Effective Communication—Managing Conflict

Effective communication can help develop positive relationships. Sometimes we have interactions with others that don't go as well as we would like. We might feel misunderstood but are able to move on with relative ease. At other times we can feel personally attacked causing us to feel angry and lash out or withdraw in fear. The strength of what we feel may make it difficult to hear what someone is trying to say to us. In extreme situations, such confrontation can feel threatening to our overall well-being and functioning.

Some common situations where students find themselves at risk of conflict with others are:

- Differences with roommates over house rules
- Disagreements with parents' wishes or advice
- Miscommunications with boyfriends/girlfriends/partners
- Challenges from university staff
- Clashes of opinion in discussions with peers or academics which feel personal

We can often prevent minor conflicts from escalating by changing the way we communicate.

Conflict Can Be an Opportunity, Not Just a Threat

There are three common reasons why people get into conflict:

- Not communicating clearly
- Not listening respectfully
- Having different needs or interests than the other person

Guidelines for Good Communication: A Three-step Process

Send	Send clear messages. Be aware of your verbal communication/tone and body language. Think about what you want to say and how it may be perceived.
Receive	What is heard is part fact and part feeling, so try to be clear on both levels. When you are listening, pay attention to both facts and feelings.
Acknowledge	Check that you have communicated what you intended by summarizing what you have perceived. Ask questions to seek clarification if parts of the message seem unclear.

Respect the Other Person's Needs as Well as Your Own

You have valid concerns which need addressing as does the person with whom you are in conflict.

Tackle the Problem Directly With the Other Person

Communicate directly with the other person in the conflict. Communicating through others can escalate the conflict or make further misunderstandings more likely.

Avoid having friends, family and peers take sides. Also, try to keep the conflict out of the public eye.

Separate the Problem from the Person

Keep the problem separate from the person. Avoid making personal attacks that embarrass/ridicule the other person.

Speak Without Interrupting Each Other

Allow the other person to have the opportunity to finish what they have to say. This will help avoid further misunderstanding and ensure that there is agreement about everything that has been said so far before moving on.

Win-win Solutions

Look for mutually satisfying agreements—one-sided offers tend not to work. Participating in negotiations where the goal is a win-win solution is possible and helpful.

Four Steps to Resolving Conflict

These suggested steps incorporate the guidelines above and can help resolve conflicts:

1. If you are in public and find yourself in a conflict, stop and ask to meet the other person in a neutral, private and safe setting at a mutually convenient time. This will allow each of you to speak confidentially without creating a scene and without being interrupted.
2. Look at and listen to each other so each person feels heard and understood and has their views acknowledged. It's worth taking time to hear the other person's viewpoint.
3. Offer options with an open mind and think of as many possible ways of meeting the expressed concerns, needs and interests of both people. Work towards a "win-win" solution.
4. Conclude negotiations with agreements that are specific and satisfy both of you.

Finally, if you don't reach agreement, don't be afraid to try again another time. It can sometimes be better to try to resolve a conflict bit by bit by allowing time to think and rest.