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“Conflict Resolution in Nine Easy Steps”

(an abstract from Coleman McCarthy in *The Baltimore Sun*)

1. Define the conflict: If defined objectively, rather than subjectively, which is how most of us do it, conflict means only this: We need a new way of doing things, the old way has failed. If two sides can define what they are fighting about, the chances increase that misperceptions will be clarified.
2. It is not *you against me*; it is *you and me against the problem*. The problem is the problem. In a battle, even if one side does win, the first reaction of the loser is, “I want a rematch. I will come back with meaner words, harder fists, and bigger bombs. Then the enemy will learn, then they will be good, and we will have peace forever.” This is an illusion, but few can give it up. By focusing on the problem, rather than on the person with the problem, we can create a climate of collaboration, not of competition.
3. List the relationship’s many shared concerns and needs, as compared to one shared separation. In Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, a character is described “He was strong in the broken places.” All of us have been, or are being, or will be broken by life. If we are strong in the broken places, chances for mending increase. They will continue to increase if the strengths of the relationship - shared concerns and needs - are given more attention than the unshared separation.
4. When people have fought, do not ask what happened. This is an irrelevant question. They will answer with their own version of what happened, almost always self-satisfying. The better question is “What did you do?” This elicits facts, not opinions. Misperceptions are then more likely to be clarified, not prolonged.
5. Work on active listening, not passive hearing. Conflicts escalate when partners try to talk more than listen and then only listen as a time-out for verbal re-arming. Listening well is an act of caring. If you are a good listener, you have many friends. If you are a poor listener, you have many acquaintances.
6. Choose a place to resolve the conflict, not the battleground itself. Armies tend to sign peace treaties far from the war zone. Too many emotions are in the battleground. In some schools around the country, peace rooms are in place. Anyone who has been fighting automatically knows to go to the peace room at the time set, where they will find mediators and classmates who have been trained in nonviolent conflict resolution. Schools with peace rooms see lower rates of violence.
7. Start with what’s doable. Restoration of peace cannot be done quickly. If it took a long time for a dispute to develop, it will take time to end it. Work on one small, rather

than many large, doables. Almost always, the conflict began with something small; the first hurt is usually a small wound.

8. Develop forgiveness skills. Many people of large minds are willing to say after the conflict “I’m willing to bury the hatchet.” To themselves they add: “But I’m going to mark exactly where I bury it, just in case I need to dig it up for the next fight.” Forgiveness looks forward, vengeance backward.

9. Purify our hearts. This is merely a way of telling ourselves “I need to get my own messy life in order before I can instruct others in how to live.” Do these nine steps of nonviolence always work? No. Sometimes the conflict partners are so emotionally wounded or ideologically hidebound that nothing can stop the violence. But large numbers of conflicts can be resolved or managed without continuing the wounding.