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Disengaging from Conflict Cycles

Nicholas J. Long

Youth in pain often show self-defeating and destructive patterns of behavior which should be seen as calls for help and positive support. Instead, deep-seated brain programs and cultural beliefs about discipline can trigger angry or avoidant behavior by adults who deal with these young people. This brief introduction to the Conflict Cycle highlights the dynamics of how caring adults can get caught in these self-defeating patterns and how to avoid them.

The Tit-for-Tat Rule

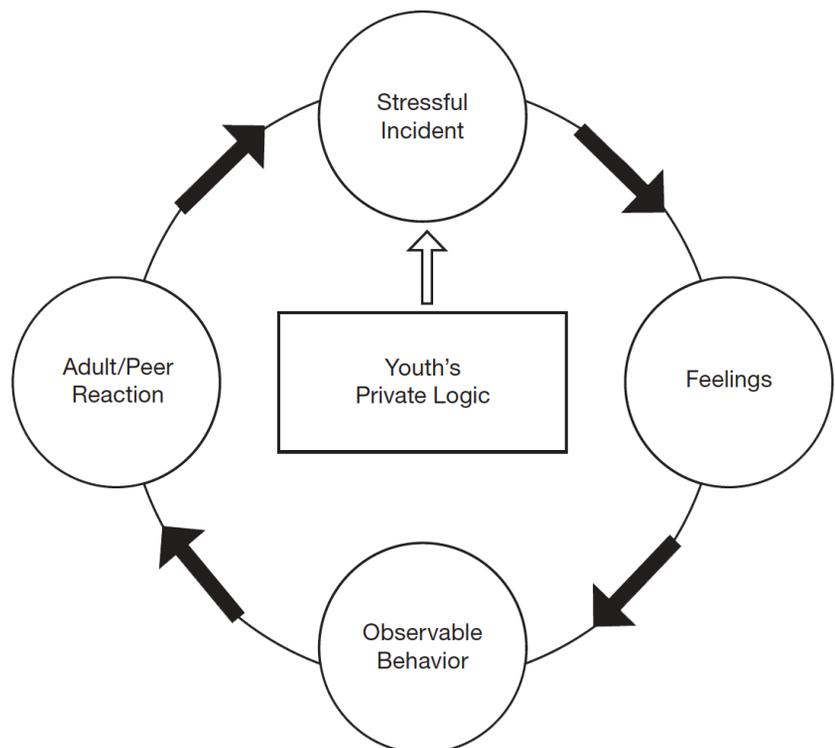
Some years ago, researchers had a competition to create a computer program simulating human conflict (Axelrod, 1984). The winner was mathematical psychologist Anatol Rapoport. His “Tit-for-Tat” principle was very simple: On the first encounter with another person, be cooperative. Then reciprocate the friendly or hostile reaction. Because Tit-for-Tat operates across all cultures, it is probably imbedded in our DNA. But the Tit-for-Tat rule is too limiting in today’s depersonalized, high-stress culture where tense encounters can quickly escalate into rage. It is also morally suspect. Whereas the Golden Rule requires empathy, the Tit-for-Tat Rule can be a payback reaction (Brendtro & Shahbazian, 2004).

Tit-for-Tat is also a profoundly maladaptive strategy for raising children. Strong emotional reactions are inevitable when working with youngsters who show behavioral problems (Winnicott, 1965). The challenge is to prevent a vicious cycle in which aggression is answered with adult counter-aggression. The Conflict Cycle model was developed for dealing with challenging children and youth behavior in families, schools, and treatment programs (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001). It explains why normal, healthy, reasonable adults can end up behaving in ways that are significantly different from their personalities when working with troubled students. What is rarely acknowledged is that a student in a stressful situation can create in the

adult his angry feelings and if the adult is unaware of this dynamic and does what seems normal, the teacher will also mirror his aggressive behavior. By understanding how this Tit-for-Tat process works, adults can learn to disengage from escalating Conflict Cycles.

Figure 1

THE CONFLICT CYCLE



As shown in Figure 1, a Conflict Cycle follows a four-stage circular track. 1) A stressful event is perceived as a threat by the student which **Activates** his feelings and negative thoughts. 2) These negative feelings and thoughts **Drive** his inappropriate behaviors. 3) These inappropriate behaviors **Incite** the teacher. 4) The teacher not only picks up the student’s feeling but also **Mirrors** his behavior which in turn creates more student stress, more intense feelings, more inappropriate behaviors, and more teacher counter-aggression, thus creating a no-win crisis.

Once ensnared in a Conflict Cycle, it is very difficult for an adult to extricate oneself. A feeling of “righteous rage” is a strong motivator to control or

punish the adversary. At this moment in time, the adult functions like a thermometer, reflecting the same emotional fever as the student.

The Conflict Cycle is the prototype of Tit-for-Tat hostility. A typical conflict starts with a trivial disagreement and escalates into a series of provocations. Before one spike of anger dissipates, hostile barbs fuel an even higher surge of intense feelings. A study of 100 violent incidents in New York City schools showed that most began as minor disagreements but escalated to dangerous levels and participants could not back away from conflict (Long, Fecser, & Brendtro, 1998).

Of course, Tit-for-Tat can have positive outcomes as well since mirror neurons also result in positive responses to those who act respectfully. Thus the goal of understanding Conflict Cycles is to convert these high-risk encounters into cycles of respect. Here are the four stages of the Conflict Cycle:

Stage One: Stress is triggered.

Stress is a state of heightened physical and psychological arousal which activates the amygdala, the brain's danger detector (Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009). This heightened state results when a person perceives some event as posing either a threat or a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

- *Threat is the perception of potential danger such as risk to safety, needs, goals, or self-worth. Threat triggers negative emotions including fear and anger.*
- *The ability to acknowledge one's stress and not be overwhelmed by it becomes the challenge (i.e., perceiving the threat as an opportunity to master it).*

Many situations include both risk and opportunity. Further, one individual's threat may be another's challenge. Resilience involves the confidence to cope with the challenge. However, once the brain has made a clear threat appraisal, it activates emotions that prep the person for fight or flight behavior.

Neuroscientists view the inability to regulate stress as a factor underlying most emotional and behavioral disorders (Bradley, 2000). Many medications are used to reduce symptoms of emotional agitation and distress. But interpersonal therapeutic or educational interventions may better serve this purpose by redesigning trusting connections in the brain, particularly in the areas that control fear and aggression (Cozolino, 2010).

Stage Two: Stress arouses emotions and thoughts.

Both feelings and thinking interact to shape reactions to stress. Emotions trigger a range of internal changes that prepare us for specific patterns of coping behavior. Thus anger arouses aggression, fear motivates escape, and shame leads to social withdrawal. Emotions register on the face, giving others some idea of how we are feeling. Since both emotions and thinking are prime behaviors, this stage provides an opportunity for the adult to initially disengage from conflict. Calm demeanor and communication by the adult can activate corresponding mirror neurons in the young person's brain, thus tamping down angry emotions and thoughts. But ignoring this anger or further agitating the youth can escalate conflict, converting inner turbulence into overt behavior.

Stage Three: Behavior is goal directed.

All behavior functions to create some change within the person or the environment. We use the term goal to suggest that—at some level—all behavior has purpose. For a century, psychologists have known about two types of learning, operant and classical conditioning. These embed response styles in the brain. When coping with stress, individuals may draw on the higher logical problem-solving brain or respond intuitively with conditioned emotional reactions. Both types of learning are interconnected and influence goal-directed behavior. Young children and those with immature emotional regulation are likely to act impulsively. As the rational brain becomes a bigger player, children employ language and logical coping behaviors to solve problems and manage emotions.

Stage Four: Behavior triggers reactions.

All behavior has consequences. These include not only reactions from others but also internal thoughts and feelings. When adults or peers respond in Tit-for-Tat fashion to the child's emotions and behavior, the Conflict Cycle has been fully activated. While either party can learn to disengage from a conflict, the primary responsibility lies with the adult who is responsible for modeling prosocial behavior. This assumes, of course that the adult is in control of his or her own emotional reactions, a measure of resilience when under threat.

How Stress Fuels Conflict Cycles

Conflict Cycles begin with stress, and there are many possible sources of stress confronting young people (Long, Fecser, & Brendtro, 1998). *Developmental stress* arises from normal challenges of maturation. Even stable youth can be buffeted by physical changes of adolescence and conflicts surrounding needs for independence and intimacy. *Environmental stress* involves adverse physical and social situations. Some live in poverty, lack food and clothing, and experience sleep deprivation or health problems. Severe stress is also caused by trauma, intrusive discipline, and hostile living and learning environments. *Psychological stress* results from frustration in meeting basic growth needs. In Circle of Courage terms, instead of experiencing the rewards of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, the person struggles with rejection, failure, helplessness, and lack of purpose. All such stressors can fuel conflict cycles.

Adults need additional skills in order to prevent their own self-defeating behavior in conflict situations. The most blatantly inappropriate adult reaction is counter-aggression—in effect, this is reverse behavior modification as the youth has produced an angry adult. But often our reaction is more subtle; analysis of Conflict Cycles reveals that adults often inadvertently escalate conflict as they mirror hostility in youth with a tone of rancor in their own verbal communication. Specifically, they tend to revert to “You Messages” when frustrated with a youth’s behavior. The following list is representative of those recorded during Conflict Cycles:

- Can’t you do anything right?
- You apologize immediately!
- Don’t you dare use that language with me!
- You better start acting your age!
- You think you know everything. Should I call you Einstein?
- You have no respect for anyone or anything!
- You don’t listen to anyone, do you?
- You better shape up because I have had it with you.
- You just never use your head.

These blaming “You Messages” erode a youngster’s sense of worth and feed a self-fulfilling prophecy that adults are hostile and rejecting. Such comments heighten stress, causing youth to feel and behave in more unacceptable ways. As the student’s behavior deteriorates, the adult becomes even more angry and disgusted. As the person who should be modeling a calm mature presence reacts in Tit-for-Tat fashion, conflict spirals out of control.

Decades of research building on the pioneering work of Fritz Redl, David Wineman, William Morse, and others provides an alternative to conflict, punishment, and exclusion (Morse, 2009). Instead of reverting to coercive methods, adults learn to connect with youth in conflict and use these events as opportunities for learning and growth (Long, Morse, Fecser, & Newman, 2014).

Moral development psychologist Martin Hoffman (2001) describes three systems of child discipline: power assertion, love withdrawal, and inductive discipline. While all adults in authority need to assert power at times, if intimidation is the only arrow in our quiver, we have little ability to help youth build controls from within. Love withdrawal is never justified because it violates the most basic need of young people whose brains are literally “born for love” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2001).

There is nothing inherently bad about stress since at manageable levels, it builds resilience. However, being overwhelmed by stress leads to crisis and perhaps long-term effects of trauma. Adults who themselves understand the dynamics of the Conflict Cycle are able to teach this to children and provide them with essential skills for coping with life challenges. Training in the Conflict Cycle is the core of therapeutic and management programs developed by the LSCI institute. These competencies are being provided to educators, treatment professionals, youth workers, school police resource officers, and all who need the tools to turn crisis and conflict into learning opportunities.

Nicholas J. Long, PhD, was founder of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute, primary author of three editions of *Life Space Crisis Intervention: Talking with Kids in Conflict*, and editor of seven editions of the authoritative book, *Conflict in the Classroom*. Nicholas passed away in February 2022, at 92 years of age.

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