## 5 Common Beliefs about Conflict that DON’T work or are Outdated

## 1. Venting is an effective way to reduce anger and aggression

While venting anger may feel cathartic, venting anger doesn’t purge aggression from your system or improve psychological state. In fact, venting is more likely to increase anger and aggressiveness than reduce them.  Decades of research on the subject is clear: You should not vent anger yourself, nor should you invite or support others’ venting.

Why does the venting myth persist? It persists because proponents aren’t up to speed on the research and because venting anger feels good. But, as respected anger and venting researcher Dr. Brad Bushman points out, “Feeling good is not the acid test of whether something works or not.” After all, taking street drugs and getting drunk feel good, too.

## 2. It took both of us to get into conflict, so it’ll take both of us to resolve it

Resigning your fate to whatever the other person will or won’t do not only leaves you needlessly stuck, but also hands over your power to them. Why on earth would you do that?

The truth is that there are all sorts of things you can do to free yourself from conflict’s claws, whether or not the other person participates.  Don’t confuse conflict resolution with conflict conversation. Collaborative problem-solving can be a beautiful thing indeed, but it is a shame to require it in order to find peace of mind again. Take your power back and do some of the many things that are within your grasp. Use these articles to get started:

## 3. The best way to resolve conflict is to focus on what’s wrong

Problem-solving by figuring out how to fix or address what isn’t working is one way to resolve conflict. But it’s not the *only* way and I’m comfortable out on a limb saying it isn’t always the best way, either. There’s an entire body of work (Appreciative Inquiry, for instance) built on the premise that doing more of what works can have as good as, and an even greater impact than fixing what doesn’t work. And the illumination of what is working can also empower people to play an active role in what happens going forward.  For people in an ongoing personal or professional relationship, the best way to resolve conflict may well be to focus on building sequential small successes over time. These include small collaborative work tasks that are likely to bring out their best together, and simple shared activities.

## 4. Being critical, angry, and defensive is bad news for relationships

While few of us want to hang out with someone who is regularly critical, angry, and defensive, these behaviors actually have only negligible effect on the likelihood of resolution after conflict. The better predictor of resolution is the degree of satisfaction with the relationship in general.  People in satisfying relationships may well have negative communication and big conflict, but the effect is mostly harmless because big conflict is usually followed by big resolution. People in unhappy relationships, however, tend to have big conflict and big trouble resolving it, regardless of the type of communication used.  Why do we get our knickers in a twist about criticism, anger, and defensive behavior during conflict? Because it feels awful to be on the receiving end of it, to be sure. It’s certainly not behavior we want to experience.  But if we want to figure out how to weather the big relationship storms better, we’d probably be better off figuring out how to make the relationship more satisfying in general (in other words, how to make it more satisfying overall, not just vis à vis communication) than focusing our attention on the other person’s irritating behavior during conflict.

## 5. We’ve already considered all the possible solutions

When someone calls me about a conflict that’s got them good and stuck, this one comes up a lot. They’ll say, “I can’t see how you can help us. We’re bright people. If there was a solution that could work, we’d have thought of it already.” They’re right…they are bright people. And any mediator reading this knows they’re also wrong. I may say to my clients, “It’s not that I’m any smarter, it’s that I come into your conversation with fresh eyes and ears.”  There are so many reasons that viable and good options for resolution are invisible or inadequately considered during conflict. Here are just a few from a long list: “Reflexive loops” cause us to draw conclusions based on partial data and get trapped in those conclusions. There’s tons of good research about the ways that our expectations inform what we notice. Failing to adequately understand the problem (because we’re sure we already know) can lead to a solution gap. How we frame a problem influences how we solve it. It is very likely that there are good solutions if you know how to approach the problem in a way that they become visible to you.

               As always, feel free to pass along these messages.

Warm regards,

Kristine