By Susan Heitler, Ph.D.

HOW CONFLICTS ARE SETTLED

A Key To Effective Psychotherapy

I. Introduction.

When people sense disagreement with one another they tend to feel uncomfortable. At that point they can bring the disagreement out in the open and discuss it to find a mutually agreeable solution; they can fight about whose way will win; or they can avoid conflict by not talking about the problem. Family therapy helps couples and families to learn to talk over their conflicts rather than fight about them or avoid them.

Individual therapy helps people to understand and to settle the conflicts that arise within themselves. A person may want one thing and yet feel that he should do something else. Again the conflict can be addressed openly, fought out or suppressed. These inner conflicts give rise to feelings of anxiety, depression, or other experiences of emotional upset or tension.

Whether the conflict is between two people or within the thoughts and feelings of one person, the job of the psychotherapist is to help the patient find his way to a peaceful solution.

The remainder of this paper will explore the steps through which a conflict must pass if the conflict is to be settled in a way that leaves both sides feeling pleased with the solution. The content of conflicts of course may vary; but the steps in the process of settling conflicts consistently include the same basic elements.

II. The Resolution Process.

The process of settling a conflict generally includes three steps:

1. Opening Statements of Wishes
2. Exploration of Underlying Concerns
3. Mutual Resolution

Let's look at these steps one by one. To illustrate each step let us take an example of a married couple trying to decide on a plan for their summer vacation.

Step 1. Opening Statement of Wishes:

To begin, each side must express what he/she wants.

Example: He: Let's take a trip to Peking. I want to travel and explore.

She: I want to stay at home for the vacation. I don't want to travel.

Note that the first step consists of each side saying what is initially on their minds. Both sides speak; both sides listen to the other, even though what they want seems to be in conflict. He wants to travel. She wants to stay home.

Step 2. Exploration of Concerns:

This step involves a change in levels. In the first step the two sides each gave what they wanted; this time each side must look for the underlying concerns that their suggestion in Step 1. was meant to accomplish.

Example: He: I was thinking of an exploring vacation because I want to be physically active during our vacation. At my job I sit at a desk all day. On my vacation I would like to move around, to walk long distances, and to meet lots of new people.

She: I was thinking I want to stay in one place because I have been working very hard and I would like to be able to rest. I want a way to relax, to slow down and to recuperate. I also want time to read, since I have so little time to read most of the year.

Step 3. Mutual Resolution:

Agreement is found by seeking a solution that meets the concerns expressed by both sides in Step 2. In Step 1. the proposals had met each individual's concerns, but not the other person's. Now we are looking for solutions that meet both people's concerns.

Example: He: I want to be able to move around a lot, to walk, and to meet new people. You want to be able to sit still, to read and relax. How about if we go to the seacoast, to a beach. You can sit and relax on the beach; I can do beach sports and take long walks on the beach. You can relax alone in the sun. I can meet the people sitting near us on the beach, or participating in water sports with me. We can go to a place that is new for us, which I would like; at the same time we can stay in that one place rather than travel, which you would prefer.

I hope that this example illustrates the steps that conflicts pass through on the road to peaceful and mutually satisfactory solutions. Note that the conflict in the example is a relatively trivial one. Families who come for treatment are dealing with far more important issues than what to do on a vacation. I took this example only because it is a relatively simple one for illustrating the steps in moving from apparent conflict to mutual agreement. In fact however, families, and individuals, who fight over or who avoid big issues also tend to have poor skills at settling trivial issues.

III. Disruptions to the Three Step Process.

In treating people with emotional disorders we see several typical pathological patterns instead of the three steps described above. How do these patterns compare with healthy conflict-solving?

In Step One, Opening Statement of Wishes, there are two common problems. One side may never say what they want. Or one side (or both) does not listen to the other. Not saying will block a satisfactory process. And not listening will do the same. Both sides must express their initial desire or thought; both sides must listen respectfully to the other's point of view. There must be symmetry with both sides expressing what they want and both sides indicating that they hear and respect what the other wants.

Step Two, Exploration of Concerns requires commitment to a solution that pleases both sides. If either person is interested instead in WINNING, Step Two cannot proceed.

Step Two also requires the ability to explore a problem in depth instead of fastening on an immediate solution. This is difficult because it requires people to look below the surface, to ask themselves "Why do I want this?" Much of a therapist's work consists of skillfully helping people to explore their underlying concerns, much as a midwife skillfully assists a baby to emerge from the womb.

As with Step One, Step Two's discussion must be symmetrical. Both sides must express their underlying concerns; and both sides must listen thoughtfully to the other's concerns.

The Third Step, Mutual Resolution, is relatively easy if the first two steps have been successful. The one requirement is that thinking be open, so that new solutions, solutions that meet both people's primary concerns, can be discovered.

It is important to check that both sides are thoroughly satisfied at the end. This checking can be accomplished by asking each side "Is there any piece of this problem that still feels unfinished or uncomfortable for you?" A small adjustment to the solution at that point can prevent later dissatisfactions with the agreement.

What happens if this process is not followed? Depression occurs when one side wins and the other loses. The feelings of hopelessness and of anger that underlie depression come from feeling that one's concerns have been ignored, that one is not being listened to, that one cannot get what one wants.

Anger is another feeling that may emerge when we feel that we cannot get what we want, that our point of view is not being seriously considered by the other side. Anger from one person is likely to provoke anger in the other. Each side may then try to escalate over the other in order to dominate and win, and a fight is on. A fight produces winners and losers, and in the process abandons the actual problem. A fight typically leaves the original problem unsolved.

Avoiding conflicts sometimes looks preferable to fighting. The difficulty with avoidance is that the problem does not get attended to or solved. If the issue is indeed an important problem that needs

attention and action, avoiding can have serious consequences. Clearly a peaceful and mutually satisfactory conflict-solving process is preferable in most cases to either fight or fight responses.

IV. Conclusions.

I hope that this paper has given at least an initial set of ideas that can be useful to you. Note that the same three steps that form the essence of therapy apply as well to solving conflicts between healthy people, between groups, and even between nations. Perhaps we can all learn to listen more seriously to our own wishes and concerns, to hear the wishes and underlying concerns of others and then to seek solutions that encompass the concerns of both sides. If so we could become more peaceful and productive as individuals, as families, and as countries. Only then are we likely to see an international community of nations that can live together in harmony, in a world that values and sustains both diversity and unity.