# The Self in Conflict

## Overview

| THEME | TIME | MATERIALS | SETUP |
|---|---|---|---|
| **SELF** | **45 MINUTES** | SCENARIO PRINT-OUT | OPEN SPACE |

**Topic**: Strategies for increasing self-awareness and emotional self-management in conflict

**Audience:** adolescents and adults who need to navigate conflict

**Conceptual Objective:** Participants will understand the changes that occur in the body and brain that during conflict and understand how self-awareness of body, brain, and emotions can help interrupt the stress response cycle and increase human capacity for thoughtful problem solving.

**Experiential Objective:** Participants will become more familiar with their own stress responses during conflict and will experience two strategies they can use to increase self-awareness and interrupt that cycle.

**Facilitator Prep**: This is a basic introduction to concepts participants can study in more depth through additional reading, practice, and education. The session will be most useful if the facilitator has some experience with navigating conflict, managing stress effectively, and/or contemplative practices such as yoga, meditation, or mindfulness. The facilitator should practice the two strategies before leading the group. This content is not intended for clinical use or to address a crisis. Please consult a professional in the case of a mental health emergency.

**Related Content:** This "self" activity is a good preface to "us" content, such as consensus decision making or creating courageous spaces. It reminds participants that self-awareness and self-management is a critical component of working well with others.

**Materials:** Print-outs of scenario.

## Procedure

### INTRODUCTIONS (3 MIN)

❑ Presenters introduce themselves, participants introduce themselves to a neighbor.

### OPENING (5 MIN)

❑ Often, we're focused on the behavior of another person when in conflict. Today, we are going to focus on how we can be our best selves in tough situations. In conflict, the hard part is not just the disagreement but the stress the disagreement creates and the funny ways we behave under stress. Self-awareness and self-management are therefore critical components of working well with others.

❑ Introduce the concept of emotional safety: stress often arises when a person feels emotionally or psychologically unsafe. We can feel unsafe even if our physical safety is not on the line. People who feel threatened, attacked, shamed, powerless, misunderstood, labeled, or not seen for who they really often feel emotionally unsafe. It happens all the time, for reasons big and small.

❑ Acknowledge that power differentials exist and addressing systemic or cultural inequities is important. Here, though, we're focusing on enhancing our ability to sustain ourselves and be emotionally grounded when advocating for change.

### ROLE PLAY (10 MIN)

❑ Use provided scenario, or write one or more scenarios applicable to your setting. Arrange participants in groups of three, with two people speaking and one person observing. Tell them they will act out the resolution of the scene handed to them, with a third person watching. No one is required to participate, but participation is encouraged. Let them know that it is actually helpful if they handle the situation imperfectly, for the purposes of this exercise. Tell speakers to pay attention to what they feel in their bodies and how they feel emotionally as they do the role play. Ask the observer to note the physical cues that indicate conflict is happening, and also pay attention to what they are feeling themselves as they watch. Give teams 5 minutes to role play.

- ❏ Debrief what each person noticed in their bodies, cognition, and emotions through this process. Observers will report on what they saw and felt themselves. Explore whether any of the characters felt threatened in this situation, and why.

- ❏ Provide the following information: Conflict triggers physiological changes, a stress response cycle, in the body that makes it especially difficult to think clearly, at just the time when we need our brains most. Our bodies react as if there were a physical threat when we feel emotionally unsafe. Our bodies prepare us to run from a bear even if what we need to do is assert ourselves verbally. Our adrenaline surges, blood is diverted to our muscles and limbs, our brain gets less blood flow, and it's hard to think clearly. Our sympathetic nervous system is in charge (fight or flight, unconscious reacting brain) and our frontal lobe (conscious, thinking brain) is not. In order to navigate verbal conflict, we need to bring our thinking brains back online. We can do this with mindfulness strategies.

## STRATEGY: SENSORY COUNTING (5 MIN)

Lead the participants in this simple centering and stress reduction exercise, which they can later perform on their own. Assure them that this not a religious activity from any faith tradition. It's a stress-reduction exercise.

- ❏ Ask the group to sit comfortably in their chairs, and if they're willing to do so, close their eyes. Invite them to count to ten on their fingers by slowly noticing the different sounds, smells, and physical sensations around them. Talk slowly and suggest possible observations, such as feeling feet on the floor, back touching the chair, lights buzzing, clothes touching skin. After allowing plenty of time - don't rush this - invite the group to open their eyes and discuss.

- ❏ Debrief: What do you notice about your body or thoughts now versus before we started? By taking time to notice sensations, you are sending signals to your brain that it is safe, you can relax and switch out of fight or flight mode. This allows for more clear thinking.

## STOP MODEL (15 MIN)

Explain that you don't always have time to do the previous type of activity. Instead, that activity helps you build a general capacity for awareness. In an immediate situation, STOP is a more useful tool. Teach the STOP model for interrupting the stress response cycle. Provide an example of when you notice yourself reacting to stress, rather than calmly thinking (e.g., for me, it's when I'm late for work and I think I've lost my keys).

- ❏ S= Slow Down
  If you can catch yourself and regain enough awareness to slow down, you've already re-engaged the thinking brain.

- ❏ T= Take a Breath
  This sends a signal to your body that you are safe and can relax.

- ❏ O = Observe
  What's happening? Pay particular attention to the body, and the environment, your thoughts, and emotions. Notice the stress signals your body is sending you. Recognize them.

- ❏ P = Proceed, considering multiple possibilities.
  Invite your brain to consider multiple possible responses to the situation, beyond your first reaction. This engages your thinking brain further (e.g., options are to panic and dump my purse out looking for my keys or to stay calm and check places they might be).

Small group discussion: Ask participants to return to their groups of 3 and each discuss a time in their own lives when they have experienced stress and could use "STOP." Ask they to discuss their default reaction to the situation, and other possibilities they could consider.

## CLOSING (5 MIN)

- ❏ Share that these examples come from a larger body of stress-reduction, conflict resolution and mindfulness work. Share related resources.

- ❏ Ask each participant to share one word about a feeling or thought they're leaving with.

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# The Self in Conflict: Handout

Scenario for discussion:

You're an adjunct professor at a local college, and you also work full-time in your field. You were the first in your family to graduate from college. You finished your degree while parenting and working. Your position at the college is temporary. You love teaching, so you want to keep getting hired back. You're holding office hours in a shared office, and another instructor walks up and starts talking about a student. She says her student just asked for a last-minute extension on a project after missing three classes in a row. The instructor says she isn't going to make any more exceptions for this student. The student's family frequently calls her during class, so even when she's there, she's not paying attention. The instructor says the student is better off failing because she's not disciplined enough to finish college. When you hear this, you feel your heart start to race. This was you in college at one point. You want to speak up for this student, so you give it a try.

Bring the brain back online with mindfulness.

STOP model:

**S** = Slow down

**T** = Take a breath

**O** = Observe thoughts, emotions, and body

**P** = Proceed, considering multiple possibilities



Related books:

*Act on Life, Not on Anger*, Matthew McKay

*Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when the Stakes are High* by Kerry Patterson, et al.

*Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior* by Kerry Patterson, et al.

*Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn

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# Survey for "The Self in Conflict" Workshop

Thank you for taking time to attend this Civic Agency workshop. We are very interested in receiving your feedback. (Alternatively, you may also complete this survey online at http://tinyurl.com/ja28zek). If you have participants complete evaluations on paper, please scan them and send them to info@mncampuscompact.org.

**Primary Role:** Student, Faculty, Staff, Administrator, Community Organization Staff, AmeriCorps/VISTA

**Institution** (College, University, Organization):

**Date:**

**Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following about your experience with the Civic Agency workshop you participated in.**

|  | Strongly Disagree 1 | Disagree 2 | Neutral 3 | Agree 4 | Strongly Agree 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I increased my confidence in my own ability to lead |  |  |  |  |  |
| I gained useful leadership skills, strategies, or insights |  |  |  |  |  |
| I learned about new leadership tools or resources |  |  |  |  |  |
| I developed new or deeper connections with others |  |  |  |  |  |
| I both learned from and contributed to the learning of others |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other participants in the workshop helped me see things from a different perspective |  |  |  |  |  |

**Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with each of the following statements about yourself before the workshop**

**Before the Workshop**

| Strongly Disagree | | | | | | | | | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I understood my own identities and cultures |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I understood how identities and culture matter in social/community change work |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I understood how I connect with social issues on a personal level |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I was aware of strategies for fostering collaboration in diverse groups |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I was aware of strategies for effectively leading others |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I was aware of strategies for developing an action plan for social/community change |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I believed I had power to address social/community issues |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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**Please indicate how strongly you agree/disagree with each of the following statements about yourself now:**

|                                                                                      | Strongly Disagree |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Strongly Agree |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| **After the Workshop**                                                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I understand my own identities and cultures                                          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I understand how identities and culture matter in social/community change work       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I understand how I connect with social issues on a personal level                    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I am aware of strategies for fostering collaboration in diverse groups               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I am aware of strategies for effectively leading others                              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I am aware of strategies for developing an action plan for social/community change   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| I believe I have power to address social/community issues                            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |

**Is there anything you would like to tell us about your experience with the workshop?**