

# The nature of all conflict

by Garland C. McWatters, Jr.

Conflict is interesting, as long as it's happening to someone else. In fact, conflict is a central element in much of our entertainment. It is the number one element in whether an event is selected to report in the news. A story is even more interesting if the conflict involves a prominent individual or institution. Add to that some odd or unusual twist, and the story is a slam dunk to be the day's lead story. Conflict also is a natural occurrence, a collision of opposing forces.

I have a simple definition of conflict. *We are in a state of conflict anytime we are not getting what we want, need, or expect, or when something is being forced on us that we do not want.* The intensity of the conflict can vary from mild irritation to debilitating panic.

All personal conflict centers around and originates from the disruption of our comfort zone—the world according to me—and the release of emotional energy that accompanies it. (See the figure below.) We work hard to create and maintain our world. Generally, we seek balance and stability: homeostasis.

## The world according to me

The only world we know is the one we create in our mind. As we think, so it is. Perception is reality. At least it's *your reality*. We define ourselves within the context of our individual world. What we believe and value, our habits and behaviors, our likes and dislikes, our relationships, our hobbies and interests, our hopes and dreams all shape the "me" that you understand to be you—self-consciousness, self-awareness, identity.

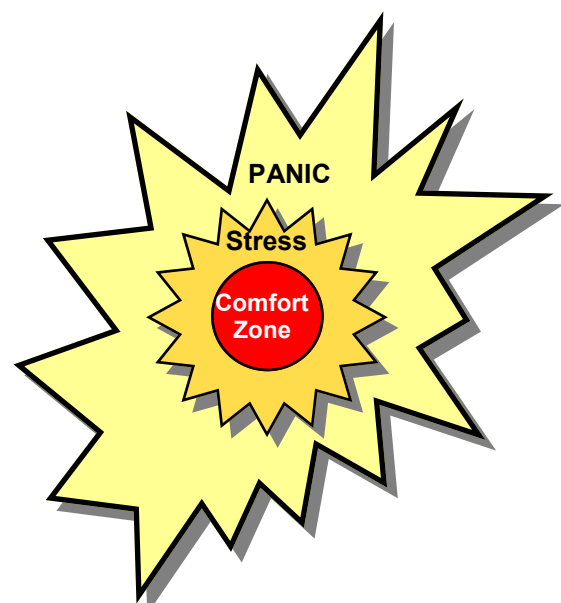
The stress zone lies on the fringe of the comfort zone. It's the region in which we experience the emotional discomfort that goes with the disruption of our world. Stress actually begins slightly inside the boundary when we anticipate the possibility of a conflict—a feeling we call apprehension. We

experience stress when the zone is breached or when we tread outside the comfort zone, even if we do so voluntarily. The body releases stress hormones primarily in the gastro-intestinal tract causing anxiety, that gnawing feeling in the gut.

Panic is an exaggerated reaction. If the threat is perceived to be great enough, the brain sends the message to release the chemicals to stimulate us to fight or flee. The intent is self preservation. It doesn't matter whether the threat is physical, emotional, or psychological. All threats are considered real. Because of the specific nature of the neural wiring we will always react first and think about it later when we feel safer.

## Protecting the comfort zone

We have erected a boundary around our comfort zone. The sign posted at the boundary of our world is clear: *don't mess with my world*. Anytime someone messes with our world, they might do so at their peril. We protect our world because we are protecting our self. Any trespassing is a threat, which produces stress or panic. It's a perceived attack, and our body is wired



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to react. So it is for everyone without exception. However, the level of reaction will be influenced by the type of boundary we have built.

For some the boundary is like a fortress. Its purpose is to prevent intruders and to protect what's inside. They put a lot of effort and resources building and maintaining the walls. Entrance through the boundary is closely monitored and controlled. The message is clear: do not enter without permission. Such individuals are vigilant to watch for change and sound the warning at any hint of it. Their beliefs and ideas are fixed and unmovable. Changing to them means rebuilding the walls, a process that takes time and a tremendous expenditure of emotional energy.

For others the boundary is more like a membrane. The boundary is definite, but flexible and somewhat porous allowing flow between the interior and the regions outside. Such individuals are available to change and are able to reconfigure the "shape" of their comfort world without feeling that the change is necessarily an intrusion or a threat to their overall identity. In some cases they will even probe the boundary themselves to determine what lies outside their comfort world. They are willing to stress themselves within limits in order to expand the boundaries of their comfort.

Others have a boundary that resembles a split-rail fence. It's there for convenience of definition, but there are few if any restrictions about who or what crosses. Such individuals embrace change and often look forward to the new "visitors" to their world. They seek new experiences and are continually restacking the fence to encompass new found ideas. For them there is more stress in no change and being forced to endure the status quo.

### **Change, conflict and the comfort zone**

Change brings conflict automatically because it is an intrusion into the comfort zone and our natural tendency toward homeostasis. We seek to

maintain the *status quo*. Any disruption requires effort to rebalance.

Resolving the conflict means we must find a new level of comfort with new ideas, new ways of acting, and different values and beliefs that do not line up with ours. We might face the absence of a long cherished element in our world such as an individual, a place or an event that is taken away. There is always a period of readjustment as we "learn" our way through the conflict. Therefore, the stress zone is the learning zone. As we seek homeostasis, we must come to new understandings of ourselves and our surroundings.

There are two basic approaches to resolving the conflict. We can get what we want, or we can redefine what we want and bring it into alignment with what we have. Both are a rebalancing. Healthy resolutions requires exploring both approaches. Sometimes we are in conflict because we aren't sure about what we want.

As you can guess, the type of boundary to the comfort zone has an impact on how one will approach the possible resolution strategy. Generally, the more rigid the boundary, the more set one is on having it his or her way. The conflict for them might be more threatening and intense than for those with a more adjustable and porous boundary.

Those with a rigid boundary are more conservative in their approach. They tend to protect the *status quo* and move slowly toward change, if at all. They tend toward changing in ways to make their world safer, more predictable and more controlled. They find comfort in the "good ole days," and prefer tried-and-true solutions.

Those with the split-rail boundary tend to be more progressive and open-ended in their expectations. They tend to change in ways that include and experiment with possibilities. Being safer means being more adaptable. They find comfort in exploring a myriad of ways to make things better in the future.