weapon.</td>
<td>Convince them that you respect their needs. Build trusting relationships. Support their need for justice and fairness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appear Inadequate (“I won't be hurt any more, only if I can convince others not to expect much from me.”)</td>
<td>You give up, overwhelmed. They respond passively, show no improvement, and stay “victim”.</td>
<td>Encourage any positive attempt, no matter how small. Focus on assets. Provide bite-sized learning experiences they can succeed at. Support how they feel as a starting place for self-improvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION NETWORK

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Chapter 6 - Applying negotiation skills training in counselling

What is negotiation?

Negotiation is defined by the Macquarie Dictionary (1998) as 'to confer (with another) with a view to agreement'.

There are no formal rules governing how these negotiations are to be conducted, although there are culturally accepted styles or approaches for doing so.
What negotiation and conflict have in common?

The obvious common denominator in negotiation and conflict is they both involve a relationship with at least one other person.

Some of the things a counsellor should be aware of when teaching a client negotiation skills as part of the conflict resolution process is that when a person enters into a negotiation or they find themselves in conflict with another person, the outcomes they and the other person desire appear to be diametrically opposed.

Otherwise there would not be a conflict or need for serious negotiation (Mindtools, 2005). A counsellor should consider the following about negotiation skills training:

- Determine how much the parties invested (i.e. time, money, emotion, energy). This will help establish whether the outcome is achievable and whether a negotiation will be successful.

- The difference between a conflict situation and entering a negotiation is that the tension levels are already high when in conflict and relationships may have already been damaged.

- It is common that both parties see themselves as 'right', and want to prove their 'rightness' to each other. In this sense every negotiation has potential for conflict.

- If both parties maintain their position of 'rightness', there is little opportunity for resolution or for either party to achieve their desired outcomes. Relationships may be irretrievably damaged and neither party wins.

(Mindtools, 2005)

The following are common ways individuals seek to resolve conflict:

- Competing is a style in which one's own needs are advocated over the needs of others. It relies on an aggressive style of communication, low regard for future relationships, and the exercise of coercive power. Those using a competitive style tend to seek control over a discussion, in both substance and ground rules. Competing results in responses that increase the level of threat.

- Accommodating, also known as smoothing, is the opposite of competing. Persons using this style yield their needs to those of others, trying to be diplomatic. They tend to allow the needs of the group to overwhelm their own, which may not ever be stated, as preserving the relationship is seen as most important.

- Avoiding is a common response to the negative perception of conflict. "Perhaps if we don't bring it up, it will blow over," we say to ourselves. But, generally, all that happens is that feelings get pent up, views go unexpressed, and the conflict festers until it becomes too big to ignore. Because needs and concerns go unexpressed, people are often confused, wondering what went wrong in a relationship.

- Compromising is an approach to conflict in which people gain and give in a series of tradeoffs. While satisfactory, compromise is generally not satisfying. We each remain shaped by our individual perceptions of our needs and don't necessarily understand the other side very well. We often retain a lack of trust and avoid risk-taking involved in more collaborative behaviours.
Collaborating is the pooling of individual needs and goals toward a common goal. Often called "win-win problem-solving," collaboration requires assertive communication and cooperation in order to achieve a better solution than either individual could have achieved alone. It offers the chance for consensus, the integration of needs, and the potential to exceed the "budget of possibilities" that previously limited our views of the conflict. It brings new time, energy, and ideas to resolve the dispute meaningfully.

Source: www.ohrd.wisc.edu (Academic Leadership Support)

By understanding each style and its consequences, the results of our behaviours in various situations are obvious.

Chapter 7 - Strategies for de-escalating anger and/or violence – a summary

It is beneficial for a counsellor to be aware of strategies a client may display or engage in when they are angry themselves or when they are in conflict with a person who’s angry.

By being aware of these strategies you will be able to teach your client how to avoid escalating the reaction of a person who is angry, thus minimising the risk of violent and harmful behaviour.

Avoid:

- Being Defensive
- Overgeneralising
- Being Right
- "Psychoanalysing" / Mind-Reading
- Forgetting to Listen
- Playing the Blame Game
- Stonewalling

According to Webne-Behrman (1998), in addition to the behavioural responses described above, we have emotional, cognitive and physical responses to conflict. These are important windows into our experience during conflict, for they frequently tell us more about what is the true source of threat that we perceive; by understanding our thoughts, feelings and physical responses to conflict, we may get better insights into the best potential solutions to the situation.

- **Emotional responses:** These are the feelings we experience in conflict, ranging from anger and fear to despair and confusion. Emotional responses are often misunderstood, as people tend to believe that others feel the same as they do. Thus, differing emotional responses are confusing and, at times, threatening.

- **Cognitive responses:** These are our ideas and thoughts about a conflict, often present as inner voices or internal observers in the midst of a situation. Through sub-vocalisation (i.e. self-talk), we come to understand these cognitive responses.” Webne-Behrman (1998)

Such differing cognitive responses contribute to emotional and behavioural responses, where self-talk can either promote a positive or negative feedback loop in the situation.
Chapter 8 - Recognising when mediation or alternative dispute resolution is required

What is mediation?

According to Honeyman and Yawanarajah (2005) “mediation is a process in which a third-party neutral assists in resolving a dispute between two or more other parties. It is a non-adversarial approach to conflict resolution. The role of the mediator is to facilitate communication between the parties, assist them in focusing on the real issues of the dispute, and generate options that meet the interests or needs of all relevant parties in an effort to resolve the conflict”.

Further, mediation is a useful tool which can anticipate problems, give a different perspective to the grievances.

Attitudes for Mediators

As such, it is important that the person nominated to act as a mediator:

1. **be objective** - validate both sides, even if privately you prefer one point of view, or even when only one party is present.

2. **be supportive** - use caring language. Provide a non-threatening learning environment, where people will feel safe to open up.

3. **non-judgemental** – actively discourage judgements as to who was right and who was wrong. Don't ask “Why did you?” Ask "What happened?” and "How did you feel?”

4. **Steer the process**, not content - use astute questioning. Encourage suggestions from participants. Resist advising. If your suggestions are really needed, offer as options not directives.

5. **Win/win** - work towards wins for both sides. Turn opponents into problem-solving partners. (Conflict Resolution Network, 2006; Honeyman et al, 2005)

Referral process for mediation services

If you are working with a client whom you believe would benefit from formal mediation then there are range of options and resources available. Mediation services are usually private and require the client to pay a fee to the mediator.

The conflict or issue in dispute influences the type of mediation a person may access as well as whether there is a legal component to the dispute. Before making a referral for mediation on behalf of your client, it is crucial to have an understanding of what they are seeking to determine the best and most appropriate referral option for them.
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