

Finding New Ways to Deal with Conflict

by Leo McGarry

I did not know how to handle the difficult times in life. I thought the only way to deal with conflict was to fight. It didn't take long to find out that fighting didn't always make my life better; and I couldn't win every fight.

Conflict at home started when I was eight years old when my mom married my stepdad. He would drink too much and come home and fight with my mom. My stepdad found out my mom wouldn't put up with his abuse, so he took it out on us kids. It became an everyday thing for him to beat us. My mom didn't protect us because she was afraid to be alone and responsible for all of us. After this went on for a few years, we ended up being put in foster homes.

They sent us back home after a year. Everything was okay for a short time, then it appeared he was drinking a lot more and the abuse just seemed to get worse. Eventually, some of the people from school began asking questions about how the marks got on my head and back. By then, I was getting sick of the beatings and started talking about what was happening at home. So I was off to another foster home.

As I got older, my own drinking led to more conflict in my life, especially in my marriage. My wife and I would fight so bad that I'd feel I had to leave. She didn't like that I'd walk away. Before long, all the fighting led to everything we had together coming to an end. After our divorce, I thought the best way to deal with my problems was more drinking, more fighting, and more women. I experienced many years of such wrong thinking; I was in and out of jail with lots of fines and lots of losses.

Now I'm 45, in prison and learning to change and find other ways to deal with conflict. I've learned that walking away doesn't mean I'm less of a man. It just means I understand I cannot have control over everything that happens, but I

can control myself. I understand now that it doesn't help to do things that cause more conflict. Thinking I always had to win, in the end, caused me to lose.

I'm now making more right decisions and fewer wrong ones. Those wrong decisions I made in the past have helped me to understand that I needed to change. And believe me, the change was a lot harder than changing clothes; it took some time. The decision to change started with loving myself.

I still get mad but I act only after thinking things over and trying to arrive at a positive point of view. I don't let today's conflict become tomorrow's pain.

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