

Module 5

Stress Less Relationships

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ.

Ephesians 4:15, NLT

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Psalm 133:1

Welcome back. We are so grateful that you are part of this program. How did this week go? Did you notice that your emotions were related to thoughts in the moment?

What small changes have you noticed? When you actively begin to shift your attention to God's peace, you will feel naturally calmer and more focused. This week we will explore relationships, differences of opinion, specific language that creates peace, and tools to resolve a conflict before it begins.

This module will be much more practical than others.

Creating Unity

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Psalm 133:1

When God created the heavens and earth, he made the sky blue and the trees green so they each could look more beautiful against the other. He made the colors of the rainbow different to reflect each other's light. He also made each of us different, not to fight over who is better but so we can live together in peace. Romans 12:16 says, "We are to live in harmony with one another." God had a perfect plan when he made us all different.

Yet those differences often create stress, fighting, and sometimes even violence. When individuals feel their view is the only view, when people see their race as better than another, it divides us. How many wars have been fought trying to get others to believe the way we do? How many fights have you had trying to prove yourself right? Proverbs 18:2 express this clearly: “Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.”

Here is an exercise to help you recognize the different ways each of us perceives the world. Look at the picture below. What do you see? What does this image mean to you? Now ask your family and friends what they see.



Anni Roenkae

Did any of you see the same thing or not? Chances are if you asked 100 different people, you might get anywhere from 50 to 100 different interpretations. This is what makes art so powerful; each person sees it through his or her reality.

This is exactly what happens with every event, emotion, and interaction you have. We each see things differently depending on whatever we are thinking in the moment. This is called separate realities.

We are all different and yet within our differences we can all get along. When you acknowledge that everyone in your life needs to be loved, appreciated, and listened to, you create unity. When you understand that every person is miraculously created in the image and likeness of God, you create peace. The key to creating unity and peace is acknowledging, celebrating, and honoring these differences as gifts, then recognizing the magnificence in each and every person that crosses your path. Ephesians 2:10 states, "We are God's masterpiece." And so are other people, even those you disagree with.

Just as an artistic masterpiece by Monet or Picasso can be interpreted differently, so too can our everyday communication. These separate ways of seeing things are differences of opinion. Differences of opinion make up most of our conversations. Often, it is how we express these differences, rather than the differences themselves, that creates conflict.

A young boy that I worked with is the perfect example. He was a beautiful little soul with a gentle heart, but when he had an opinion about something, he expressed it in a way that put other people down without meaning to. He would say, "This chicken is disgusting," "That dress is so ugly," or "*Star Wars* is the only good movie." Over the years, he has learned to say things differently and now is able to communicate his opinions in a respectful way. This is expressed so perfectly in Proverbs 17:27, "The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint."

When we express ourselves, it is important to learn to decipher whether we are stating a fact or simply sharing our opinion about something.

Look at the following sentences and decide whether each is an opinion or a fact:

Statement	Fact	Opinion
The snow is beautiful.		
My mother is the best mother.		

That dress doesn't look good on you.		
The east coast of Florida borders the Atlantic Ocean.		

To reduce arguments, we can begin to use words to express our opinions in a way that will create peace rather than fights. Starting sentences with cushioning words like “In my opinion,” “To me,” or “The way I look at it,” conveys that you are stating your perspective. When opinions are phrased without these cushioning words, the opinion will often be an open invitation for argument. Going back to the young boy I worked with as an example, if he said to his friend, “*Star Wars* is the only good movie,” his friend might argue, “No, it’s not, *Spiderman* is the best movie.” Then the argument could continue endlessly, each one trying to prove he is right. But if this young man had said, “To me, *Star Wars* is the best movie,” his friend could say, “To me, *Spiderman* is the best movie.” Discussion over. Both express their opinions without making the other one wrong. Romans 14:1 says “Not to quarrel over opinions.”

How often do differences of opinion cause conflict in your family? In your life? At your job? When you use cushioning words like “In my opinion,” “To me,” or “The way I look at it,” you can express yourself and still respect the other person’s perspective. Think carefully about your words and the way you express them. This simple act of adding a cushioning phrase can greatly reduce the amount of stress and conflict in your life. Colossians 4:6 says “Let your speech always be gracious.”

For the rest of today, or tomorrow, start noticing how many things you say that are opinions and pay attention to the way you phrase your opinions. Then notice the reactions others have to the way you phrase your opinions.

The Blessing from Relationship Challenges

There are times in everyone's relationships where loving people can be hard. You or your loved ones may be going through an addiction, emotional challenges or just being human. Yet within each of you there is a deep well of resiliency, wisdom, and love that comes through God's power inside of you.

Many times, we don't get to choose our circumstances, yet we can choose how we experience them. Our relationships can either be a well of worried, judgmental thinking or holy ground.

Many years ago, when several loved ones were going through a season of deep struggle, I went to a recovery workshop lead by Rabbi Meir Kessler, director of the Jewish Recovery Center.

He shared the story from Exodus 3:1-11 where Moses approaches the burning bush. The first thing Moses notices is that the bush is ablaze, yet it is not consumed.

Rabbi Kessler said, "It's just like that for us and our loved ones. When we're going through significant challenges, we are not consumed by them because we have an in-dwelling God."

The next part of the story is drenched in grace. God tells Moses to take off his sandals for he is walking on holy ground.

Rabbi Kessler went on to share, "When we or our loved ones are struggling, go before God and take off your sandals for you are walking on holy ground."

I have seen this so clearly; the challenging circumstances are what bring us face to face with a God who is all powerful. A God who is ever present, who is always there, yet sometimes we only notice this divine power in our deep need.

Those things I didn't want to happen, the things that I could not control when brought before the Almighty in full surrender, became holy ground. My loved ones and I were not consumed by the challenges but rather consumed with God's amazing love and relentless grace.

Our God of all grace guided my actions, comforted my soul, calmed my fearful thinking, quieted my heart and carried us through it all.

God does not play favorites. The same God who did that for me is right there for you too. So, cry out to the Lord who loves you deeply and remember to take off your sandals because you're walking on holy ground.

Lord thank you for our loved ones who invite us to stand before your presence and walk on holy ground. Help us to love them the way you love. In Jesus name we pray.

Powerhouse Prayer for Loved Ones

How often in our relationships do we judge, get caught up in what we think someone else should or shouldn't do, and pray for specific ways we think someone else should change. Lord, forgive me I sometimes do that. Yet Paul teaches a profound lesson in where all change comes from ourselves or our loved ones.

Philippians 1:9-11 The Passion Translation (TPT) I continue to pray for your love to grow and increase beyond measure, bringing you into the rich revelation of spiritual insight in all things. This will enable you to choose the most excellent way of all becoming pure and without offense until the unveiling of Christ. And you will be filled completely with fruit of righteousness that are found in Jesus, the Anointed One—bringing great praise and glory to God!

As I was reading this Scripture it became abundantly clear that the pathway to being filled with goodness, choosing the most excellent way to live and bringing God glory comes as we grow in love.

And then as we grow in love we are filled with the revelation of spiritual insight in all things. It is then and only then can we choose God's ways and take the actions He wants us to take.

It's not up to us to fix or control circumstances or people it is an inside-out change that comes from God because "God is love." 1 John 4:7

Yet as we pray God's will, which is His word, then we are praying from a space of love not fear. "For His perfect love casts out all fear." 1 John 4:18.

In those moments when we want to fix or control another's behavior, what would happen if you remembered to pray for them to grow in love and to be who God called me?

The Art of Listening

Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

James 1:19

Now that you know how to identify whether a statement is a fact or opinion and you know the language to express your opinions, let us take the next step: truly listen to what another has to say. Many times, during conversations or arguments we are not listening to what the other person has to say; we are simply waiting for a break in the conversation so we can say what we want to say. Truly listening to another can be one of the greatest gifts you can give someone. Deep listening is being there for another just to understand what they are going through, not to give advice. Proverbs 2:2 expresses this so beautifully, "Making your ear attentive to wisdom and incline in your heart to understanding."

Deep listening also involves listening to yourself and listening to the Holy Spirit, while you are alone and with others.

Here are some practical strategies to become a better listener when faced with conflict. However, if you ever feel you are in harm's way find a safe space and get help.

Effective Listening Techniques in the Middle of Conflict

- When someone is upset, take several deep breaths to center and calm yourself. This will also help calm down the other person. It is called "sympathetic resonance."
- And your heart asks the Holy Spirit to put the words through you that he would have you say.
- Then say, "I'm here. You look upset. Is there something you want talk to about?"
- Suggest that you find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
- Look into the person's eyes and recognize he or she as a precious child of God.
- Say, "Help me understand what you are so upset about."
- When the other person is done, rephrase what he or she said. For example, "It sounds like you are _____. Am I understanding you correctly? Do you want some feedback, or did you just need to vent?"

In addition to defusing conflict, these strategies are effective in day-to-day conversations.

Effective Listening in Conversations

- Put your phone away and look at people when they are talking.
- Give them your full attention.
- Allow them to complete their thoughts without interrupting them.
- Wait for a break in dialogue and begin speaking.
- When others have expressed an opinion, reflect on what they said: "Sounds to me like you _____."

The process of resolving conflicts peacefully is learning to respect the way someone else sees something and to use language that creates peace. Each of you will see things in a different way; each of you will interpret things in your own way.

When it is your turn to speak, remember that your words hold great power. They can create peace or strife. Proverbs 18:21 strongly expresses this: "The tongue has the power of life and death."

Many years ago, I came across a quote, which has been attributed to many authors, and it changed my life: "It is better to be kind than be right." When it came to differences of opinion, by giving space for others to hold a different opinion, I was living out Romans 12:18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (NASB).

For years I created so much stress and conflict in my life because I had to be right; I had to make others see things the way I did; I had to have the last word. My need to be right led to years of arguments and fights. Then I discovered that everyone has the right to an opinion and views the world through a unique perspective.

How many arguments have you had trying to prove a point? What would happen if you allowed someone else to see things in a different way? For the rest of today, count how many times you felt the need to be right and what occurred from it.

Here are two questions that can prevent a conversation from escalating into conflict: (1) Is it more important for me to be loving or be right? (2) Will anything be different tomorrow, next week, next year, or five years from now if I am right?

Here is language to honor and support the views of another:

Words that honor another's perspective

- You may be right about that ...
- I can understand how you would feel that way...

- You have a point there...
- I see what you are talking about...

Would any of the above statements compromise your own values or would they respect another's point of view?

Speaking Truth

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference between the two.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

Some things in life we cannot ignore, and we must speak about them. When someone is hurting you, your loved ones, or themselves; when your needs are not being met; or when you can be a vehicle for positive change, you must speak your truth. Ephesians 4:15 tells us how to do that: "Speak the truth in love" (NLT). But how do you and your loved ones do this in a way that is peaceful and respects each person in the situation?

After you have expressed words that validate and support what the other person has said, you can share your feelings, using the following guidelines:

- When sharing feelings, always use "I" statements, rather than "you" accusations.
- Show gratitude and use language that expresses how you have been listening.
- Begin with a positive comment reflecting your common bond.

Words to Express Yourself While Honoring Another's Perspective

- You may be right about that. I am grateful for your honesty, and I hear _____.

- Our relationship is so important to me. I can understand how you would feel that way. I am concerned about _____ when I hear you say _____.
- I know you are working really hard at _____. You have a point in what you shared, and the way I see it is _____.
- I see what you are talking about. Are you open to hearing my perspective about _____?

Learning to express yourself is essential to creating loving relationships.

Effective Communication When You Are Angry

*But, children, you should never let
Such angry passions rise;
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.*

Isaac Watts

Now consider another situation. What happens if you are thinking angry thoughts about another? Check in with the Holy Spirit and see if a conversation needs to be had or is something that will pass like a storm cloud.

Tips for communicating when you are feeling angry

- Go to another room to calm down.
- Pray and ask God to help you communicate in a loving way.
- Breathe
- Wait until both of you have a quiet moment together when you can discuss the issue.
- Remember you are both doing the best you can at the level of your thinking in that moment.
- Use “I” statements rather than “you” accusations to express your emotions.
- Listen and try to understand your partner’s motives and feelings by asking, “Help me understand what you were thinking when _____?”

- Seek solutions together by using statements like: “How can we work together to alleviate this situation?” or “What steps can we take to eliminate this problem?”
- Express gratitude when good communication occurs.

Although it is important to settle down before speaking when you are angry, it is essential that you discuss issues as they come up. Holding in anger will only lead to stress and resentment. This will have a negative effect on your health and your relationships. Matthew 18:15 gives clear instruction: “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.”

What often happens is that when we hold in our emotions, little things continue to build, grow, and fester. Then something that could have been easily resolved turns into a huge conflict.

There's Still More

Although I believe the above strategies are effective for resolving conflict, there will be times and situations that do not require such in-depth communication. Several other strategies are effective for smaller conflicts or when you need extra tools to use along with your peaceful communication strategies. These are great tools to use yourself.

Compromise
Use humor
Ignore
Get help
Take turns
Apologize

The Match Game

Now that you know the strategies for peacefully resolving conflict, let’s play the Match Game. In the box below are five scenarios of conflict. Using the above strategies, pick the one that would best solve the problem.

The Conflict	Your Peaceful Solution
You and your partner want to watch two different shows at the same time.	
Your boss has picked someone else to head a project that you thought you would get.	
Your best friend thinks you have been ignoring her.	
Your date has been physically abusive.	
Your friend is seriously cranky.	
Your loved one wants to go to a different restaurant than you want to.	

When you are done, role-play your choices with either a partner or by yourself in the mirror.

Be a Star

We have covered so much information, and at this point you may be saying, “How will I remember what do to in the middle of a conflict? Remember that you are a STAR, and just like the stars in the night sky, you can brighten the darkness—the darkness of conflict. STAR is also an acronym for remembering the steps necessary to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner. Let’s examine each step:

STAR Steps
S—Stop and take a deep breath
T—Take it to prayer and ask for guidance

A—Choose a peaceful action
R—Re-evaluate

S—Stop and Take a Deep Breath

This stage is the most important because taking this step you make the choice not to react emotionally. Immediate emotional reactions cause a conflict to escalate, and in some instances, can turn a difference of opinion into an argument, an argument into a fight, and a fight into a violent episode. When you stop and take a deep breath, you can then move to the next stage and gain greater clarity about the situation.

T—Take It to Prayer

In taking it to prayer and asking for God's guidance, you can gain a better perspective of the situation. You can determine whether your reaction was based on a difference of opinion or if a real issue needs further communication. In the prayer stage you can also look at your reactions and determine whether you need time alone to allow your emotions to settle before speaking with the other person.

Finally ask the Holy Spirit to guide your actions. Proverbs 3:5–6 reminds us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

A – Choose a Peaceful Action

What action will you take and when will you take it? If you are angry, did you give yourself time to settle down?

R—Re-evaluate

As with everything in life, at times you will make mistakes. But out of your failures, defeats, and unsuccessful attempts, you learn and grow. As you learn to resolve conflicts peacefully, it may take several conversations to reach a resolution. Galatians 6:9 says it so beautifully, "Let us not become weary in doing good."

Within most of your relationships, there is room for mistakes. This stage allows you to re-evaluate the strategies you choose and determine if they worked. If the tools you chose did not work, guess what? You're human. Try another one, then another one, until you find the strategies that work for you. If your choices worked, congratulate yourself and thank God.

Celebrate the small victories and know that you will have many opportunities to practice these strategies throughout your life.

Let's Review

Be faithful to guard the sweet harmony of the Holy Spirit among you in the bonds of peace.

Ephesians 4:3 TPT

Are you ready to practice what we have discussed? Here's a step-by-step plan to get started in resolving problems peacefully.

- Notice a difference of opinion from a fact become aware of separate realities.
- Put down the phone and listen to understand what someone else is experiencing.
- Practice using words that honor another's opinion.
- Express yourself while respecting another's perspective.
- Give up your need to be right.

Use these strategies to address areas of conflict in your own life and see if there is a deeper level of peace and love in your relationships.