Are you a shark or a teddy? How understanding conflict styles can help you overcome fights with friends and family

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

For all the joy they bring, families and close friendships often involve conflict, betrayal, regret and resentment. Prince Harry's recent memoir, "Spare," is a reminder of the fact that the people closest to us often have the greatest power to hurt us. He describes power struggles, conflict,

challenging family dynamics and decades of guilt, jealousy and resentment.

This sort of conflict can feel impossible to resolve. It's not easy to move past and sometimes it simply isn't going to happen, at least in the short term. But psychology has helped us understand more about the breakdown of close relationships and what factors make resolution more likely.

In the course of a lifetime, it is difficult to avoid hurting, upsetting, or being in conflict with people we love. It is an inevitable part of most lives and learning how to negotiate it is a more useful and realistic goal than avoiding it. The first step is understanding what makes relationship conflict so difficult and the different approaches people have to it.

Canadian psychologists, Judy Makinen and Susan Johnson, have used the term attachment injuries to describe the sorts of wounds inflicted when we perceive that we have been abandoned, betrayed, or mistreated by those closest to us.

These wounds sting so sharply because they lead us to question the safety, dependability or allegiance of these people. They trigger a myriad of emotional and behavioral responses, including aggression, resentment, fear, avoidance and reluctance to forgive. These responses have evolved as self-protection and are rooted to our personal histories and personality.

But the pain can linger indefinitely, continuing to influence us from the shadows. So what have psychologists learned about how people heal, move through the hurt and even learn and grow from it?

Turtles, sharks, teddy bears, foxes and owls

Much research has been carried out studying conflict resolution. Social psychologist David W. Johnson studied conflict management "styles" in humans and modeled the typical ways we respond to conflict.

He argued that our responses and strategies in conflict resolution tend to involve an attempt to balance our own concerns (our goals) with the concerns of the other people involved (their goals and preservation of the relationship). Johnson outlined five main styles or approaches to this balancing act.

"Turtles" withdraw, abandoning both their own goals and the relationship. The result tends to be frozen, unresolved conflict.

"Sharks" have an aggressive, forceful take and protect their own goals at all costs. They tend to attack, intimidate and overwhelm during conflict.

"Teddy bears" seek to keep the peace and smooth things over. They drop their own goals completely. They sacrifice for the sake of the relationship.

"Foxes" adopt a compromising style. They are concerned with sacrifices being made on both sides and see concession as the solution, even when it results in less-than-ideal outcomes for both sides.

"Owls" adopt a style that views conflict as a problem to be resolved. They are open to solving it through whichever solutions offer both parties a pathway to achieve their goals and maintain the relationship. This can involve considerable time and effort. But owls are willing to endure the struggle.

Research has suggested that our conflict resolution styles are related to our personalities and attachment histories. For example, people whose early attachment experiences taught them that their feelings are

unimportant or invisible may be more likely to develop conflict management styles that instinctively minimize their needs (for example, the teddy bear).

Some psychologists have also suggested that our conflict management styles can be modified in long-term relationships but do not tend to change dramatically. In other words, while a teddy bear may have the potential to develop conflict management characteristics that reflect other styles, they are highly unlikely to turn into a shark.

Psychologists Richard Mackey, Matthew Diemer, and Bernard O'Brien argued conflict is inevitable in all relationships. Their research found the duration of a relationship heavily depends upon how conflict is dealt with, and the longest-lasting, most fulfilling relationships are those in which conflict is accepted and constructively approached by both parties.

So, while a relationship between two sharks might be enduring, the likelihood that it will be harmonious is significantly less compared to a relationship between two owls.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is often hailed as the ultimate goal in relationship conflict. Jungian analysts Lisa Marchiano, Joseph Lee and Deborah Stewart describe forgiveness as reaching a place where we are able to "hold in our hearts at the same time, the magnitude of the injury that has been done to us and the humanity of the injurer". That's not an easy place to reach because it can feel as though we are minimizing our suffering by forgiving someone.

Psychologists Masi Noor and Marina Catacuzino founded the Forgiveness Project, which provides resources to help people overcome

unresolved grievances. They include a set of essential skills or tools that they argue can help us reach forgiveness.

These include understanding that all humans are fallible (including ourselves); giving up competing over who has suffered more; empathy for how others see the world and acknowledging that other perspectives exist; and accepting responsibility for how we might have contributed to our own suffering, even if it's a bitter pill to swallow.

As Mark Twain put it: "Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it."

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