



Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**
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Letting Go of Running Away

Me: “So, how did you handle it when she asked you to do this thing you really didn’t want to do?”

Client: “I said I would do it.”

Me: “Even though you didn’t want to do it?”

Client: “Yeah, it wasn’t worth the fight.”

And then I realize I’ve spotted one – the elusive conflict avoider. Generally not seen in a therapist’s office except under duress (i.e. having been dragged in), or until they realize the lifelong patterns they have been in.

I always know when I have a conflict avoider on my hands. They usually come in telling me how wrong they have always been treated in relationships, how they are always taking care of other people but no one seems to care about them, how they keep getting stomped on.

When I begin to ask how they react to these unfair demands, that’s when the truth comes out. “Well, I didn’t say anything.” Or, “I just couldn’t take it anymore and I blew up.”

Conflict avoiders are runaways. They run away from anything negative, and they perceive much to be negative. To them, standing up for oneself is being bossy. Acknowledging you are good at something is bragging. Telling someone your needs is picking a fight. And since being bossy, bragging or picking a fight is never a good thing, they must be avoided.

And conflict avoiders tend to pick partners that will help them to continue to avoid conflict: bossy, demanding people who like to get their way, and who will enact a price for not going along with them. This only reinforces to the conflict avoider that their way is best: just don’t rock the boat.

The problems begin when the conflict avoider dares to think his/her own opinion might have merit at times. And they usually begin to think this when someone else introduces them to the concept, be it a friend, co-worker, etc. I am often reminded of the client I once worked with who had never truly considered that she was intelligent until she got a job. First her parents, then her partner had convinced her that she was stupid and useless. In fact, she was lucky they put up with her! She spent all her time flying under the radar and avoiding conflict. Then she had to go to work (after all, it was the least she could do since she had been mooching off her partner all those years). As she had good days at work, she began to realize how bad being at home was. As she was given positive feedback at work, she realized how little of that she got at home. As people listened to her and valued her opinion at work... (you get the picture). It wasn’t long before she was in my office and we began to develop a plan for her future that did not revolve around keeping everyone else happy.

The other situation I see so often has more to do with those people who are dragged into therapy. Usually some type of indiscretion has occurred. Conflict avoiders are very often unfaithful in some way. Because they are not getting

their needs met in the relationship, and because they don’t think they should ask to get their needs met (nor do they know how), they will often go outside of the relationship to get those needs met. Secrets are also a big part of relationships for conflict avoiders. They do not want their partner unhappy with them, so they say whatever they need to so conflict can be avoided.

Convincing a conflict avoider that saying “no” is not only okay, but necessary at times, is difficult. As is “I don’t like it when you do that” or “this isn’t working for me.” Just as difficult is convincing the partner that the only way the relationship can be healthy is if honesty supersedes everything, and the partner must create the environment where honesty is safe. If punishment is doled out when anyone stands up for him/herself, either the conflict avoider will regress to old patterns (including secrets and/or infidelities) or will begin to outgrow the partner in healthiness and the relationship will no longer be viable.

As a marriage and family therapist, there are certain relationship patterns that are very predictable. The way a couple handles conflict accurately predicts the viability of the relationship. I encourage you to take a look at yourself. It’s time to stop running away!