

A guide to adult group conflict resolution through good communication

1

Address issues immediately and openly

Group members should air any concerns or issues immediately with the group leader.

When a conflict arises in your group, action should be taken quickly to resolve it in a positive way. Failing to address conflicts quickly can cause resentment to grow, so it is important to address the issue immediately.

Try to be open and transparent from the beginning by finding out exactly what happened or what the issue is. An open dialogue should be encouraged during these discussions. Getting to the source of a problem will involve honest conversations and a little detective work.

Remember to allow for extra processing time when asking autistic individuals questions. It may be necessary to repeat each question using the same words to help them to process the questions. Try not to ask too many questions, and avoid asking open-ended questions by making your questions more specific.

2

Set clear expectations

Show mutual respect and co-operation between members of the group and fellow volunteers. Knowing what behaviour is expected and is acceptable can help people feel more comfortable.

If there is a conflict that cannot be resolved immediately, give the individuals involved a timeframe for when you will get back to them to help reduce unnecessary anxiety.

Manage your expectations, both in terms of what you expect from others and what they expect from you. This will help to facilitate better communication and prevent conflict from occurring.

3

Build active listening skills

Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Active listening involves not only hearing a person's words, but understanding the message that they are trying to communicate.

You may be hearing what other members have to say, but are you actually listening to them? You can improve your active listening skills by paying attention to the speaker when they are speaking, giving feedback to show that you have understood by repeating a statement or asking for clarification, by deferring judgement until they have finished speaking and responding appropriately.

Active listening is an undervalued skill, and it can have a real impact in resolving conflicts and preventing them from occurring.

The social communication difficulties that autistic individuals may experience should be considered at all times when active listening. For example, they may find eye contact uncomfortable, have differences in facial expressions, need more or less personal space, need sensory considerations, have difficulty in eliminating background noise, have a literal understanding of language, have difficulties in interpreting tone, or be very honest or direct, which may appear rude or abrupt.

4

Use neutral terms and open body language

When managing the conflict, speak in a calm, agreeable manner. If necessary, give yourself (or those in the conflict) time to calm down before asking questions.

Use neutral language and separate the other person from the problem. It is better to speak in "I" language, as opposed to "you" language, to avoid the other person feeling attacked. For example, saying "I feel undervalued in my position" is going to be more effective than saying "You don't value my work." Using "you" language will only cause the other person to get defensive, which may prevent conflict resolution.

As well as choosing your words carefully, try to use open body language to show you are willing to resolve the conflict and reach an agreement, eg sit with your legs uncrossed and try not to fold your arms. People often mimic the body language of those around them, so using open body language may help to elicit a calm attitude from others in the conflict. However, be very mindful that many autistic individuals experience difficulties in interpreting body language, and may find it difficult to process changes in body language.

5

Recognise and respect personal differences

We all see and experience the world differently based on our own experiences, values, individual diversity and culture. We each interpret what we've heard or seen and draw conclusions based on our experiences. Recognising and valuing our differences will make it easier to begin discussions that help resolve conflicts.