

Member's Quarterly

Spring 2020 Edition

Ask the Expert

Where is the Truth in Conflict?

The negative impacts on our cognitive abilities

Q: Why is it that the same two people in a conflict situation can view past events in such a different way?

A: I hear the word 'truth' brought forward many times in these conversations, or its opposite — 'you're a liar'.



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Parties in conflict often have difficulty being objective about the truth — or sticking to the facts. This is because each person involved has his or her own story or description of the events. People in conflict assign meaning and intent to each action and reaction. A look of despair is taken to be a glare of hatred. A missed call might be interpreted as an intention to ignore or demean another person. Each person reads his or her own meaning into everything — this is often referred to as subjective truth. We use our lens of how we see the world to interpret events. Assumptions are made based on how we interpret people's actions and lead to more assumptions which may be quite removed from the facts.

Ask any varying group of people who have gone through the same experience to describe what happened and you are likely to get many different stories. Police officers on the scene of an accident interview multiple witnesses and often never get a consensus on what happened. The elderly lady whose grandson was hurt by a drunk driver sees the car as "speeding through the intersection". The teenager who dreams about fast cars and admires racing sees the driver as "competent and skillful". These witnesses will see things differently from each other, but both are telling 'their' truth.

We've all heard about the fight/flight/freeze response that is triggered in conflict situations. Studies have shown that when a threat response is activated, it has a severely negative impact on our cognitive abilities. It automatically sends our limbic system into its automated response and fewer resources (oxygen and glucose in particular) become available to the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain where conscious thought takes place, our logical thinking and planning. This means that when a threat response is activated, our ability to **understand**, make decisions, **remember**, solve problems and communicate is impaired.

Nature has developed this emotional state to help us stay alive. Our ancestors had to consistently assess the risks around them. The ones that were nervous were very successful — and we are their offspring, sitting atop the food chain. Fear or anger sends signals to all parts of our body to help us fight, flee or sometimes freeze. It energizes us to prepare for action against a threat response. Hence, we come across the same results in our prefrontal cortex when we feel emotionally threatened and our abilities to remember, etc. become impaired. So, one person remembers you pounding a fist on the table in anger or backing away in fear when you have no recollection of this at all.

We need to recognize that multiple perspectives and views regarding a common event can simultaneously be both true and different from each other. That's because of the nature of human beings — we each bring our own histories and lenses to see and understand our world. It's also tied into the science behind how our brains work when we are in conflict and what we are able to understand and remember. So, when in conflict, try to move away from phrases like 'you are a liar' to more fitting phrases such as 'the truth of my experience is'.

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