

FEELINGS, NEEDS AND EMPATHY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Emotions are indicators of needs that are either fulfilled or unfulfilled. The feelings and needs of all the individuals involved are at the root of any conflict. Emotions have an enormous influence on every person, regardless of whether we show them or acknowledge them ourselves. The better able each person is to articulate and express his or her feelings and to take responsibility for them, the less harmful and more supportive they will be to peaceful and constructive relationships and interactions.

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: about 45 minutes, plus some time for discussion afterwards
- A pair exercise in which students explain to each other the emotions and needs involved in interpersonal conflicts
- The goal is to allow the students to create for themselves an emotion-based experience of nonviolent methods of argumentation

THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

The main aim of the exercise is to help students gain emotional experience of peaceful methods of debate. In this way they'll develop a greater appreciation of the significance of feelings and needs in conflicts of all sorts. It is because of the presence, abundance and strength of human emotions and needs that conflicts can be so difficult and time-consuming to solve. Self-knowledge and understanding are essential for creating peace and living in peace. With practice, everyone can become better at this.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED

The teacher asks the class to take a moment to think about the following quote, and then to say briefly what thoughts it brings to mind:

Conflict is an interactive situation between at least two sides (individuals or groups). At least one side considers something to be too important to give up to the other. At the same time, at least one side feels that one or more of the others prevents them from fulfilling their needs or hopes -Thomas Jordan

After this, get the students to think of examples of basic needs that all human beings have, regardless of culture or any other detail. Make a list of these. Discuss with or explain to the students the idea of universal human needs.

Examples of universal human needs include: food, clean air, clean water, physical protection / shelter, physical security, physical contact, exercise, autonomy (the freedom to make one's own choices and to have the means of acting on these), freedom from injury, trust, meaningfulness, creativity, self-expression, peace, balance and variety of experiences, beauty, inspiration, interdependence, wellbeing, acceptance, respect, support and encouragement, interpersonal warmth, emotional security, care, empathy, honesty, love, understanding, the need to be seen and heard, play / recreation, etc.

Discuss together the following:

- What happens if some universal human need is not met for some person or group, or country, or even on a broader level?
- What happens if several universal human needs go unfulfilled?
- How can one person, or group, or community, etc. help ensure that another's universal human needs are met?

Ask the students to then think about what emotions really are. These explanations and examples should be written up for all to see. Discuss the fact that many emotions and sensations are universal, that is, independent of culture, age, religion, specific situations, and so on. In general, emotions and sensations are based on fulfilled or unfulfilled needs.

Universal human emotions or sensations include being: energetic, pleasure, amazement, lovestruck, relaxed, attracted, inspired, hopeful, satisfied, impressed, surprised, lively, happy, relieved, optimistic, secure, horrified, shocked, taken aback, suspicious, disbelieving, bemused, disheartened, encouraged, mean, vicious, stingy, generous, careless, apathetic, fond, hardworking, lazy, bleak, terrified / petrified, nervous, annoyed, angry, sad, exhausted, bothered, embarrassed, troubled, overburdened, disappointed, miserable, irritable, grumpy, aggravated, etc.

The teacher might suggest to the class:

To be able to see a clear relationship between emotions and needs, emotions can be compared to the little light in a car that indicates the oil level. This light blinks when the oil is running low. That is, the light is not important in itself – what's important is what it signifies. By recognizing this signal at the right time and acting on it in the appropriate way (by putting in more oil), we can prevent the harm that would be caused by ignoring this need. Similarly, feelings and sensations are important signals of particular needs. For instance, when thirsty you need to drink; if you feel lonely, you might be in need of company; if you are bored, you might be in need of a change or of more meaningful tasks or relationships; and so on. The general point here is that if we don't listen to our feelings and sensations, we can miss vital signals that could help us feel better.

Needs and emotions are also intimately related to conflict. Emotions exert a great influence regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged and expressed. Ask the students to imagine that someone close to them is in a highly emotional state, as shown by their body language and expressions. But when asked, they do not necessarily admit to these feelings. Indeed in some situations it is best just to acknowledge the feelings that are "in the air" in a particular situation without trying to get the people involved to explicitly acknowledge them. In such cases, the best option is to keep the discussions explicitly focussed

not on emotions but on the needs involved in the situation.

In general, however, the better able people are to express their emotions and to take responsibility for them, the less likely these emotions are to be an obstacle to constructive cooperation.

PAIR EXERCISE

Explain to the class that one safe (non-provocative and non-threatening) way of getting a better idea of what another person is feeling in a given situation is to ask him or her questions along the lines of the following:

“Is it important for you that ?”

“Do you mean that what you really want is?”

“So is the key point here that ?”

- Divide the class into pairs.
- Ask each student to think of some conflict situation, either in his or her own life, community, or in some subject they’re studying (e.g. from history or geography). Get them to make notes on the conflict for 5-10 minutes.
- Using their notes, one student in each pair takes his or her turn to present what his or her chosen conflict. The listener may take notes. The presentation should last about 15 minutes. Then the two swap roles, and the second student’s presentations should last about the same time.
- Then the whole class talk together about the main things each student learned from the exercise.

This exercise could also be done by dividing the class into three-person groups. Each group contains one mediator who listens carefully to the other two students, who act as the negotiators. If done in this way the exercise is a bit more difficult than otherwise.

The aforementioned ways of obtaining additional information are not difficult, but putting them to use demands careful listening. (The goal is to listen for the background needs, either met or unmet, and the emotions with them). These methods are hard to remember to apply in real-life situations – in the “heat of the moment” – if they have never been practised.

The ideas presented in this document are based on Marshall B. Rosenberg’s writings about nonviolent communication.