



## How to break the cycle of stress and conflict in times of crisis

Anna Shields, Consensio, April 21, 2020



**With exquisite timing, April is stress awareness month and the current COVID-19 global pandemic is potentially one of the most stressful situations many of us will ever face.**

Stress can have a significant impact on us, both physically and mentally. It can also affect our thinking and behaviour, which makes us more likely to get into conflict situations.

In turn, being in conflict can be very stressful, which affects our health and wellbeing. So, in times of crisis, how can we best manage our stress levels and avoid unnecessary conflict?

Over the last few weeks, most of us have experienced wholesale changes to our everyday lives. Worries include those relating to our health and the health of loved ones, our financial security, how to deal with continued uncertainty and the impact of lockdown restrictions. These are likely to have caused most of us some level of stress and anxiety.

Because these events also happened quite suddenly, thousands of organisations have had to move employees to working from home, or furlough, very quickly. Unexpected changes such as these can leave us feeling disorientated, uncertain and anxious.

This stress and anxiety can affect us in a variety of ways. We can feel low or lack energy, have trouble sleeping or turn to 'crutches' such as unhealthy food or alcohol.

Our behaviour can also change and we can have trouble listening and communicating, become more irritable or angry and blame other people for everything. It's easy to see how these behaviours can potentially lead us into conflict with our work colleagues and loved ones.

Added to this, many of us are now working from home and virtual teams can experience more conflict than those that are co-located. Communications technology tends to make it more difficult to interpret other people's meaning and intentions, leaving us open to misunderstandings.

There can be less clarity over roles and responsibilities, especially at the moment, when many organisations' operations are adjusting to this new and unexpected way of working. Perceived inequality of workload can be a significant cause of conflict in remote teams.

When teams work together in the same location, many of these communication issues are easily resolved in informal ways, such as a quick chat by someone's desk or grabbing five minutes with a manager. Co-located teams benefit from more social contact which helps to build relationships and trust.

So, what can we do to reduce stress and manage conflict in the current environment?

### **Build healthy practices**

We can choose practices and habits that will help us respond to stress and conflict in the healthiest possible way. If you are adjusting to working at home, establish a routine, take regular breaks, make time for exercise and look after your nutrition.

If you feel stress rising, try focussing on your breathing or use stress-management techniques. Even at times of relative 'peace', building healthy practices into our daily life can bolster our inner resources and equip us to handle stress and conflict better when they do arise. Right now, these practices are essential.

### **Maintain relationships**

As virtual teams miss out on those water cooler moments, remember to take time to connect with your colleagues on a social level. It is also good to maintain regular contact with other support channels such as friends and family. If we're in conflict, talking things through with others can be calming and help us to gain perspective.

### **Be clear on tasks**

Ensure clarity on tasks you're collaborating on, what you need from each other and when. If you're a team manager, make sure that everyone in the team is clear on their roles, has personal goals and that the workload is split equally. Also, build awareness of others' skills and use public praise for goals reached, projects completed and valuable contributions.

### **Walk the talk**

If you're a manager, you can help your team by role-modelling the behaviours that are helpful to manage stress and conflict.

For example, you can demonstrate how to respond to conflict in a healthy way, encourage constructive challenge and deal with challenging behaviours quickly and informally.

Team members who feel a high degree of psychological safety will be more comfortable to express themselves, challenge others respectfully and voice concerns collaboratively. Healthy conflict can be very beneficial as it helps to find better ways of working, and fosters creativity and innovation.

### **Help people to help themselves**

Often the best way to help people deal with conflict is by giving them the time and space to reflect on their situation and take the necessary actions. You can also offer your own time to listen to your colleagues without making judgments or suggestions, as this can be an effective way to make people in conflict feel supported and not judged.

### **Mind the skills gap**

Make sure you have access to the right resources and support. Many organisations have assistance programmes that employees can turn to if they need help in stressful times.

Online training in conflict resolution skills or mediation skills can be invaluable for managers, and courageous conversations training can help build skills and confidence.

If conflicts remain unresolved, workplace mediation helps parties in conflict to talk to one another directly, with the support of an impartial third party, and can be very effectively delivered virtually. Another useful resource is conflict coaching, which allows people to work with an experienced coach to discuss their current conflict issues and find a way forward.

It is always important to manage stress and conflict and this is even more the case in times of crisis and uncertainty. This will benefit the wellbeing, mental and physical health of your teams. Providing individuals and managers understand the potential issues, build their virtual team-working skills, and reach out for support when they need it, conflict can be resolved and its opportunities harnessed.

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