

Conflict and Forgiveness

Summary

This topic covers conflict resolution and prevention, dealing with anger, internal conflict, the benefits of forgiveness, and healthy reactions to hurt/general conflict. It is backed up with hadiths and Quran.

Types of Conflict

Conflict is a part of our culture. Conflict is common on TV shows and films; a drama is usually popular if it involves conflict. Most of Shakespeare's most popular plays, such as Macbeth, Hamlet, and Romeo and Juliet involve conflict, both inner and external. Superhero films like Superman, Ironman, Wonder Woman, The Black Widow, and Black Panther etc all have conflict as central to their plots: the battle between good and evil.

Conflict is also very common in real life. Where do we find conflict? We find it within families, amongst friends; in workplaces/colleges. Sadly, family conflicts can go on for several years or even decades, with more than one generation being dragged into the fray. Often the conflict is based on relatively minor issues that are blown out of proportion, such as a rude comment or the refusal of marriage within the extended family. However, it can also be the result of more serious issues such as bullying or abuse. Similarly, there can be conflict within a marriage for various reasons: tiredness, not feeling appreciated, misunderstandings and even emotional manipulation or domestic violence. Conflict in friendships may be based on misunderstandings and being let down but can be more serious when they are based on manipulation (toxic friendships).

In workplaces there are often power struggles as colleagues may see each other as threats to their advancement, rather than people they can collaborate with. They may also be against colleagues due to racist or sexist beliefs. As a result, they may use political tactics such as withholding information, spreading damaging rumours about someone, or deliberately confusing others by using information overload and using terminology which no one else understands.

There is also conflict between political parties; different factions within a country (civil wars) and between nations. Arguably, the British first past the post parliamentary system, which results in us having two main political parties, is adversarial rather than collaborative. The role of the Opposition is to, as the name suggests, oppose the government to make it accountable, not to seek the common good, so it is rare that they concur. Conflict between nations can be in many forms such as trade disputes, propaganda wars, and invasions such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Wars usually involve demonising the Other.

Religious sectarianism is another expression of conflict. Amongst Muslims, this is based on rigidity - believing that only one's own interpretation of Islam is correct and discounting the possibilities of difference of opinion on issues. Often fabrications about the Other (Shia, Sufi, Salafi) are circulated, adding to the tension to the extent that some declare other Muslims outside the fold of Islam. So, we need to be wary about negative comments about the beliefs and practices of other Muslims, as these comments may be untrue.

Racism is another specific type of conflict: a form of oppression. Racism has many forms. On an interpersonal level it can range from racist jokes, to abuse, to even acts of violence. On a structural level, negatives stereotypes and misinformation about people from Black, Asian and Arab backgrounds etc are perpetuated through films and dramas, the media and social media, the education system and by politicians. Racism is also apparent in the legal system, illustrated by the disproportionate numbers of Black people in prison.

Is all conflict negative? It depends on the intention and how it is expressed. Standing up against oppression using peaceful means is praiseworthy, such as peaceful demonstrations, economic boycotts or highlighting discrimination through sympathetic media outlets. Similarly, whistleblowing in an organisation is also positive as it can prevent abusive happening again to oneself or others. Nations defending themselves against another's aggression is another example of positive conflict. However, unacceptable methods such as violent rioting, even for a good cause, is not allowed as people and property are harmed.

Anger and Conflict

Conflict is often linked to anger, when angry people hurt others physically and emotionally. If not curbed, this anger can result in resentment; the desire for revenge and even gloating about the other's problems.

But is all anger negative? Imam Al Ghazali stated that anger needs to be controlled, not eliminated. This is because anger can be either positive or negative depending on the context. Anger for the sake of your ego is clearly negative, however anger for the sake of God is not. The Prophet (pbuh) never became angry when someone mistreated him, but remained patient. However, for the sake of God, his face became red with anger. Once, he became angry when someone said that they came later for Fajr because the imam made the salah too long.

Another time, he became angry when he heard that one of the Sahaba had said a racist remark to Bilal.

Sheikh Hamza Yusuf states that *'Without anger there are many things that would not have been achieved. Anger can be a positive motivation'* (Yusuf 2004: 102).

Without righteous anger, oppression would prevail. However, we should be careful to channel it in a constructive rather than destructive way.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

(William Blake, *A Poison Tree*)

Discussion point: What is the message of this poem about anger? Do you agree with this message?

This poem teaches us that anger needs to be expressed, otherwise it grows. If someone expresses their hurt in a constructive way, then this anger is released from them. However, if someone hides their anger, it will grow as they dwell on it and they can become deceitful hiding it. The poet says later in the poem that this results in a poisoned apple being produced which one deceitfully presents to their adversary which destroys them. The idea of expressing one's anger constructively to the one who has hurt you links to reconciliation, which we will return to later.

Islam however teaches us that the best believers are those who can control their anger and forgive the one who has hurt them. The Prophet (pbuh) said:

'Whoever suffers an injury and forgives the person God will raise his status to a higher degree and remove one of his sins.'

(Tirmidhi)

The Prophet also said that:

'The strong person is not the one who overcomes others through his physical strength but rather the one who controls himself when he becomes angry.'

(Bukhari)

The Prophet also emphasised the importance of not becoming angry. A man asked him for some advice. The Prophet replied, *"Do not become angry!" and he repeated it several times, saying, "Do not become angry!"* (Bukhari).

We should seek God's protection from Shaytan if we become angry. Shaytan likes to encourage us to continue to become even more angry, so that there will be disastrous results. Imam Ibn Daqiq al-'Id mentioned three



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results of anger: saying falsehoods, committing sins, and developing hatred. Developing hatred can lead to other sins such as backbiting or slander, ridicule, oppression and breaking relations with others.

Ibn Rajab stated that anger is the root of all evil and one should not respond to provocations, as the Prophet said, *“Whenever anyone of you is angry, he should remain silent.” and he repeated this three times* (Ahmad). Ibn Rajab added that to prevent becoming angry, one should develop positive characteristics such as patience, humbleness, and forgiveness.

Other practical advice to help you control your anger is illustrated in the following hadith:

‘When one of you becomes angry while he is standing, he should sit down. If his anger is not repressed, he should lie down.’

(Abu Dawud).

Ibn Rajab explains this hadith by saying that someone who is standing when angry is far more likely to take revenge than someone who is seated, and lying down makes it even less likely that they will do so.

Internal Conflict

Discussion Point: What do you think internal conflict means? What examples of internal conflict can you think of?

Not all conflict is external to us, as we can also have inner conflict. Inner conflict can also have positive and negative aspects. We are all tempted by the whispers of Shaytan, who makes sins look attractive. He also tries to keep us away from good deeds with excuses such as: we do not have the time, they are too difficult, we won't fit in with others if we do them, etc. The more we dwell on these whispers, the more likely we will enact them. Thus, as Ibn Qayyim pointed out, we need to nip them in the bud when they first appear by focusing on positive thoughts, such as the remembrance of God.

Our nafs (desires) also tempt us to overeat, to be lazy, to become angry, to want popularity (followers on Instagram, Twitter, Snap Chat, Tik Tok...) etc.

The whispers of Shaytan and our nafs are in conflict with our conscience. The latter encourages us to keep away from bad/selfish acts and to do good deeds. Sometimes the conscience is victorious but sometimes Shaytan and our nafs are. When the latter two are victorious then we need to sincerely repent to God and try to live by the teachings of Islamic values again.

Causes of Conflict

Discussion Point: What do you think are the causes of conflict?

Conflicts have many causes, which include the following:

Power: Conflict is often linked to a desire for power and influence: prestige, physical power or economic power. Most wars are caused by a mixture of nationalism/imperialism and greed for another country's natural resources. Some people want power for selfish reasons and are willing to obtain it by oppressing others, such as controlling friends, abusive teachers, and some politicians.

Superiority complex: Linked to power are beliefs based on superiority to others. Racism, sexism and discrimination against people with disabilities or mental health issues are based on people viewing others as inferior to themselves.



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Ego and Satan: Our ego (nafs) can lead to conflict if we do not believe that our opinions can be wrong. Our ego can prompt us to commit selfish/inconsiderate behaviour which can lead to conflict. It can also be linked to behaviours such as demanding others show us respect. Satan also whispers to us, i.e. plants negative thoughts in our minds.

Misunderstandings: Everyone is different; we tend to interpret events based on our own individual prior experiences, which may lead to conflict if the other person has a very different understanding of the same event. Misunderstandings can also be the result of poor communication: someone may not communicate a matter clearly or may not have been listening carefully. There are different levels of listening, the deepest being listening with your eyes as well as your ears i.e. watching someone's body language, including facial expressions, which may contradict what they are saying. Not having the correct information about something (fake news) and having insufficient information about something can also result in conflict.

Ignorance: People may be ignorant of good manners and as a result can be rude or harsh, which can lead to conflict. People may be ignorant of other viewpoints on an issue or other's life experiences/culture and religious beliefs/values etc which can also result in conflict.

Personality clashes: There are some people that we get on with and others we do not due to different personalities.

Injustice: People can stand up against being treated unjustly.

Preventing Conflict

Discussion point: How can we prevent conflict?

- Control our anger. The Prophet advised us to make wudu if we are angry; to become stationary if we are walking; sit down if we are standing or lie down and go to sleep if we are sitting down.
- Make excuses for the other's behaviour and try to forgive them.
- Regularly evaluate our own behaviour/intentions and make repentance.
- Educate ourselves about others' cultures/beliefs.
- Never stop broadening and deepening our understanding of Islam.
- Remember God more throughout the day and check our intentions before doing acts.

Do you have to accept an apology? Yes. The Prophet said that whoever doesn't accept an apology has the sin of someone who unjustly takes another's property.

How should we behave towards those who have harmed us?

Discussion point: How do you respond when someone hurts your feelings?

Islam teaches that there are three viable responses to someone harming us. Firstly, we can seek justice in this life but not revenge. Secondly, we can leave the person to the justice of God in the hereafter. Thirdly, we can forgive them. It is usually better to forgive, but the other two are still allowed. Forgiving means not retaliating nor wishing evil upon a person who has wronged you, nor holding a grudge against them. A sign of sincere forgiveness is if you can respond to the harm by doing something good back to them.

'Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with that which is better and your enemy will become close as an old and valued friend.'

(Quran, 41:34)



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The Prophet through his example showed us the importance of forgiveness. When he travelled to Ta'if to convey the message of Islam, he was physically injured, humiliated and abused by the people there. However, in response he said, *'O God, guide these people, because they did not know what they were doing'* (Bukhari). Similarly, when he victoriously entered Makkah, he had the power to punish the people who had persecuted him and his followers but instead he was merciful: *'No blame on you today. Go, you are all free.'* The latter is an example of reconciliation. If possible, it is good to make peace with the people we have had conflict with. Sometimes it may be good to express, to them or to someone else, the pain we have experienced as a form of self-healing.

Forgiveness does not mean that you should be naïve. If someone has let you down you, by telling others something that you wanted to remain private, then you should be careful about trusting them again. Similarly, forgiveness does not mean being passive. For example, in relation to domestic violence, if the person being abused continues to passively forgive the abuser, then they could be putting themselves and their children in fatal danger. If this cannot be positively resolved, then they should leave this relationship - this is sometimes easier said than done however, due to emotional and economic factors.

Conflicts can also occur in friendships. No one is perfect, and sometimes we are let down by our friends; occasionally our friends may tease us or insult us. If these things do not happen regularly, then we can make allowances for our friend and forgive them. However, if this is happening regularly then, arguably, this is a toxic friendship. If these issues cannot be resolved, then we should distance ourselves from them, otherwise it can have a negative impact on our self-esteem.

“Help your brother whether he is an oppressor or he is someone who is oppressed.” People asked, “O God’s Messenger! It is alright to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?” The Prophet replied, “By preventing him from oppressing others.”

(Bukhari)

Discussion point: How is this relevant to our lives today?

Conclusion

Discussion point: How can practising forgiveness be good for us?

When we forgive others, we attain inner peace as we become closer to God and we remove the related negative thoughts produced by the whispers of Satan and our nafs (ego). Surah An-Nas teaches us the importance of seeking God’s protection from the sneaking whisperer, Satan.

Psychologists have stated that if we do not learn to forgive others, then anger builds up inside us which negatively affects other relationships. However, being able to forgive can increase one’s sympathy towards others who are in the same situation we were in.

Finally, we need to be able to differentiate between positive and negative conflict. We need to channel our anger in a constructive manner and not let anger control us. If we engage in conflict for a positive cause, we need to check that our intentions and actions are in accordance with Islam. Usually, it is better to forgive - forgiveness can accompany standing up for justice. Forgiving others is not a denial of the wrong they did to us and the hurt they caused us, but it is a means for our spiritual growth, as we judge the action rather than the person.

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Handout

Conflict is very common in real life. Where do we find conflict? We find it within families, amongst friends and in workplaces/colleges. There is also conflict between political parties and between nations. Religious sectarianism is another expression of conflict, as is racism.

Conflict can be positive. Standing up against oppression using peaceful means is praiseworthy, such as peaceful demonstrations or economic boycotts. Nations defending themselves against the aggression of another is an example of positive conflict.

Conflict can be external to ourselves or within us. Inner conflict is between our conscience and the whispers of Satan/our nafs (desires).

Conflict is often linked to anger. When angry, people can hurt others physically and emotionally.

The Prophet (pbuh) said:

'Whoever suffers an injury and forgives the person God will raise his status to a higher degree and remove one of his sins.'

(Tirmidhi)

The Prophet only had righteous anger. He became angry when he heard that one of the Sahabah had said a racist remark to Bilal.

How should we behave towards those who have harmed us?

Islam teaches that there are three viable responses to someone harming us. First, to seek justice in this life but not revenge. Second, to leave the person to the justice of God in the hereafter. Third, to forgive them. It is usually better to forgive, but the other two responses are still allowed.

Forgiving means not retaliating nor wishing evil upon a person who has wronged you, nor holding a grudge against them. A sign of sincere forgiveness is if you can respond to the harm by doing something good back to the person.

'Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with that which is better and your enemy will become close as an old and valued friend.'

(Quran, 41:34)

Could the act of forgiveness actually be good for us?

When we forgive others, we attain inner peace as we become closer to God and we remove negative thoughts produced by the whispers of Satan and our nafs. Psychologists have stated that if we do not learn to forgive others, then anger builds up inside us, negatively affecting other relationships.

However, being able to forgive can increase one's sympathy towards others who are in the same situation that we were in. Finally, forgiving others is not a denial of the wrong they did to us and the hurt they caused us, but is a means for our own spiritual growth, as we judge the action rather than the person.