Getting to Zero

What’s in it for me? Learn how to resolve conflict and get to zero.

What does the word conflict mean to you? For many, it conjures up visions of violence, political discord, and war. But these are extreme forms of conflict. What about conflict in your close relationships? People often try to get by without resolving conflict in their interpersonal relationships. But there are times when conflict can be just what you need – conflict could save your marriage, for example, or help rekindle an important relationship. In these blinks, you’ll learn how to “get back to zero” after a conflict – that is, get to the point where the conflict is resolved and you have the level of connection you desire. The advice in these blinks isn’t intended to resolve trauma or abusive relationships. For those kinds of situations, please seek help from trauma specialists or other resources that will support you. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how to productively listen and speak during conflict; the reasons for five of the most common conflicts; and how making agreements can ease your conflicts.

Conflict is usually the result of either too much closeness or too much distance.

Have you ever really thought about how conflict arises? The specific reasons vary, but generally, conflict occurs when you feel threatened. That can mean a physical or emotional threat, or one that relates to your identity, property, safety, health, morals, or the people you love. When it comes to relationships, threatened feelings usually arise as a result of one of two things: too much closeness or too much distance. Both can make you feel threatened – get too close to someone and you start worrying about being attacked; grow too distant, and you’ll worry about abandonment. Too much closeness can occur when someone moves toward you in a confrontational way or raises his voice. Behaviors like these feel like acts of aggression, and that sense is only heightened if the other person is actually upset – his body language can make him seem physically bigger than he actually is. The automatic response is for you to get defensive. Too much distance, on the other hand, can make you feel that the other person doesn’t care about you or is even about to leave you. This happens when someone gives you the silent treatment, abruptly leaves, slams doors, or cuts you off during a discussion. And in today’s hyperconnected, instant-messaging world, a person not returning your call or answering your messages can create too much distance, too. But possibly the worst culprit is simply silence, which leaves you in a state of not knowing what’s going on. It’s normal to feel triggered by either closeness or distance. But staying triggered can have long-term effects on both your physical and mental health. Fortunately, you can do something about it. Start by identifying your coping mechanisms, or disconnectors. There are basically four of these. The first is posturing, which involves attacking or blaming the other person to protect yourself from harm. The second is collapsing, the opposite of posturing. Here, you implode or shut down and feel that the situation is all your fault. With seeking, the third coping mechanism, you feel insecure and seek out the other person to try to reinitiate connection; this, however, can end up driving that person farther away. And the fourth coping mechanism, avoiding, is when you move

away and create distance between you. Identifying how you disconnect allows you not only to recognize when you're doing so and take action accordingly, but also to forewarn people close to you so they can help you during conflict.

Conflict resolution starts by identifying someone with whom you want to get to zero.

Do you have an unresolved issue with anyone in your life? If you're like most people, you probably do – and chances are, leaving things unresolved with that person is a needless drag on your emotional energy. If so, it's time to get to zero – by thinking inside the box. How? Well, start by grabbing a pen and a sheet of paper. Then it's time to sit down and make your first conflict box. To make a conflict box, draw a box and separate it into nine rows. In the top row, write the name of the person with whom you have an unresolved issue. Then, in the next row, write up to five words that describe what that person did or didn't do. In the third row, describe how you feel when you think about the person – pissed off, annoyed, or anxious, for example. In row four, score those feelings on a scale from one to ten, with zero your baseline and ten the feeling at its most extreme. On the fifth line, add how long the conflict has been going on. Then label each row with a brief description of what it's about, if that helps you keep track of things. Once you've completed these rows, think carefully about the person, the situation, and everything you've just written. Then ask yourself: Do you want to resolve the conflict? Have you tried everything you can to do so? If not, maybe you just can't face the prospect of confrontation with that person. If that's the case, maybe it's better to work on getting to zero with someone else first. Or, if the truth is that you just see that person as a lost cause, be honest about that and pick someone you really care about and want to get to zero with. When you have the right person, you can add the sixth row to your conflict box. Take some responsibility for the conflict by describing the part you've played in it. What was your behavior? What did you do or not do? You shouldn't feel that you did something wrong or that you're the victim here. You're merely taking some ownership. The conflict box you've just created is a valuable tool that contains all the pertinent information about your conflict. It will allow you to reflect on the conflict as you move forward with getting to zero. Keep it handy, as you'll return to it in a couple of blinks.

How you grew up affects how you approach your high-stakes relationships.

Do you feel anxious when your partner doesn't return your text messages? Do you sometimes feel you want to shut the noise of the world out and find a space for yourself away from other people, including your loved ones? These kinds of feelings arise from your relational blueprint – that is, imprints from past experiences with high-stakes relationships. Those are your relationships with your family, good friends, and partner, and they affect how you'll relate to others for the rest of your life. Understanding your personal relational blueprint is important if you want to be able to get to zero after

conflict. Even if you didn't have any good role models as a child, this understanding will help you empathize during conflict. The foundation of your relational blueprint is your attachment relationship – that is, your primary relationship. You formed a primary relationship with at least one caregiver – the person, or people, you relied on to keep you alive when you were just an infant. Your life experience, especially how well you do with relationships, depends on how secure you felt during your childhood. And what makes for a secure childhood? A secure attachment relationship. In order for an attachment relationship to be secure, it must meet your four relational needs. You must feel supported and challenged, safe, seen, and soothed. This gives a stable base for adulthood. When you become an adult, you and the people with whom you form high-stakes relationships mutually meet each other's relational needs. When you were a child, your caregivers got you back to a good place after conflicts, and that built your confidence. But of course not everyone relates to that. If your caregiver was too distant or too close, you probably developed an insecure attachment. This can lead you to shut down emotionally, feel that relationships are unsafe, and even feel disconnected from life. You also become unable to work through conflicts in your high-stakes relationships. Now, unresolved issues in relationships, called disconnects, are normal. But resolving issues through a process of reconnection will eventually get you to zero – a state of connection. The way you now approach this conflict repair cycle – which goes from connection to disconnection to reconnection before returning to connection – has been influenced by how adults in your life did this when you were a child. Some people feel disconnected their whole lives – even with their 500 Facebook friends. But you don't have to go through life being a slave to your relational blueprint. By learning how to work through conflict, you can rewire your brain to understand the normal conflict repair cycle and become master of your own relational destiny.

Conflict resolution requires you to understand the price of conflict avoidance.

According to self-care expert and author Cheryl Richardson, "if you avoid conflict to keep the peace, you start a war inside yourself." Often, children feel they have two personalities. The first is free, wild, and innocent – the true self – while the other is constricted in the face of perceived threats and conforms to the rules of the environment it finds itself in – the strategic self. These two personalities often pull in different directions and create inner conflict, which later in life can make you feel like something isn't right. When you experience conflict in your adult life, you have an opportunity to move closer to your true self. That's one reason to bite the bullet and face conflicts in your life rather than avoid them. Ready to start dealing with conflict in your life? Grab your conflict box and look at the name of the person you wrote there. If you want to settle your conflict with that person, then, realistically, you have two options. Option A is to dive in and be truthful – but doing so recklessly is risky, and the worst-case scenario is that it will end the relationship. Option B is business as usual – avoid the conflict and keep the peace. That might sound appealing, but if the conflict continues and you don't express your true self, it will eventually get to be too much, and the truth will come out anyway. Then you'll have three issues on your hands: the initial conflict itself, the inner conflict caused by your avoidance, and the brand-new conflict you just created. That's conflict creep, and option B – that is, avoidance – just creates more and more of it. To see why, return to your conflict box. For now, skip row seven. In

row eight, write down what you fear the other person will do if you tell the truth – for instance, blame you, cut you off, or leave. Then, in row nine, write down how you'll feel if these fears come to pass. Use "I" statements if you can – for example, "I'll feel hurt." When you explore your fears this way, it's easy to see that when you choose option B, avoidance, what you're really doing is protecting yourself from the consequences of speaking up. Fortunately, there's an option C: learning how to resolve conflict correctly. This allows you to be your true self and get back to the connection you want. By teaching you how to deal with conflict, option C moves you from option B to option A – that is, from avoidance to honesty.

To resolve conflict, learn to live with your own discomforts and with how the other person experiences conflict.

Relationships fail because, as the author puts it, "People don't know how to work their shit out" – in other words, people don't know how to handle their own reactions or those of the person they're in conflict with. Think back to your past relationships that didn't work out and you'll probably find that this was the case – and that this made it impossible for the relationship to recover from even the smallest bumps in the road. If you're like most people, you probably find it difficult to deal with your own discomfort. But the good news is, you can learn. Start by identifying whether the source of your discomfort is internal or external. You might think another person has made you feel the way you do – but other people don't cause your feelings, they just trigger them. Dealing with those feelings is on you. The author calls the amount of emotional discomfort you can deal with your emotional discomfort threshold, or EDT. Without training or development, your EDT will likely remain small. But it's possible to increase your EDT by using NESTR meditation – that stands for Number, Emotion, Sensations, Thinking, and Resourced. Here's how that works. Focus on the pain or discomfort you're feeling. Number it on a scale of zero to ten, where zero is your comfort zone and ten is hardly holding things together. Then label the Emotion you're feeling – maybe you're happy, sad, or enraged. What physical Sensations are you feeling? What are you Thinking about? Then find a place in your being where you feel grounded and Resourced – think of how it feels when both your feet are firmly on the ground, for example. Your NESTR meditation should take around five minutes. With continued practice, you'll become more accustomed to your feelings, and your number will lie closer to zero more often. Just as important as getting used to your own feelings is learning to be comfortable with another person's experience of conflict – understanding that will help the two of you reach resolution. One way is to consider the four relational needs you learned about earlier. Make sure that the other person feels supported and challenged, safe, seen, and soothed by you. Continually offering these connectors in every conflict will help you get back to zero.

Listen until the other person feels understood.

Not everyone is a great listener. During conflict, this is particularly so, and you might find yourself becoming defensive very quickly. This often comes down to you and the

person you're in conflict with not understanding each other. The author's tool for understanding the person you're in conflict with is called LUFU, which stands for Listen Until they Feel Understood. There are a few steps to it, but before you even get started, you'll need presence; in other words, an awareness of your thoughts and feelings coupled with a focus on the other person. The eight steps of LUFU are nonlinear, but try to stick to the order until you know the process well. The first step is to be curious – not only about what the person is saying but also about how they're saying it. You should be curious about what's not being said. The second is to practice reflective listening. Repeat back or reflect on what the person said to you. Use phrases like, "It sounds like . . . " The third step is confirming that you understand what the other person has said by using same-page questions like, "Am I following you so far?" Fourth, practice active listening. This basically means pressing "pause"; not saying anything, but just interrupting the speaker so you can digest what's been said. You could say, "Hold on – let me just make sure I'm with you so far." The fifth step, empathizing, is often the hardest. Put yourself in the other person's shoes, and honestly consider your contribution to the conflict and its impact on that person. Add this to line seven of your conflict box, and express it to the other person with empathic statements such as "I see how angry you are." Sixth, validate what the other person has said. Three simple words can do this: "That makes sense." You're not saying the person is 100 percent right – just acknowledging how they see things. You do have to really get it, though. Step seven is owning your part, and that can be as simple as saying, "Yes, I did do that." But don't explain or justify your actions – keep listening. Your turn to speak comes after step eight, when you confirm you have a shared reality. Do this by asking questions like, "Do you feel understood now?" Of course, if the person says no to that last question, keep going with the LUFU!

Conflict resolution requires empathy.

Studies have found that between 70 and 93 percent of communication is nonverbal. So before you even start to speak, remember that your tone of voice, eye rolling, folding your arms, or getting distracted by your phone will all affect the person with whom you want to communicate. If you do these things, you'll end up moving away from zero rather than toward it. So sit back, relax your belly and shoulders, and check your tone of voice before you take your turn to speak! The author uses the acronym SHORE for the speaking process, which stands for Speak Honestly with Ownership to Repair Empathetically. As you'll remember, LUFU has eight steps. So does SHORE. Just like you did when you were listening, remember to be present. First, consider the context. Explain why you want to reconnect – for example, because the relationship is important to you. Remember: you're speaking because this is going to be good for both of you. Second, own your part. Tell the other person your part in the conflict. Don't justify yourself or become defensive. Be vulnerable if need be. The third step is empathizing with the other person, just like you did during LUFU. The fourth is validating the other person. It's similar to what you did during LUFU, except that during LUFU you validate how the other person feels. During SHORE you're validating what they're going through. In the fifth step, share the impact that the other person's behavior is having on you. Talk about facts or observations about that person's action or lack of action. Then about how it affected you, using "I feel" statements. As a sixth step, you can make a behavior change request. For example, if the person is habitually late, you could ask them to let you know in the future if they won't be on time. It helps if you start by saying something that you'll change in your behavior first. Then, talk about the lessons you've learned. You can also journal these and share them with the other person. What

lessons have you learned together? Finally, collaborate on agreeing how you can move forward. Create agreements, or a conflict plan. Using the LUFU and SHARE techniques, you and the other person should be getting to zero – or close to it.

Understanding the five most common conflicts helps you resolve them.

Have you ever noticed that, in long-term romantic relationships, after you've moved on from the honeymoon period, little things like your partner leaving the top off of the toothpaste tube begin to bug you? Or worse, you realize that your values are different, or that there are just things you don't like about the person? The same things happen in families, close friendships, and even the workplace. When you don't know how to work through conflict, resentments can fester. But thankfully, most conflicts boil down to five common scenarios – and when you understand them, you can work through them better. First, there are surface fights. These are fights over superficial things, like how you stack the dishwasher or not returning messages. Be aware that there may be something else underlying the conflict, so identifying what you're actually fighting about is key to resolution. Second, there are childhood projections. Projecting occurs when you take a negative or positive past experience and project it onto someone else in the present. If your father always used to criticize you, for example, you might have a tendency to think that other people do that in your adult life, too. When you realize this, acknowledge it to your partner by saying something like, "Sometimes I project onto you that you're criticizing me." Third, you might have security fights. Typically, one or both partners feel that the other isn't fully in the relationship. Sex and money fights often fall into this category. Maybe you're financially dependent on your partner, which makes you feel insecure. That feeling can lead to you not wanting to be intimate with your partner. Your fights will continue until you're both 100 percent committed to the relationship. Fourth, you may have value differences. You care deeply about your values – things like monogamy, parenting, and religion – but you notice that your partner doesn't share those values. You can overcome these differences by setting up the context – why you want to reconnect – and then agreeing to confront those differences. Listen to and understand each other, and be open to change or compromise. And fifth, resentments can occur when you try to change someone or someone tries to change you. If you don't change, that person resents you, and if you do, you resent that person. If you make your expectations of each other clear, you can negotiate and find a better outcome that suits both of you.

You may encounter roadblocks to reconciliation, but you can ease conflict by making agreements.

When you were a child, you learned how to deal with conflict by watching the adults around you. But now, you need to take responsibility for how you do it rather than relying on what you learned. Think for a moment about your own experience. Did adults comfort you when conflict happened? Did people own their part in the situation? Was there an apology, and who initiated it? Or did you simply find distractions such as sports, food, games, or friends to disconnect from the pain? There are many roadblocks

to reconnection that many adults use as coping strategies. They're not effective, and demonstrate either an inability or unwillingness to work through conflict. Attributing blame, for example, is simply a form of the posturing that you heard about in an earlier blink. It shifts the responsibility for and the solutions to the conflict to somewhere "over there." If, on the other hand, you blame yourself, that's a form of collapse. It results in you thinking everything is your fault and your responsibility, nobody else's. You can counteract both of these roadblocks by taking responsibility for your part in the conflict. And apologies? More often than not, they're rushed. They don't get to the heart of the problem – a lack of understanding between two people. But if you know when to use your apology, and it works for the other person, it can get you to zero. Often, though, it should wait until the end of a LUFU process. These roadblocks can be overcome by making agreements. These help you to stop being reactive and get you to zero faster. You should put these in place in your high-stakes relationships as soon as you can. For instance, a prenuptial agreement helps protect both parties in a divorce, and a coparenting agreement can clarify when parents can pick up and drop off their kids. In business, partners also need legal agreements to protect the parties if the partnership becomes contentious. You might also want to consider making an agreement to make clear agreements. You don't want to find yourself in conflict with a partner about what the agreement actually means! And, of course, it's essential that you both agree to own your own part in any future conflict and to be respectful of each other when communicating.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: When you're in conflict with someone who's one of your high-stakes relationships, get to zero by understanding how to listen and speak during conflict. Understand how you and the other person react during conflict, using NESTR meditation to help you deal with your own feelings. Then, by recognizing roadblocks to reconciliation and easing conflict by making agreements, you can get to zero faster. Actionable advice: Get outside help. If you're finding it difficult to get to zero with your partner, consider getting outside help. Facilitated sessions with a trained couples therapist will help you both move forward. Make sure you're both willing participants – if you or your partner isn't fully onboard, there's not a therapist in the world who can help you. And while you shouldn't expect miracles if you've been bottling up issues for years, even though it may take some time, your therapist can help you get to zero.