

## ***Waging Good Conflict***

Are you ready to try something new this spring? Would you like to sow the seeds for deeper, more meaningful relationships? Then why not learn how to Wage Good Conflict, a way to repair the inevitable disconnections that happen in life?

It's easy to be an active participant in good relationships. Those are characterized by The Five Good Things (Jean Baker Miller, 1986), and include a sense of clarity about oneself and the other person in the relationship, a feeling of zest that comes from participating in the relationship, a greater sense of self-worth, an increased ability to act within that relationship, a desire for more connection.

But when things don't go well, what do we do? Many of us have learned dysfunctional ways of managing disconnections – by cutting people out of our lives, taking on responsibility for what wasn't our fault, exploding, pretending nothing happened, etc. Here's a three-stage model of disconnection and some ideas of how to start on a path of learning to Wage Good Conflict:

**Stage One: Disconnection.** Maybe your friend said something hurtful to you, or you realized that there just isn't much of you in this relationship. This stage of the disconnection process is characterized by intense negative feelings such as anger, hurt, fear, disappointment, confusion and sadness. You wonder what the relationship has been about. The best thing to do at this time is to allow yourself to experience the feelings you have, but not act on them.

**Stage Two: Vacillation.** There is uncertainty and shifting of thoughts and feelings as you try to evaluate whether this relationship gives you enough of The Five Good Things to make it worth repairing. One day you may feel overwhelming sadness at the possible loss of the friendship, the next you may feel glad to be rid of someone who hurt you. At this time it may be helpful to turn to a friend or therapist for help in evaluating the relationship. A third party may be able to help you see both sides more clearly. But remember, you are seeking input to do just that – see both sides, not to get help in slamming the other party. Relational aspirations may also be helpful here – who do you want to be in this relationship and in relationships in general? Do you want to be someone who is able to calmly stand up for yourself? Someone who is able to apologize when wrong? Who can admit to being unsure? Who can insist on the validity of her feelings?

**Stage Three: Repair.** We start to shift from our typical way of managing conflict to a more open stance. We have decided that this relationship is worth the effort of repair, and we are willing to try to do something different to fix it. This might involve an awareness that our usual ways of managing conflict, whether learned within our families or habit, typically lead to further disconnection. The first step in making the repair involves listening. After really listening and hearing the other person, you then have to be able to speak your own truth and be heard as well. It is only through the honoring of

both persons' points of view that feelings can begin to be healed, the relationship repaired, and eventually deeper levels of intimacy achieved.

So go ahead, get some relational courage, and try to wage some good conflict. What do you have to lose?