

Dear Val: How Do I Cope with Conflict at Work?

By Val Nelson

Dear Val,

I sat through a meeting this week during which a client and my boss had a very strongly worded, aggressive disagreement. The client wasn't raising his voice, but his words, tone, and body language were very combative, and my boss was trying to defend our position against his.

I have a hard time with this type of conflict: that type of aggressive tone makes me really jittery and produces an adrenaline-fueled "flight" reaction. I spent a lot of the meeting hoping it wasn't obvious how much I was shaking.

I also avoid interrupting others in a conversation, so fast-paced arguments make it extra hard for me to know what to do. My instinct is to avoid getting involved and to not draw more attention/ire toward myself.

In situations like these, I often feel that if I open my mouth, I might start crying, which I know is read as extremely unprofessional and is something I particularly would want to

avoid when I am already being dismissed as young, inexperienced, and insufficiently skilled at my job.

However, sometimes I know there is information that I have or perspectives I can bring that would help with the disagreement if I could only figure out how to insert myself into the conversation.

What strategies can I as an introvert use when I need to jump into a contentious/agitated situation in a professional setting?

Jittery in Massachusetts

Dear Jittery,

Oh, my—I could practically feel the jitters with you while I was reading your letter. Conflict can kick up our self-preservation instincts such as fight, flight, or freeze. It's particularly tough in a work situation where we can't easily run away and we have our professional reputation at stake. This is a big challenge for anyone.

Introverts' challenges in conflict situations

You might feel the stress of conflicts more than the extroverts around you would.

High sensitivity and introversion tend to go together. You're likely especially sensitive to the emotional energy in the room.

It's also common for introverts to hate the idea of interrupting. It just seems to go against our grain, maybe because we hate being interrupted or because we value listening so much. But having a say in a conflict often requires interrupting.

What's more, introverts prefer to think carefully before speaking. It's hard to get our thoughts together quickly enough to jump into the fray. We can get caught in analysis paralysis, especially during conflict, and tension can build inside us.

Keep in mind that avoiding conflict will only *increase* your discomfort with conflict and foster your original frustrations. *In the long term, the more comfortable path in dealing with conflict is facing it.*

Your hidden strengths for handling conflict

The way you told your story tells me that you value being considerate, or else this wouldn't bother you so much. That puts you in a good position to be able to speak up effectively and respectfully. In fact, I suspect you did well in that situation even if you felt messy on the inside.

Because introverts tend to think carefully before speaking, they are often good at incorporating many perspectives and

imagining new solutions. Your insights are needed, no matter how young or inexperienced you might feel!

Getting used to speaking up

I used to be very conflict-avoidant, never wanting to draw attention to myself. Gradually, I found my voice during conflicts, but I still have my nervous moments. Everyone does—no matter how calm they look.

In order to find more ease and make yourself heard in the midst of conflict, you need to:

- a. manage your physical and emotional stress,
- b. risk speaking up even if your thoughts aren't perfectly formed, and
- c. accept that sometimes you need time to think and that it's okay to ask for it.

Skill-building tools

1. **Remember that your feelings are normal.** When you're stepping into new territory, jitters are almost inevitable. Only *after* we act will the jitters get quieter.
2. **Prepare physically.** Before going into a potentially stressful meeting, release your physical tension. A brisk walk around the block does wonders. Taking three slow deep breaths is also surprisingly helpful (or six breaths on a tough day). Keep a list of your favorite calming methods to draw on before stressful events.

3. **Prepare mentally.** Visualize speaking up, and imagine the positive effect your words have on the conflict. Tune into that positive energy. When you imagine pleasure, the mind perceives it as if it were really happening, thus relaxing your body. The body responds to our imagination. (Imagine biting into a lemon, and notice how your mouth physically reacts to it!)
4. **Gather your thoughts.** Write down what you want to say. This will help you get your thoughts together before you speak and help you relax because you're probably worried you'll forget your words when it's your turn. Yes, you can even look at your notes while you speak. A little awkwardness is okay.
5. **Take a break.** Whenever things get heated in a discussion, suggest a five-minute break. Tense moments rarely produce anything useful. And often, it's the quiet one in the room who can sense when a time-out is needed!
6. **Raise your hand.** Accept that sometimes interrupting is necessary, and it's not as rude as you think. People are often grateful for it! In some cases, a time-out hand signal works, and it can be easier to interrupt with a gesture than with words.
7. **Practice.** Look for opportunities to practice these methods in less scary situations, e.g., when interrupting a trusted friend. It could still feel a little uncomfortable but not as scary as when you have to do it in a work situation. You can build your confidence gradually as you practice on the smaller stuff. Notice how it goes and how you feel. Practicing taking risks when dealing with conflict will change your brain

over time and make you more mentally and emotionally resilient.

8. **Accept your humanity.** Let's say you do start to speak at work and the tears do happen. *Then what?* This has happened to me at least a few times. Yep, it felt awkward, but after my tears, I was able to discuss what I needed and repair any messy spots left. I have finally come to terms with the fact that tears happen. I bet you can do the same. Choose one or two of these techniques before your next group meeting, and see how it goes. The more you apply these tools, the easier these situations will become. You'll see that when you speak up, you will not only survive but you will also find that your fear will have lessened, and you'll also enjoy the relief and rewards of having a say.

If the issue of conflict is a big one for you, I highly recommend learning [Nonviolent Communication \(NVC\)](#).

What works for you?

Dear readers, I welcome hearing your thoughts below. What works for *you* in handling conflict situations or tense work meetings?

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