

The Case for Staying with Conflict

In his book *Staying with Conflict*, Bernard Mayer posits that people engaged in an ongoing conflict would do well to take a constructive approach to enduring and entrenched disagreements. While challenging to do so, it is important that individuals not run away from the difficulty, resort to destructive escalation, or attempt to find a grand solution that ignores the conflict's deep roots. Mayer argues that staying with conflict is what allows us to lead life to the fullest.

He contends that staying engaged with conflict requires courage, vision, resources, skills and stamina, and that individuals involved in long-term conflict often need help and support in this effort. When we stay with conflict, we remain engaged with the core issues that we care about, we continue to work on the problems or concerns that are important to us, and we continue to relate to the people with whom we are in conflict. Crucially, we also continue to communicate about the conflict and to advocate for what is important to us.

In kind, there should also be a conscious attempt to deepen our understanding of how others think and feel about the issues. By staying engaged with conflict, Mayer claims that we develop the emotional and intellectual capacity to live with our enduring differences but also, importantly, continue to work on them even though we know that the core conflict may continue over a long period of time.

Though Mayer encourages us to stay with an enduring conflict, he recognizes that the urge to avoid conflict is always there, and in some cases, avoiding a conflict is wise and even essential. Although one message of this book is that conflict avoidance is a major obstacle to long-term healthy relationships and growth, we might ask ourselves why the urge to avoid conflict is so pervasive, even when avoidance appears to be ineffective and/or destructive.

Mayer explains that there are some powerful and valid incentives to avoid conflict. For example, individuals may avoid conflict due to: fear, feelings of uncertainty, feelings of powerlessness, inadequate skills to handle the situation, and resource depletion for possible ways to address or resolve the issues. Individuals may also avoid conflict to conserve energy, avoid a sense of shame, and preserve any relationships that are at risk because of the conflict. It is indeed a complex process. For Mayer, these factors of avoidance play out in many different ways, and often times, they reinforce each other as well. And, these are obstacles that many people experience. We can think of enduring conflicts as those struggles that are embedded in people's lives, relationships, and institutions because they stem from their most deeply held values. The key is learning more about those values and then how to endure conflict. Staying with conflict calls on all involved to develop their capacity to fully engage in life with all its perplexities and challenges.

Mayer, B. (2009). *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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