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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



*“If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.”*  
Marcus Aurelius

## When Conflict Shuts Us Down

Our brains and bodies are wired to bond. Without bonding, our species would ultimately become extinct. Some cultures, among them certain Asian cultures, strive for conflict-free living and prefer to smooth over bumps in the interest of harmony. They may do this by suppressing their emotions, and practicing extreme politeness to avoid unpleasant disagreements when faced with even the most ordinary “concerns.”

The problem here is that suppressing emotion isn't usually a successful way to handle issues that come up in everyday life. Sometimes a person can be thrown off-center and have their comfortable sense of bonding disrupted when a real conflict enters the picture. A situation may occur and they suddenly get flooded with emotion, such as fear, or anxiety, or they feel threatened. They may not even understand why.

At such times, our animal unconscious takes over; our thinking mind shuts down and stops processing the experience in its usual sensible, logical, normal way. The more passionate we are about our point of view, the greater the internal conflict. What has usually happened in these unexpected states of conflict is that something negative from our family of origin has been triggered by an encounter or event in our environment — including the workplace.

A real-life example is the case of Janice who showed up for her first day on a new job and found herself in an immediate conflict with her new boss, a calculating man who vacillated between obsessive micromanagement and a total lack of structure and direction. It was a shock to Janice who usually felt in control, capable and strong in other areas of her life, but in the presence of this new boss she never knew where she stood; she had to walk on eggshells. She was suddenly a basket case — shut down and withdrawn: “It started with a tremendous anxiety, an intense pressure, like I've been here before,” she said. It was the kind of reaction most commonly associated with family of origin dysfunction where a parental figure had the unspoken agenda of always having to be “right” and in control — a win/lose dynamics which makes connection and bonding almost impossible.

Janice's “Aha!” came after an unexpected scolding from her boss during which he'd yelled at her, “If you ever, ever, have a reason for somebody to come and talk to me about you again, don't come back to work!” She was devastated. “He didn't even give me a chance to discuss it or to explain,” she said.

That's when she realized she was once again facing her abusive father, but this time in the workplace! Janet recognized that her job environment was ancient history. "Once again, I was scared, jittery, and on the defensive. This was just like home! Although I tried to please him, my boss had a way of making me feel wrong, bad, and guilty about nothing."

### **Fixing the damage**

It may surprise you to learn that conflict can create change! It's very common for people to ask in a therapy situation how to reduce the level of conflict they are experiencing with another individual. And, yes, in a world in which there are so many conflicts going on, it would be ideal if we could *all* learn better "bonding" and develop the ability to identify and resolve conflict when it happens. If only we could nip it in the bud by sitting down and having a creative *win-win* dialogue to better understand, even welcome, differing perspectives that might lead to growth, change, and additional outcomes that could benefit all involved. Empathy is one such effective strategy that can open up a closed system of thinking. But this is a truly difficult concept for people who are engaged at either end of the pole. Both "pleasers" and "controllers" need to learn that other ways of living in the world are possible. . .

Failing that, there's always an additional alternative: *Suffering moments* like the ones Janice experienced can also lead to soul searching and change. After six months on the job, the strain finally got to Janice. Tired of the whole experience, tired of trying to "fix" it, tired of bouncing about in a sea of uncertainty and pain, she quit. She walked away. Not everything is fixable. And recognizing that fact is in itself a win.

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