

Conflict

Competitive or opposing action of incompatibles; antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons). A fight or battle, controversy or quarrel, discord of action, feeling or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles.



Abuse is NOT Conflict

To treat in a harmful, injurious or offensive way. Language that condemns or vilifies, usually unjustly, intemperately and angrily; to speak insultingly, harshly, and unjustly to or about; revile; malign.

Abuse includes a power differential, in which one partner is bigger, stronger, wealthier (or controls the money), of a higher or more dominant class/gender/race/sexual orientation, higher level of authority, etc, and uses this power to control the victim in some way: forcing or coercing through aggressive or threatening verbal, physical, emotional, financial, psychological, sexual, spiritual or legal tactics.

Abuse

Abuse frequently looks like conflict. Without understanding the dynamics of abuse, it is easy to see a situation involving two parties as conflict. Abusers know how to act in front of others and would prefer to present the situation as conflict since then they are not held accountable for abuse, and they can keep their power over their victim. Those in authority have the responsibility to properly diagnose a situation. If they make the wrong diagnosis, there can be devastating effects on the victim(s) especially and on society in general.

For example, if a child is being bullied, the situation can be helped by an adult holding the bully accountable or it can be worsened by an adult telling the two parties to get along. The victim will have lost their voice, feeling more disempowered, and the bully will be emboldened to increase bullying. Abuse has similar dynamics but is harder to detect, since there are a plethora of covert tactics that may be missed. Understanding whether the situation is conflict (a fair fight) or abuse (extreme bullying) takes discernment, openness and an understanding of abuse dynamics.

What happens if an abusive relationship is diagnosed as:

	Conflict	Abuse
If/then	Sends the message that the couple doesn't get along.	Sends the message that his behavior is unacceptable.
Victim	Increases her fear; loses her voice, support system and sense of safety; is looked at as a liar; not believed next time she speaks out about abuse. Continues trying to adjust her own behavior to avoid abuse. Feels abandoned by systems who should have helped her. May become depressed, isolated, experience physical symptoms; may feel guilt, self-blame. Loss of family, friends who blame her. Pressure from others to get over it, get back together with him, forgive and forget. Advice to understand him better, learn to communicate better, focus on fixing herself.	Feels supported and believed; grows stronger and better able to stand up against further abuse; learns her voice matters. Receives understanding and support. Increase in self-efficacy and self-worth.
Abuser	Increases his* power, and his abuse. Feels justified in his anger; uses "conflict" as an excuse for more abuse. He blames his victim even more, enabled by the view that this "conflict" is also her fault. Sees no reason to get treatment.	Is held accountable for his behavior; has no basis to continue blaming his victim; may try subtler ways of abusing; has less power over victim than before. May be willing to get treatment.
Their children	Receive the message that abuse is a two person problem; feel confused and unsure how to process what they've witnessed. Often blame victim for the situation; may side with abuser out of fear, seeing his power and society's reaction.	Receive the message that people are responsible for their own behavior, that victim blaming is not okay. May feel anger toward abuser and support victim. Have a sense of clarity about situation.
Their relationship	Abuse (seen as conflict) increases; no chance of a mutually respectful relationship.	Relationship may be saved.

What happens if an abusive relationship is diagnosed as:

	Conflict	Abuse
Girls	Learn to blame themselves; abuse is women's fault. Often leads to low self-esteem, depression, self-harming behaviors or acting out.	Are empowered to speak out about abuse; don't blame self for actions of others; increase in self-esteem and self-value.
Boys	Learn to blame the victim; often leads to harming others. Learn to identify with the abuser, using power over others.	Accept responsibility for their own actions rather than blaming others. Learn to see women as equally valuable.
Other victims	Learn that if you speak up about abuse, you will be blamed, punished and not helped. They stay silent out of fear.	Learn that help is available and they will be believed and supported if they speak out. They feel safer.
Other abusers	Emboldened to continue abusing, knowing they will not be held accountable.	Realize that they could be held accountable; decrease abusive behaviors.
Bystanders	Afraid of "taking sides," they refuse to help the victim or hold the abuser accountable. Focus on victim's behavior, attempting to find what she is doing wrong. Downplay or disregard abuser's behavior. Give suggestions for how to get along; reinforce abuser's belief that his behavior is her fault, and further reinforce victim's self-blame and isolation. She's already been walking on eggshells to avoid angering him, adjusting her behavior constantly. Now she's given more things she should try.	Understand that the problem is his behavior; have a clearer understanding of how to help; show support and ask about victim's well-being; help hold abuser accountable by asking about his progress regarding treatment; make supportive, appropriate comments.
Society in general	Reinforces victim blaming.	Reinforces responsibility for own behavior.