CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NURSING

1.5 Contact Hours

This continuing education course is intended to help nurses identify conflict, understand various types of conflict, implement strategies to effectively manage conflict, and understand how to minimize conflict and prevent escalation of conflict situations in the nursing environment.

Course Objectives

- Define conflict and effective communication skills.
- Identify four general types of conflict.
- List the four primary types of conflict in nursing.
- Describe five strategies used to manage conflict.
- Identify four components of effective communication skills.
- List three rules for effective negotiation.
- Explain four organizational tactics for preventing and resolving conflict.

CONFLICT AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Conflict resolution skills are essential, not just for nursing leadership, but for all nurses. Nurses, in general, have been found to lack conflict resolution skills and often use avoidance or withdrawal when confronted with conflict. In order for conflict to be managed successfully, effective communication skills are necessary. Effective communication skills are skills that stress resolution and a positive outcome, allow for the discussion of the issue without blame, and include the ability to clearly express oneself to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunication.

Conflict can be defined as a state of disharmony that occurs within a group of people with differing viewpoints, opinions, values, or priorities. Nurses need to be able to recognize and accommodate differences in the workplace while striving to minimize conflict. Conflict is not always a negative thing. When handled effectively, a little conflict can promote organizational and personal growth. Conflict left unchecked, however, can paralyze a group and interfere with quality patient care. Continued conflict further
leads to higher staff turnover rates, increased healthcare costs, patient dissatisfaction and an overall decrease in organizational morale.

Quality and safe patient care depends on a collaborative work environment that stresses teamwork and communication. The Joint Commission developed a leadership standard, effective January 1, 2009, to address issues of conflict in the workplace. This standard calls for an organizational code of conduct that defines acceptable versus disruptive or inappropriate behaviors. The standard also calls for leaders to create and implement processes to effectively manage conflict in the workplace. The Joint Commission report also identifies two main factors involved in healthcare workplace conflict:

- **Personal Factors**: The Joint Commission reports that the stress involved when dealing with high-emotion situations, especially when coupled with fatigue can lead to intimidating or disruptive individual behavior. Healthcare professionals who possess characteristics such as self-centeredness, immaturity or defensiveness are more prone to these types of behavior and often lack interpersonal, coping, or conflict management skills.

- **Organizational Factors**: The same report also points out how the uniqueness of the healthcare cultural environment can create challenges for interpersonal communication and trust issues between team members. The healthcare environment is marked by productivity demands, cost-containment issues, embedded hierarchies and the ever-present fear and stress caused by the possibility of litigation. A continual flux of change is present in healthcare, further contributing to an environment where conflict can be expected and must be dealt with effectively for positive outcomes.

**GENERAL TYPES OF CONFLICT**

In order to effectively assess a conflict situation, it is important to understand the main types of conflict. Each type of conflict requires a different approach for effective management.

- **Intrapersonal Conflict**: This type of conflict occurs within a person when confronted with a situation that causes discomfort. Intrapersonal conflict can affect others working with the nurse who is experiencing this type of conflict and lead to the next type of conflict. An example of intrapersonal conflict is a nurse who is working a shift that interferes with her family schedule and is creating conflicting emotions in that nurse.

- **Interpersonal Conflict**: This type of conflict occurs between two or more people who disagree on an issue due to factors such as differing goals, values, ethics, or priorities. This is the most common type of workplace conflict. An example of interpersonal conflict is a situation where a family member is angry with a nurse over a treatment or medication change.

- **Intergroup Conflict**: This type of conflict is similar in nature to interpersonal conflict, but occurs between two or more groups of people. An example is a disagreement between two units about the best way to transfer a patient and provide a handoff report.

- **Organizational Conflict**: This type of conflict occurs when there is a disagreement between staff and the organization over issues including policies and procedures, changes occurring on the unit, or organizational standards. An example is an organizational change in documentation the nurses feel is unnecessary or redundant.
PRIMARY TYPES OF CONFLICT IN NURSING

- **Nurse-to-Nurse Conflict**: This type of conflict occurs when nurses clash over philosophies, experience, or collusion. Nurse-to-nurse conflict can escalate to incivility which may result in bullying or lateral workplace violence. Lateral violence refers to hostile acts between workplace colleagues. Examples of this type of violence include covert or overt acts of verbal or nonverbal aggression and may lead to bullying behavior. Because this type of conflict can escalate quickly and directly affect patient care, it is important that it is quickly recognized and resolved.

- **Nurse-to-Physician Conflict**: This type of conflict arises as a difference in power or perception of power. Communication can become condescending, critical, or patronizing. This type of conflict can affect all members of the staff and inhibit patient care by interfering with interprofessional collaboration. Steps must be taken to improve nurse and physician communication which stresses the shared goal of patient-centered care.

- **Nurse-to-Patient Conflict**: Patient and family members who do not feel they are being heard or are not part of the decision-making process may lead to conflict situations. Patients may feel a nurse is not answering their call bells promptly, ignoring their pain, not giving their medications on time, or are speaking to them in a condescending or abrasive manner. Nurses who can remain mindful and not become defensive are able to communicate more effectively with the patient or family members and discuss issues as they arise, thus preventing further frustration or escalation. Care must be taken to ensure that patients and/or family members are actively engaged in the decision-making process.

- **Staffing Conflicts**: Staffing and scheduling issues are common sources of both internal and external conflicts. The process of nurse staffing requires the balancing of quality patient care with the number and needs of staff nurses. Because of the ever-present change that is part of the process, conflict can arise over this issue that affects nursing staff, patients, and other team members.

  Ideally, staffing should include the input of the nurses to work together in a collaborative process to create a fair and balanced schedule as much as possible. However, no matter how staffing schedules are determined, transparency is key to minimizing conflict and promoting safety, a sense of community, and overall job satisfaction among staff members.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

There are five main types of strategies used to manage conflict. Not all types are effective in all conflict situations. Often, a combination of the following strategies can be used to effectively deal with conflict in the workplace.

- **Avoiding**: This strategy is the least effective method of dealing with conflict because nothing is resolved, only postponed. However, in a volatile situation sometimes using the avoidance strategy to walk away and clear your head may be the best strategy to use.

- **Accommodation**: This strategy is also considered largely ineffective because it often results in future conflict. Accommodation involves putting someone else’s needs or goals ahead of someone
else’s (often your own) at a sacrifice. This strategy may temporarily resolve the conflict, but leads to a build-up of frustration and resentment.

- **Competing:** This strategy involves someone pursuing their own goals, needs or desires at the expense of others. While some competition may benefit the workplace, using competing as a strategy to management conflict leads to aggression and anger and is often found in power struggles.

- **Compromising:** This is considered an effective strategy to deal with conflict. In this method, both parties are willing to give something up in order to gain something. This strategy is only effective if both parties feel their trade-offs are fair and equal.

- **Collaborating:** This strategy is considered the best method for effective conflict management. Both parties identify shared goals and work together in a fashion where both parties are satisfied with the outcome.

**CASE SCENARIO**

Nurse R arrives for her 12-hour shift in the emergency room department and finds that her assignment is quite heavy. She has been assigned seven patients, including two who are currently unstable. She notices that Nurse M has a light assignment with only five patients, all of whom are scheduled to be discharged to home during the shift. She feels frustrated because her patient load exceeds the ER guidelines regarding patient number and acuity. She knows Nurse M often receives lighter assignments because she is known to be intimidating and aggressive. She decides to address the issue with her charge nurse who tells her she is busy and “it is what it is.” Increasingly frustrated, Nurse R decides it is time to approach the unit manager about this ongoing issue.

What are some ways the nurse manager can address the issue and manage this conflict situation effectively?

A. **Avoidance:** The nurse manager can choose to avoid the situation and say nothing or tell Nurse R she is too busy to address the situation.

   Results: Nurse R walks away feeling more frustrated and powerless over the situation.

B. **Competing:** The nurse manager can become dominating and tell the charge nurse the assignment is unacceptable and needs changed immediately.

   Results: The charge nurse is upset and angry at both Nurse R and the manager. The manager later feels regret that she handled the conflict in this manner and has caused more stress and discord on the unit. Nurse R gets the results she wanted, but now is at odds with her charge nurse and the other nurse on the unit.

C. **Compromise:** The nurse manager can discuss Nurse R’s concerns with the charge nurse and engage her assistance to find a speedy solution that will make both nurses happy.

   Results: By engaging the charge nurse and asking for her help, the manager can address the situation without escalating it. If they can work together to find a solution that works for both nurses, this approach may result in a positive outcome.

D. **Collaboration:** The manager can have an informal meeting with both nurses and the charge nurse where they can discuss ways they can all come to an acceptable solution.
Conflict Resolution in Nursing

Results: Each party can give input and feel their opinion is important and heard by management. With all involved parties included, each will be more willing to compromise for the overall benefit of everyone on the unit including other staff members and patients. This solution offers the best way for a speedy resolution while also improving patient care and patient outcomes.

Collaboration is considered the most effective method of conflict management.

Effective Communication Skills for Conflict Management

The first step in managing any conflict is to develop communication skills that are effective and produce positive results. Some points to remember for effective communication during conflict management include the following four strategies:

- **Mutual Respect**: Both parties must remain respectful towards the other party and keep the focus on the issue and not resort to personal attacks.

- **Needs Versus Wants**: Each party should examine whether their issue is a need or a want, as well as seek to understand the other party and their needs and wants. Clarifying this point can improve collaboration and compromise during a conflict.

- **Compassion and Empathy**: Both parties must act with compassion and empathy to the other party if conflict is to be managed effectively. Both parties must be willing to actively listen to the other party with an open mind and without becoming defensive.

- **Stay in the “I”**: Each party needs to stay focused on “I” statements and not fall into the habit of using accusatory “you” statements which often lead to an increase in conflict and create an environment of blame.

The Art of Negotiation

A critical communication skill during conflict situations is the ability to effectively negotiate. Negotiation involves controlling reactions during the conflict, seeking to actively listen and understand the other party’s issues, identifying the unmet need, and being able to compromise and collaborate to come to a positive solution. There are three rules to remember when using negotiation to solve a conflict:

1. Do not take negative comments or information presented personally. Instead, listen to the other party with an open mind while trying to determine the core of the actual problem. While it may be a normal reaction to become angry and defensive when faced with criticism, effective communication and negotiation requires both parties seek to understand the other party and collaborate to find an effective solution.

2. The second rule involves identifying the need being expressed by the other party. Is the need a personal need, an institutional need, or a patient need? By staying in control of your own emotions and identifying the unmet need, you can move on to the third rule in successful negotiating, which is finding a solution.
3. The third rule focuses on finding a positive solution for all the parties involved. To accomplish this, each party must be willing to give something up, or to compromise. Although it may be difficult to give something up in the immediate short-term, by keeping long-term goals in mind, it becomes easier to negotiate conflict situations as they arise.

Three Rules of Negotiation
1. Don’t take it personally.
2. Identify the need.
3. Focus on a solution.

Organizational Tactics for Preventing and Resolving Conflict

Conflict in the workplace can also be seen as a disagreement where one or more parties perceives a threat to their needs, wants, or concerns. Organizational leaders can do much to prevent or resolve conflict and to promote a company culture where collaboration and cooperation are the norm. These four steps can assist nurse managers and leaders in their role to prevent or resolve conflict:

- **Engage in Dialogue:** The organization and management need to be willing to engage in dialogue. Nurses should have the opportunity to speak at councils or meetings and give their perceptive and concerns on issues that are currently creating conflict or have the potential to create conflict. This important step will often be enough to prevent the conflict from continuing or escalating.

- **Debriefing and Education:** Staff conflict needs to be identified as an opportunity for dialogue and communication skills training. Nonpunitive debriefing after a conflict situation allows everyone to reflect on the incident and seek ways to learn from it. Role-playing and the use of case scenarios can be helpful in preventing or minimizing conflict by teaching effective communication skills and providing a non-threatening environment to practice these skills. This allows nurses to feel better prepared and more confident in real-life conflict situations.

- **Identify Potential Conflict:** Organizational leaders can help identify potential areas for conflict and develop policies and procedures to handle conflict that may occur. Conflict is inevitable in the workplace, especially in fast-paced healthcare settings with various disciplines working together in high-stress situations. By becoming aware of where potential conflict situations are likely to occur, the organization can prepare the staff and provide tools and guidance to handle the situation effectively.

- **Recognize Conflict Early:** If conflict is not managed effectively, it often continues to grow and escalate. Nurse managers and other organizational leaders must receive the necessary training to recognize conflict in the early stages and be prepared to act as a guide towards successful resolution. This step produces a workplace that focuses on cooperation and collaboration.
CONCLUSION

Conflict is an inevitable part of any healthcare workplace environment. Although conflict can cause stress and fear, with the right tools, conflict can be seen as an opportunity for growth. Effective communication skills, role-playing, and case scenarios can be used by nurses to manage conflict in a way that results in a positive outcome for each party.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL CONFLICT RELATED RESOURCES

Everything DiSC Productive Conflict

Everything DiSC Productive Conflict is a behavior assessment, and available presentation materials, that gives participants the tools to turn conflict into productivity.

- Assessment & Trainer Materials
- Demo Request Form

Handling Workplace Conflict

Handling Workplace Conflict is an online course that helps managers understand employee conflict styles, identify causes of conflict, and implement strategies for addressing conflict.

- Online Course
1. Conflict can be defined as a state of disharmony that occurs within a group of people with differing viewpoints, opinions, values, or priorities.
   
   A. True  
   B. False

2. This type of conflict occurs between two or more people who disagree on an issue due to factors such as differing goals, values, ethics, or priorities. This type of conflict is the most common type of workplace conflict.
   
   A. Intrapersonal conflict  
   B. Interpersonal conflict  
   C. Intergroup conflict  
   D. Organizational conflict

3. This type of conflict occurs when nurses clash over philosophies, experiences, or collusion.
   
   A. Staffing conflict  
   B. Nurse-to-Nurse conflict  
   C. Nurse-to-Physician conflict  
   D. Nurse-Patient conflict

4. Lateral workplace violence does not include covert or overt acts of verbal aggression.
   
   A. True  
   B. False

5. This conflict management strategy is considered the least effective method of dealing with conflict because nothing is really resolved, only postponed.
   
   A. Avoiding  
   B. Competing  
   C. Compromising  
   D. Collaborating
6. Successfully being able to negotiate in a conflict situation requires the ability to define unmet needs of the other party.
   A. True
   B. False

7. This type of conflict occurs in the healthcare workplace when there is a difference in power or perceptions of power.
   A. Staffing conflict
   B. Nurse-to-Nurse conflict
   C. Nurse-to-Physician conflict
   D. Nurse-Patient conflict

8. The Joint Commission report identifies two main factors involved in healthcare workplace conflict as personal and organizational factors.
   A. True
   B. False

9. This conflict management strategy involves someone pursuing their own goals, needs, or desires at the expense of others.
   A. Avoiding
   B. Competing
   C. Compromise
   D. Collaborating

10. Role-playing and the use of case scenarios can be helpful in teaching effective communication skills, but are also a source of conflict and tension.
    A. True
    B. False
**EVALUATION**

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NURSING**

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<tr>
<th>Please answer the following questions by circling the response that best represents your experience.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td><strong>COURSE OBJECTIVES &amp; CONTENT</strong></td>
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<td>1. The activity met the stated learning objectives.</td>
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<td>2. The content was up to date.</td>
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<td><strong>TEACHING/LEARNING METHODS</strong></td>
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<td>3. The teaching/learning methods, strategies, and slides were effective in helping me learn.</td>
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<td>4. The material was clearly explained.</td>
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<td>5. The answers to the post-test questions were appropriately covered in the activity.</td>
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<td>6. The online course/download supported the achievement of the stated learning objectives.</td>
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<td>7. The material was relevant to my professional development.</td>
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<td>8. Overall, I am pleased with this activity and would recommend it to others.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>9. The content was presented free of commercial bias.*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>10. Did the material presented increase your knowledge and/or understanding of this topic?**</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NA</td>
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_See next page_
* If you responded “No” to question 9, please explain why:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

* If you answered “Yes” to question 10, what change do you intend to make?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What barrier, if any, may prevent you from implementing what you learned?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Cite one new piece of information you learned from this activity:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Additional comments/suggestions:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

With my signature I confirm that I am the person who completed this independent educational activity by reading the material and completing this self evaluation.

Signature ___________________________________________ Date:_________________________
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Email: ____________________________________________

Employer: ____________________________________________

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Have you registered with us before? __________ Yes __________ No

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Credit Card Number: __________________________ Exp. Date: ______________

Cardholders Name: __________________________ Sec. Code: __________