

The Crazy Roller Coaster of Conflict

How to break out of circle arguments to find peaceful connection

By Dwight Bain, Nationally Certified Counselor & Certified Life Coach

“It’s your fault!”

“No it’s yours!”

“Oh yea, well you’re a bigger one!”

And on, and on the conflict goes. It’s what I call a circle argument because it goes around and around and never really gets anywhere and everyone ends up feeling bad. Sort of like a seriously dysfunctional merry-go-round except a lot more dangerous- it’s what I call the “Crazy Roller Coaster of Conflict.”

Are you a roller coaster fan or do they just make you fearful? I’ve found that most people are clearly on one side or the other, so let me ask it again. Do you really love the twists and turns of giant thrill rides or does it seem completely crazy to you?

If you absolutely can’t get enough of coasters you are not alone. Almost 300 million people visit theme parks every year and many of them are roller coaster enthusiasts. They love the excitement of a controlled setting that provides a rapid rush without any real risk.

So, if you love coasters let me ask the question again, but changing just one factor- the safety harness. You know, the big foam covered steel brace that covers your chest and completely locks you snugly into the seat. What if that safety harness failed 20% of the time? Would you like the ride with the risk of hanging on for your life one out of every five trips? Nah, I wouldn’t either. It would be a crazy coaster and only people totally out of touch with reality would ever get on it and they certainly wouldn’t ride it twice.

Conflict in relationships is a lot like the crazy coaster- it races round and round and occasionally you feel like you are hanging on for your life. That’s why most people don’t like conflict. They believe that no one wins the fight and that both sides end up losing so they try to avoid the tension of conflict by doing everything possible to avoid ever getting on the roller coaster of conflict.

Conflict-

a disagreement, struggle or battle over opposing issues or principles. From the Latin word ‘conflictus’ meaning an act of striking together or clashing with. – Webster’s Dictionary

Everyone has to deal with conflict at every stage of life, consider-

- Little kids who have conflict with their mom over bedtime or eating veggies
- Employees who have conflict with co-workers because of office politics
- Students who have conflict with the bully on the playground
- Husbands who have conflict with their spouse over spending
- Wife's who have conflict with their mate over sloppiness
- Teachers who have conflict with students who won't do assignments
- Politicians who have conflict with each other about who has the best plan
- Roommates who have conflict over who cleans up the kitchen
- Friends who have conflict over differences of opinion and belief

Since everyone has conflict, the bigger question is what will you do about it? People develop a style of managing conflict in childhood which flows out of their personality and family of origin. If you grew up in an environment where everyone stayed quiet and stuffed anger to avoid conflict then you will likely do the same. If your childhood home was full of shouts and mean spirited fighting was a daily occurrence then you will repeat the process. It can be pretty hard to break the cycle but it can be done if you are ready to change. Here are some insights to help you break out of circle arguments to move forward to have real connection in your communication with others.

Start by identifying the type of conflict that you are facing

- Internal- struggling inside between multiple choices or decisions
- Personal- struggling with opinions between you and other people
- Organizational- competition, clashes or power struggles within or between groups, (like countries, families, schools, churches or political parties)

Next- track your typical response to conflict

1) Attacking-

When facing conflict you take an approach that includes traits of attacking others aggressively or passively with actions that could be described as- controlling, judgmental, close-minded, critical, using power plays, attacks behind your back, uses criticism and "put-downs", starts false rumors, pretends to have done nothing wrong, complaints, making negative statements about everything, blames others, pulls others into disagreements, delights in misery of others.

2) Avoiding-

When facing conflict you take an approach that actively tries to avoid any form of pressure from others by choosing one of the following- playing dumb, withdraws, stuffs emotions, indecisive, acts innocent, defensive, sidesteps the issue, twists or bends the truth, blames others, avoids facing the truth about themselves and the situations around them.

Finally- focus on taking positive action based on your personality

If you are an attacker personality, then step back and remember the words of St. Paul who taught, "As much as possible try to live at peace with everyone." Take a breath and focus on making responsible choices to calm the situation down, but start by calming yourself down first. This is a way to slow down the crazy coaster of conflict and break out of having another needless circle argument.

If you are an avoider, then step up to face the issues directly instead of stuffing it inside or trying to shy away from whatever tensions you may be trying to not deal with at work or at home. Since many people would rather avoid than deal with issues it will be important to remember the different stages of conflict to challenge you to grow to a stronger level of honest expression.

Conflict levels:

1. The real issue, (this is the only level that a solution can occur on)
2. Attack, blame, ignore, or circle argue which only leads to more conflict
3. Question everything, feel confused or full of doubt that things will change
4. Escape the relationship or give up on things ever changing

To break out of a circle argument- focus on finding and dealing with the real issue. If you are in a conflict with a small child who says, 'you're not the boss of me,' focus on the immaturity and selfishness that can get in the way of rational thought. If you are facing a power struggle with a co-worker who is acting like a small child use the same approach. Face things directly and talk about the real issues. Don't shout and don't sulk. Just get real.

When you begin to take bold action to honestly face issues you will see the level of conflict begin to decrease and the level of satisfaction in your relationships increase which is a lot better way to live than being stuck on the crazy coaster of conflict.

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About the Author: Dwight Bain is a Nationally Certified Counselor, Certified Life Coach and Certified Family Law Mediator in practice since 1984 with a primary focus on solving crisis events and managing major change. Critical Incident Stress Management expert with the Orange County Sheriffs Office, founder of StormStress.com and trainer for over 1,500 business groups on the topic of making strategic change to overcome major stress- both personally & professionally. Bain is a member of the National Speakers Association who partners with major corporations and national organizations to make a positive difference in our culture. Access more counseling and coaching resources designed to save you time by solving stressful situations by calling 407.647.7005 or by visiting his counseling blog with over 100 complimentary articles and special reports at www.LifeWorksGroup.org