



# Healthy Conflict

*Breakthrough Consultancy*

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**Healthy Conflict** is a monthly newsletter published by **Breakthrough Consultancy**. It is dedicated to transforming the way we deal with conflict in our everyday lives, in our teams and organisations and in our communities. **Healthy Conflict can help:**

— **Build:** creativity, collaboration, and high performance

— **Avoid:** stress, costly disputes, and lost opportunity

— **Prevent:** absenteeism, relationship breakdown, and staff loss

— **Save:** expense, time, and energy

— **Create:** quality communication, relationships and learning

***In this edition – I explore how we can deepen our connection to others through relating to their suffering during conflict.***

**Attending to suffering during conflict** (*This is the third of three articles on the subject*)

In article three I will address how we might relate to the suffering of others in promoting healthier conflicts.

In earlier articles I explored how we lose core elements of our humanity by desensitising our selves to our own suffering and filtering out the pain of others and how this leads to communication and relationship breakdown. When we block off our personal pain and suffering we gain some relief but may seem callous or inhumane and find it increasingly difficult to care or empathise. So our first step to recovery is attending to our own suffering. In this way we are more able to create space in our hearts to empathise with the suffering of those around us, gain awareness of the systemic and structural roots of our own and others suffering and how we may be contributing to it.

**High dreams in Relationship – a source of suffering**

Much suffering in conflict arises out of broken dreams and expectations during conflict. As I dream my high-dream for relationship, it includes being able to look at each other with kind eyes – speaking lovingly to each other despite our conflict – being fully present and acting mindfully. It means doing

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no harm to each other, learning to speak of our suffering in a way that the other side can hear without getting inflamed or triggered – without blaming or judging and owning our emotional responses. It means listening deeply/compassionately – with the intention of helping opponents to express and heal themselves – offering my opponent an opportunity to empty their heart. It means being able to hear what is important in each other's stories in a way that brings us closer and strengthens our mutual understanding, trust and relationship.

Of course, like most, I am usually disappointed when my high-dream is shattered, as it often is, during conflict. I may not have communicated my high dream or checked that the other party shares it but I am disappointed and may hold the other responsible for shattering it nonetheless. I may even forget that I have that dream and get lost in punishing the other for dismantling it or just feel depressed that something is gone not knowing quite what the loss is. It is important to realise what our high-dream is and that it is our unrealised/shattered high dream that is the source of much of our own and our opponent's suffering if we blame them for its loss. We need to realise this and maintain a positive focus on achieving our relationship high dream, better still a shared high dream, which will alleviate much suffering on both sides and potentially transform our relationship as well as our conflict.

### **How we add to the suffering of others when in conflict - both intended and unintended**

Most who suffer during conflict do not choose to do so. They may feel unable to avoid, prevent or understand it. Whether oppressed by structural violence - marginalisation/exclusion, abuse of power or violation, they may feel unable to protect themselves or change situations that generate their suffering. We contribute to the suffering of others in many indirect and unintended ways simply by lack of awareness of our position and privilege as members of dominant groups, e.g. our social rank, wealth, education, access to power and resources, etc. We may unintentionally add to it even by our social activism in challenging abuse of power, not to mention setting out to hurt – giving someone taste of their own medicine through revenge and retaliation. In conflict, we can also add to suffering through lack of skill or awareness of our impact, forcing the other into seeing the world as we see it or behave in the way we would like them to behave, reducing person to a stereotypical role and so on.

The suffering of others may not always appear in the form of vulnerability or expressed pain as we might expect. It may come in the form of blame, intransigence, attack, flight or helplessness. It may appear as silence, loud protest or denial, evasive or irritating behaviour or retaliation. When in conflict we tend to be too wrapped up in our own suffering or its prevention to be aware of what opponents might be suffering. Recognising, acknowledging and sympathising with the suffering of others, rather than adding to it, will prevent escalation and increase the likelihood of resolution.

This is very difficult to do if we have not worked on our own suffering, learned that we are more than our suffering and can transcend it. Without this we are easily inflamed. Even when we agree to talk to our opponents we are often still fighting from our place of suffering – now we fight with our fears rather than with our usual weapons. If we have not transformed our inner experiences of suffering, hatred and fear, it will prevent us from understanding, communicating and making peace. It is difficult to listen to and bear to be near others suffering if you cannot connect with your own peace within.

So our opponent's suffering may not be communicated directly unless they are both aware and emotionally competent and able to overcome the barriers to being transparent and vulnerable. If we have developed emotional/spiritual competence and have learned to suffer without harming, violating or blaming others we can model this and help our opponents discover they can do likewise.

### **Attitude to others suffering**

While it seems easier to sympathise with those who suffer as a result of natural catastrophes – we are less sympathetic when we believe others have caused our suffering, as is often the perception during conflict. We are more likely to blame or be angry with the perpetrator while being sympathetic with the perceived victim. We may even treat the other with contempt, as subhuman, one who does not suffer or whose suffering does not matter as much as ours. We justify ignoring their suffering: they deserve it; they are punished by a higher power; they must have done something wrong; it's karma! Such beliefs distance us from our opponents. We need to reduce the gap by being able to listen to their suffering which helps us renew our connection.

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To have sympathy (to suffer with) we have to regard them as important, to care or have a desire to see them suffer less. To discover this we need to look beyond their “perpetrator” role to discover evidence that will reconnect them and us with their humanity. In conflict, being listened to deeply affirms us, recognises our suffering and makes it easier to bear even if the source has not or cannot be immediately removed. Ram Dass says, “Each time we quiet our mind, our listening becomes sharp and clear, deep and perceptive; we realize that we know more than we thought we knew, and can reach out and hear, as if from inside, the heart of someone's pain. Each time we are able to remain open to suffering, despite our fear and defensiveness, we sense a love in us which becomes increasingly unconditional.”

### **Awakening the bystander**

Attending to opponents suffering can awaken us as well as connect us. “Victims” suffering can draw attention to abuse of power, violation, injustice, etc. The assumption being that if the world/others knew of their suffering and their inability to protect themselves, they would stop it. Of course this does not always happen. The observer may feel paralysed or helpless to do anything, or may feel it is not in their interest to do something about it because of their dependant relationship with the oppressor/perpetrator, or because of their fear of being so victimised themselves. They become passive bystanders, ignoring or allowing abuse to continue and thus appear to collude in it.

Now the original victim becomes despairing or is enraged by the behaviour of the bystander who does not speak up for them as they are with the oppressor, often even more so. They may feel desperate, abandoned and their suffering compounded and may turn on themselves or internalise the oppression. So the bystander can play an important role in raising awareness of suffering and in its alleviation. The bystander also suffers, though in a different way, even if they deny or do not act to alleviate or prevent the continuation of the suffering they have witnessed. Suffering continues and is compounded when good men and women stand by and do nothing. Bystanders suffer anyway the only question is how?

“From the quantum physicist’s point of view, you cannot isolate and separate the observer from the observed. We are in this together. And I say we are more than observers. We are also witnesses. The witness stands together, inside, with those who are hurt and with those who are violated; the witness has an extraordinary capacity to stand in the fires of hatred and violence without increasing those elements. In fact, the deepest form of witnessing is a form of compassion for all suffering beings on all sides of a conflict. In reality, we are never outside observers. We are inside the wound together. It is just that some feel and some are numb. We are inside the very thing that needs to be transformed. Isn't that good news? We ourselves -- each one of us -- is part of the wholeness of consciousness. Each one of us has our work cut out.” --James O'Dea

### **Being left to suffer – victims turn oppressor**

When people are left to suffer in silence or unsupported, when they have nothing left to lose, when they have lost hope of having their suffering acknowledged or things ever improving, they tend to resort to making the other suffer or attempt to annihilate them, even at the risk of self-annihilation, as in the case of suicide bombers and those who knowingly risk serious consequences of taking revenge. Such hopelessness and ignoring of suffering by the powerful or those who have repressed their vulnerability and become desensitised, breeds further hatred, violence and extreme responses that add to suffering.

The suffering oppressed easily become the suffering oppressors and so the cycle of violation, justification and retaliation continues until someone decides to stop it. So we also require aware victims who do not act out, repress or add to suffering, who know how to suffer in a meaningful manner, who are willing to suffer on behalf of others and for what they value. It is a big ask but we reason to be hopeful - we have celebrated role models such as Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, and many, many more who have done so in smaller ways but have gone uncelebrated or acknowledged.

Suffering is a driver for social activism. We may be so driven by the pain of oppression and abuse that we are motivated to change the world and the circumstances which we deem to be generating it. Often however, we find that the enemy is not just out there but in here also – Orwell’s pigs learned well from their human oppressors. Changing social systems requires innerwork and not just social activism as we have internalised the oppressive as well as positive aspects of our culture and we need to break the cycle by changing the internal as well as the external roots of oppression and suffering.

### **Suffering as an incomplete process – victim and oppressor**

You could also say that the breakdown in communication during conflict occurs not because opponents cannot listen to each other’s suffering but to the accusations, either implied or explicit, in the telling.

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Parties to the conflict are not able to hear and respond to the accusations regarding their abuse of power and privilege which is either implicitly or explicitly stated in the “victim’s” story of their suffering.

The “oppressor”, perhaps in effort to avoid responsibility, does not respond from the oppressor role but subtly and often unwarily switches into the victim role (by telling of their own suffering) thus deflecting attention away from the accusation and what it implies or attempts to awaken in them. The “victim” is left without a response from the “oppressor” position and becomes irritated by the “victim/suffering” response of their perceived oppressor (whether or not it relates to genuine suffering,) as they need a response to their accusation from the “oppressor”.

The exchange is therefore incomplete and frustrating; communication breaks down and it degenerates into an argument about who is suffering most, often without either knowing quite how the breakdown occurred. In this view, everybody wants to identify with the “victim” position and nobody wants to answer for the “oppressor” role. Here, suffering and continued conflict is seen as an incomplete process and someone needs to speak genuinely from the oppressor role if a sense of completion is to be achieved and suffering alleviated. We might usefully ask what needs to be completed and how?

### **Communicating suffering – without escalating**

One can also view the inability to listen each others suffering from the perspective of the victim and say that their communication style is part of the problem: they are confusing the story of their suffering (which is about the impact of events on them) and their blame and accusation (which is a statement about the other and a challenge to them). Neither intention is actually achieved as mixing them up confuses the intentions and dilutes the power of the messages.

Separating the two intentions in time, space and language (i.e. to convey the experience of suffering and to challenge the other’s oppressive behaviour) makes it much easier for the listener to hear and be moved by the suffering because the accusation does not trigger defensive reaction. It also makes it more likely that the listener will be able to hear the accusation if they have become sympathetic to the suffering of the other and realise they can help alleviate it. The realisation that they can communicate more effectively can empower the “victim” in such situations. Of course the language used to respond to the victim is also important here and the accusation will also need to be addressed later.

### **Compassion**

Tich Nhat Hanh says, “Suffering is needed for understanding and compassion to be born.” As we look deeply we discover that we all suffer and that retribution, revenge, retaliation, violation or violence only increase that suffering by creating continual cycles of pain and suffering. It is as if we believe that making others suffer will lessen our own suffering or that we gain some satisfaction from knowing that they will also suffer. There must be a better way of alerting us to each others suffering without intentionally creating more of it. Punishment, violence and war are not the answer. Hanh’s answer is compassion.

The Dalai Lama defines compassion in terms of “a state of mind that is non-violent, non-harming, and non-aggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other.” Compassion is the antidote to violence and hatred – there is no other medicine and unfortunately, says Hanh, compassion is not available in drugstores - you have to generate the nectar of compassion in your heart. Learning to suffer gracefully helps us to generate such compassion.

Hahn suggests the path to connecting with each other is in and through our suffering. Suffering sensitises us to our own and others’ vulnerability and humanity. Shared suffering breaks down many barriers – becomes a leveller – suffering is suffering whether you are the powerful or the powerless. The powerful feel it no less than the powerless though there may be different roots or sources. Acknowledging each other’s suffering and understanding its roots helps us feel more compassionate towards others and ourselves. Those who make us suffer are also victims – perhaps motivated by their own experiences of oppression, their need for safety or to create a better future for their children.

It is hard to have compassion for others if they are still oppressing you and you are unable to defend yourself. The more powerful tend to live off, exploit the weaknesses of the less powerful and tend to ignore the resulting instability and suffering. However if people around you are suffering it is hard to

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be happy. Our well-being is entwined, we are ultimately interdependent and, although the more powerful would usually rather not believe this, they ignore the suffering of the other at their peril.

### Public recognition and acknowledgements of suffering

In reconciliation truth commissions, tribunals of inquiry, people primarily want to be heard – to know that their suffering is not being denied forgotten or in vain, that something good will come of it. Such public acknowledgement and atonement, assists in healing and the reparation of the injury and pain suffered. It gives people a renewed sense of being valued and helps recover and repair their sense of self worth and renew the relationship with themselves and society. The same is true for interpersonal conflict.

However, becoming overly identified with and stuck the role of the victim is a common occurrence for many in conflict. Being stuck in the victim role may be experienced as punishing or vengeful by opponents whose suffering is increased despite acknowledgements or reparation they might have made. It may trigger further cycles of oppression. If this happens the “victim” fails to realise they have choices and may lack awareness of how they contribute to prolonging suffering or even their role in adding to it. Compassion and acknowledgement can greatly assist the “victim” to step out of the victim role and find their power, enabling destructive polarisation and recycling of oppression and retaliation to resolve itself and constructive dialogue to proceed more easily. We may also be able to help in other ways without disrespecting their suffering or adding to it.

## Upcoming Workshops

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### Befriending Conflict and Building Relationships

October 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> 2009

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For many, their biggest conflict is with conflict. Some avoid it, prevent it repress it for fear of adverse consequences. Yet conflict is a natural and healthy part of life, work and democracy. It is our attitude to it and how we handle it that makes it destructive or creative. Addressed in a healthy and constructive manner, friction and conflict will help you understand your own and other’s behaviour, revitalise your relationships and build dynamic teams and robust working partnerships.

This workshop is for those who would like to develop positive attitudes to conflict and explore the opportunities that it opens up for creating more fulfilling and productive relationships. It is for those who find conflict challenging or find them selves having repetitive unsettling or debilitating conflicts whether in social or workplace settings.

Following this workshop you will:

- ? Understand key drivers of your own and others conflict behaviour
- ? Become more aware of your own and others pre-conflict and escalation signals
- ? Discovered how to have healthy and constructive conflicts
- ? Learned how to build more robust relationships and partnerships
- ? Practiced a range of skills for to enhance communication during conflict
- ? Explored how the roles you play in relationship and conflict help and hinder
- ? Learned how your emotional states and use of power can help and hinder relationships

**Facilitator:** John Mulligan

**Cost:** € 200.00

(Early bird €180.00 before August. 31<sup>st</sup>.)

**Venue:** Novara Centre Bray, Co. Wicklow, Ireland

[info@novaracentre.ie](mailto:info@novaracentre.ie)

Tel: +353 (0)1 2761745

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**Breakthrough Consultancy**

**Contact:**

**Breakthrough Consultancy**  
**Ashtown**  
**Roundwood**  
**Co. Wicklow,**  
**Ireland**

**tel: +353 1 2818948**  
**fax: +353 1 2818948**  
**email: [info@breakthrough.ie](mailto:info@breakthrough.ie)**  
**web: [www.breakthrough.ie](http://www.breakthrough.ie)**

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**John Mulligan** works with business and service professionals, who want to transform the way they deal with conflict, give outstanding leadership, and build the performance and learning agility of their teams and organizations. He provides coaching, facilitation and training to individuals and groups and communities on request. See also Breakthrough Centre on website for other services.

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