The Comfort Zone and Resistance to Change

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will discuss how resistance to change can impact the conflict resolution process. The areas of focus include:

1. The Comfort Zone
2. Fears That Prevent Change
   a. Fear of Upsetting Others
   b. Fear of the Unknown
   c. Fear of Failure
   d. Fear of Success
3. Effect of Fear on the Conflict Resolution Process

1. The Comfort Zone

The term **comfort zone** conjures up feelings of a place that's comfortable, but that's not always what it means.

The comfort zone is the range of situations and feelings that a person is accustomed to. It's simply something that we've grown used to, not necessarily something that's comfortable.

In fact, we may resist moving out of a situation that is quite uncomfortable just because we have a fear, or any number of fears, about what change or something new will look like.

TERM TO KNOW

Comfort Zone
The range of situations, feelings, etc that a person is accustomed to.

2. Fears That Prevent Change

There are several kinds of fears that can get in the way and keep us in our comfort zone even when we know, somewhere inside of ourselves, that a change would be positive.

2a. Fear of Upsetting Others

The first fear is the **fear of upsetting others**, or a perception that one's actions will cause pain to others and thus cause emotional harm to the self.

⤷ EXAMPLE Let's say you have a childhood friend that you love dearly, but they make terrible decisions. They call you for help every time they are in trouble. You are uncomfortable and unhappy in this relationship. But you share friends, do activities with this person, and have longstanding history. So you don't leave; you don't consider making a change because you're afraid of hurting others.

⤷ EXAMPLE You are living somewhere where you can't find work, but you grew up here. It's your hometown, and in many ways you like it. Even though it's not working for you, you're afraid to leave. You're afraid to move somewhere larger, maybe a larger city where you could find work, because you don't want to upset your family and friends who also live here. This can be a strong fear that keeps you in your comfort zone.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Fear of Upsetting Others
A perception that one's actions will cause pain to others and thus cause emotional harm to the self.

2b. Fear of the Unknown

In either of those scenarios, someone might also stay put because of a **fear of the unknown**, or a perception that undertaking a task will expose one to threatening situations.

⤷ EXAMPLE Let's return to the friendship situation. You might think, "If I end this friendship, what's going to happen to my friend? People have known us as inseparable for years. Who will I turn to?" You might have a fear of what the unknown will look like. Keeping the friendship, as dissatisfying as that is, feels safer than jumping into what you don't know.

⤷ EXAMPLE The same may be true about moving out of the town you live in. You may not want to move across the country because you're not sure if you're going to expose yourself to some threatening situations: "I don't know what it will be like to live in a larger city. I don't know if it will work for me." This is how fear of the unknown can keep us in our comfort zone.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Fear of the Unknown
A perception that undertaking a task will expose one to threatening situations.

2c. Fear of Failure

The **fear of failure** is a perception that not succeeding in a task will harm the self in tangible or emotional ways.

⤷ EXAMPLE There's a new job you would like to apply for, but you think, "I don't know if I can do this. I'm afraid I might fail, and then I'll be embarrassed. It just won't work; I don't think I have the skills." This fear of

failure might prevent you from applying for the job.

↪ **EXAMPLE** You have number of friends who like to go skiing, but you're afraid you'll fail at this. You might think, "I'm not very good at sports. What if I break my leg? I'm afraid." Because you're afraid you'll embarrass yourself by failing, you might decide you're not going to try this new sport. This is how the fear of failure can hold you back.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Fear of Failure
A perception that not succeeding in a task will harm the self in tangible or emotional ways.

2d. Fear of Success

Fear of success, on the other hand, is a perception that actually succeeding at something will harm the self in a tangible or emotional way.
Fear of success might seem like a counterintuitive concept because success is considered to be something that everybody wants. But if you step back and think about it, fear of success is not that unusual.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Consider the new job scenario. You might think about what your life will look like if you get the job. There are going to be a lot of new responsibilities and challenges: "I'm afraid of this success. Am I going to be able to keep up? Will this change my social circle? Am I good enough for this? Can I really do this?" Sometimes the fear of success and the fear of failure go back and forth in a situation like this.

↪ **EXAMPLE** Fear of success can also present itself in young people. Let's say you're a teacher, and there's a child in your class who's very bright, but he's just not studying or getting good grades.

This child knows if he exhibits good study habits, he might be looked upon as a "nerd" or a "geek" by a group of his peers that doesn't want to be associated with the smart kids in school. Because of peer pressure and the perception that succeeding will in some way harm him emotionally, this child prefers not to succeed.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Fear of Success
A perception that succeeding at something will harm the self in tangible or emotional ways.

3. Effect of Fear on the Conflict Resolution Process

Any or all of these types of fears can come into play during the conflict resolution process.

↪ **EXAMPLE** When you're sitting with someone, and there's a solution on the table, you might have a fear of the unknown if you're being asked to make some sort of change; this proposed change could also incite a fear of success or failure. Or perhaps the change is going to affect others, and you're afraid of upsetting them.

When two parties are hesitating because of a decision or an agreement that is being discussed, the role of the conflict-resolver is to ask questions that both acknowledge the parties' fears and help shed light on what their perceptions of the resolution are.

By drawing people out to look at the resistance that might be happening in the conflict resolution process because of one or more of these fears, the mediator can help the parties address why the comfort zone seems more comfortable than making the change.

☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **the comfort zone** is not always a place of comfort, but rather a state of familiarity that we can get stuck in because of **fears that prevent change**, such as the fear of upsetting others, fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and fear of success. You now understand the **effect that fear has on the conflict resolution process**. The parties need to confront and understand the reasons for their fears so that they can agree on and embrace a change that might be part of the resolution. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.

🗎 TERMS TO KNOW

Comfort Zone
The range of situations, feelings, etc that a person is accustomed to.

Fear of Failure
A perception that not succeeding in a task will harm the self in tangible or emotional ways.

Fear of Success
A perception that succeeding at something will harm the self in tangible or emotional ways.

Fear of Upsetting Others
A perception that one's actions will cause pain to others and thus cause emotional harm to the self.

Fear of the Unknown
A perception that undertaking a task will expose one to threatening situations.