

# 10 Steps to De-Escalate a Conflict

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***If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.*** Chinese proverb<sup>1</sup>

So it happened again. What started out as a reasonable discussion, turned into a shouting match, with little accomplished by either side. If anyone were listening, they would hear the same arguments being repeated over and over, using absolutes like, *you should, I won't, you never or I always*. One person may have disengaged with attention completely elsewhere. Perhaps an insult or two is being flung about. It's time to stop.

Few people enjoy this kind of conversation. We have been

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programmed for centuries for fight or flight. While that might have saved our ancestors from the woolly mammoth, it is overkill in discussions with family, friends or neighbors.

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One way to change gears is to say something like, "I want to

talk with you, but not like this." You might add, "Why don't we take a break and meet again later?" Here are some thoughts on how to return to a more productive conversation.

1. If you use the break time to hone your arguments, create scathing comebacks, rehash your point of view with your best friend, or further convince yourself you are right, you will end up exactly where you left off. Instead, use the time for some self-reflection.

2. Marc MacYoung writes that the first step is to de-escalate yourself.<sup>2</sup> Take a deep breath. Have you allowed

the other person to push your buttons? Do you like how you

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responded? What would you like to say and do differently? What do you need? Have you made your request clear and in a way the other can hear?

**Decide what the argument is really about.**

4. Decide what the argument is really about. Is it really the

subject at hand? What are the feelings behind the words? Recognize that we rarely change our minds as the result of clever arguments. More often, being accepted and understood as we are, frees up brain space, and allows the emotional flexibility to consider other options.

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6. Listen. Are you hearing the same argument over and over again? Most likely the other person hasn't felt heard. Acknowledging what

someone says doesn't mean that you agree, just that you understand. A good opener is

Flexible language can calm things down.

something like, "It sounds like you want \_\_\_, have I heard you correctly?"

5. Watch your language. Making judgments, accusations and speaking in absolutes, is a sure fire way to get an argument going. Flexible language may calm things down. Words that can end a diatribe and open a discussion include, *what if, could we try, would you be willing to, I wonder, I think, sometimes, it seems like, maybe.*<sup>3</sup>

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7. Understand. Appreciate the feelings and position of the other.

Withhold judgment. Allow others to have their feelings, whether they make sense to you or not.

3. Take a close look at your intention for this conversation. Personal story: I had many political arguments in my life before thinking about what I was trying to accomplish. The answer? To prove the other party wrong. Their intention was

similar, resulting in lots of sound and fury with absolutely no

What is the best way to convey your intention?.

progress. Assuming your intention is honorable, what is the best way to convey it to the other person?

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8. Be respectful and expect respect.

Disrespectful or abusive language is never acceptable. If you fear violence, get out now. Call the Friendship Center for support and help with making a plan to leave the relationship.

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Remember wooly mammoths are extinct.

9. Let your voice and body language express an attitude

of curiosity. Uncross your legs & arms. Relax. Remember wooly mammoths are extinct. It is safe to put your spear down. Think about what you like or admire about the other person.

10. Ask for what you need. Be clear and non-accusatory. Use one of the

famous “I” statements. “When x happens, I feel \_\_\_\_\_. Instead, I would like us to \_\_\_\_\_.”

While it doesn’t take much to get an argument going, there are many ways to tone it down. The next time you are going around and around about the same

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old subject, try calming yourself down, and spend some time reflecting on the real issue. Listen. Be

respectful, understanding and curious about the other person’s feelings and opinions. Examine your intentions and the real issue behind the conversation.

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Improving communication helps us understand and be understood. It gets us more of what we want, with fewer hard feelings and less drama. It improves relationships and makes them stronger. If you have trouble doing this on your

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own, get some help. A religious leader, family member, therapist

or mediator can help keep you on track.

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<sup>1</sup>@MindfullyChange

<sup>2</sup><http://www.conflictcommunications.com/deescalation.htm>

<sup>3</sup>DeJong, William. (1994). *Building the peace: The resolving conflict creatively program*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

