

"A very thoughtful, practical, and upbeat book with tips you can apply to any relationship."

—Bill Eddy, author of *It's All Your Fault* and Chief Innovation Officer of High Conflict Institute

***The Secret to* GETTING ALONG**



**(And Why It's EASIER
Than You Think)**

**3 STEPS TO
LIFE-CHANGING
CONFLICT
RESOLUTION**

GABRIELLE HARTLEY

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Published by Sourcebooks, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hartley, Gabrielle, author.

Title: The secret to getting along (and why it's easier than you think) : 3 steps to life-changing conflict resolution / Gabrielle Hartley.

Description: Naperville, Illinois : Sourcebooks, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "Conflict is everywhere—in our homes, at work, in our social media feeds. But conflict isn't inherently bad... in fact, it's a normal and healthy part of human relationships. Mediation expert Gabrielle Hartley argues that we've forgotten that disagreement is normal and even necessary in our relationships; instead, we've normalized a zero-sum approach to interpersonal conflict and prioritized "winning" at all costs. The Secret to Getting Along (and Why It's Easier Than You Think!) will help you reframe your approach to conflict, harness the power of storytelling, and transform your reactions to conflict and build cooperative, thriving relationships across all areas of your life"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022047823 (print) | LCCN 2022047824 (ebook) | (hardcover) | (pdf) | (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Conflict management. | Interpersonal relations.

Classification: LCC HM1126 .H374 2023 (print) | LCC HM1126 (ebook) | DDC 303.6/9--dc23/eng/20221018

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022047823>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022047824>

Printed and bound in the United States of America.
VP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

Hillary and Simone had been best friends since high school. After graduation, they attended the same cosmetology school. While renting chairs side by side at a local salon, they developed a business plan and went on to purchase a hair salon in Chicago. One decade later, their salon boasted a top-notch team of stylists, and they were typically booked out weeks in advance. Their staff was happy, the money was flowing in, and they had a loyal client base. By all markers, these best friends had created a stellar business together.

Hillary couldn't have been happier. She was doing what she'd always dreamed of doing: earning a comfortable salary and working with her best friend. Simone was also satisfied with the salon...at least she had been for the first few years. While she had loved developing the business into a thriving enterprise, she began to feel a growing dissatisfaction every time she walked

into the salon. She wanted more. What was once fun suddenly felt humdrum. She began to nurture aspirations of earning more money and operating the salon on a much larger scale.

Over drinks, Simone raised the subject of business expansion with Hillary, starting with moving the business to a better location. Hillary immediately replied that it would be “awesome” to move the business. Simone came away feeling like she and Hillary were both excited about the idea. Yet, unbeknownst to Simone, Hillary was expressing excitement without attaching any actual intention to move the business. Though proud of the business and every bit as passionate about it as Simone, she didn’t feel the same urge to expand. When Simone suggested the idea, Hillary didn’t want to shoot it down and disappoint her friend. She thought Simone might forget about it, and the two could continue with their successful business venture.

For Simone, however, “awesome” was all she needed. She took the ball and ran with it, immediately setting out to find the perfect new location. Within a month, she found the ideal spot, but to her surprise and dismay, Hillary avoided signing the lease until the space was no longer available. Two months later, the same thing happened with a different space—this time, Simone didn’t just lose another lease, she also was about to lose a business contact who had been helping her scout for new locations. Simone angrily blamed Hillary for being slow to sign the lease yet again, then she reacted with outrage when Hillary expressed confusion about the problem.

Hillary didn't understand why Simone was so frustrated. To her, Simone had impulsively charged forward before they'd had any serious conversation about making such a big change. But from Simone's point of view, they'd made a joint decision to move forward. Simone felt so aggravated that she could hardly bring herself to talk to Hillary.

From there, Hillary and Simone's partnership and decades-long friendship quickly unraveled. Hillary bought out Simone's interest in the business, and Simone left to strike out on her own. Even though she had retained the staff and client list, Hillary lacked Simone's business smarts and financially mismanaged the salon until she had no option but to close it. Simone had an equally rough time of it because without Hillary's perceptiveness, she was ill-equipped to hire talented stylists who would attract more clientele.

But perhaps more importantly, Hillary and Simone lost what might have otherwise been a cherished lifelong friendship with each other. What could have been a thoughtful conversation about the future direction of a successful business built by two smart, accomplished women who truly cared about each other became an argument that ended up derailing their personal and professional relationship. The women failed to meaningfully communicate with each other. They made assumptions, became defensive, blamed each other, and eventually cut each other off.

What happened to Hilary and Simone has always been a natural part of our basic human communication failure—and

now, it has become far too common. What starts as disagreement morphs into senseless argument loops that upend business partnerships, friendships, and marriages. And, in our increasingly isolated bubbles, we're less likely to make the effort to repair these rifts than ever before. Few among us need to be reminded that we're experiencing unprecedented levels of interpersonal tension, disagreement, and disinclination to meaningfully engage with each other amid conflict. Long-standing family gatherings have been canceled over COVID-19 vaccination or mask debates. Political disagreements have dismantled decades-long friendships. We fight over politics, money, personal health decisions, parenting, and so much more, leaving everyone lonelier and more susceptible to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety than ever before.ⁱ

But in focusing on our increased polarization, or chalking everything up to “these crazy times,” we're overlooking an even more worrisome part of the equation: **We have gotten really, really bad at managing conflict. Somewhere along the way, we've forgotten that some level of disagreement is normal and even necessary in our relationships.** We've normalized a zero-sum approach to interpersonal conflict and prioritized “winning” at all costs. While being right may be satisfying, it's not going to do much for us in the long run, especially when it comes to compassion, connection, and community. Even so, we've become deeply attached to our positions, leaving us worse listeners than ever before. Moreover, we feel helpless in the face

of all the conflict infiltrating every facet of our lives at home, work, and online.

Fortunately, we have tremendous agency to remake our relationship with conflict—and to emerge as stronger, calmer, and kinder people. This book will give you the transformative mind-set and skills needed to embrace and then move beyond personal and professional conflict—using the same methods I’ve conceptualized and successfully utilized in my law and mediation practice for over two decades.

Welcome to the YES Method

When I was thirty years old, I clerked for a divorce court judge in New York City. I could never have imagined how much I would love—and excel at—bringing a messy divorce to a relatively tidy close. Weaving together a resolution that was accepted by both aggressive attorneys and angry clients became my calling.

When I married my husband and relocated from Brooklyn to Northampton, Massachusetts, I opened a private mediation practice centered on alternative dispute resolution, which meant I was able to work collaboratively with the attorneys on the other side to reach reasonable resolutions. Together, we were able to support our clients in reaching a compromise that each party could live with rather than trying to “win” the most points in court. Today, I have expanded my mediation practice online to help people around the country reach the best possible outcome for their conflict-filled divorce. Sometimes there are lawyers

involved; often, it's just two people trying to close a difficult chapter of their lives without destroying each other in the process. In either case, I work with them carefully to arrive at a solution using a structure called the *YES Method* that can be applied to your everyday conflict, which we'll explore in the coming chapters. Spoiler alert: navigating conflict better all begins with *you*. The secret to getting along is something everyone can access, even in the most entrenched arguments. The best part of this method is that it is super doable because it prescribes small changes that result in big outcomes. Of course, you will have to really engage in the three steps and be mindful of them each time you find yourself in a conflict. Once you begin engaging with the *YES Method*, you will see that getting along better, if not perfectly, is attainable in most relationships. More on this in a moment...

In 2019, I published my first book, *Better Apart: The Radically Positive Way to Separate*, to help readers avoid contentious and destructive conflict in divorce. I focused *Better Apart* around five essential elements: patience, respect, peace, clarity, and forgiveness. By using these five lenses, I helped people going through divorce reconsider how they were handling their process at every step along the way. I've since given dozens of talks and interviews focused on changing the divorce conversation by helping couples get through divorce with ease, grace, and personal power.

After the publication of *Better Apart*, though, something strange happened: past and present clients, along with many of

my friends and colleagues, weren't just approaching me to ask for guidance on their divorce cases—they also wanted help managing the conflict disrupting other relationships in their lives. I felt this called for a different tool kit than the one I prescribed in *Better Apart*, which was structured to help readers move forward after a relationship had already irreversibly broken down. I wanted to create a program for developing a healthier relationship with conflict altogether, one that was easy to grasp but would spur deep thought and foundational change.

It was at this time that I began to codify the three steps that I had been intuitively using in mediation for more than two decades. I realized that I often employed these steps to stop conflict from destroying relationships. By walking people through these same steps, I thought, I might be able to help them navigate a wide array of situations in their lives that were stirring up conflict, from coping with household tiffs to dealing with their beloved-yet-hot-headed friends and relatives who held what they deemed obnoxious political perspectives. I came to call this the YES Method.

Y stands for *your* role in the conflict.

E is for the *emotional* story.

S stands for *shelving* heated conversations.

By integrating these three accessible skills, the YES Method has the power to stop all manner of conflict in its tracks and

keep it from escalating into all-out chaos. It prevents us from being overly reactive to conflict and cutting ties with people who have been an important part of our lives. It can provide us with other, better options besides ignoring, avoiding, or escalating the point of contention—options that can open pathways to greater togetherness. And, perhaps most importantly, it encourages the type of self-reflection and challenging emotional work that encourages serious personal growth. In these pages, I will counsel you that before you consider canceling a friend, writing off a relative, quitting a job, or leaving a marriage, you should first try saying YES to looking at conflict differently.

To be clear, I'm not talking about slapping a smile on an ugly situation, nor burying your head in the sand around secrets and lies. I'm also not suggesting that this Method is an alternative to counseling or therapy. There are many serious, traumatic, and difficult life situations and experiences that will require professional help beyond what is offered on these pages. I also acknowledge that my privileged life has given me a particular viewpoint and limitation in experience. That said, so long as your basic needs are met and you are not engaged in an abusive relationship, you will see that by engaging in these three simple steps, you have the ability to truly feel better and live with far less circular and unnecessary conflict in every facet of your life.

With the YES Method, I will show you how to build cooperative, thriving relationships amid tensions at work, across conflicting political opinions, and over the endless debates on

how to parent—or how to load the dishwasher. Whether you're at the divorce mediation table, the kitchen table, or the virtual table in the comments section, getting along *better* is possible, and it's easier than you think. Through exercises, stories, conversation openers, and other practical tools, you will learn to stay calm and balanced even when facing the most uncomfortable conversations or explosive interpersonal situations. Again, I would like to emphasize that if you are in an abusive relationship, walking away is the only answer. But often, in many scenarios, we have the power to shift our dynamic in surprising ways that are feasible, and supportive of our well-being as well as the health of our relationships over the longer term.

The YES Method isn't going to give you immediate, everlasting peace in all relationships, much less resolve all your conflict. However, it will give you the tools you need to get closer to having higher function within complicated interpersonal dynamics. The fact is, peace and resolution are often fleeting, especially when we're facing entrenched conflict with those in our innermost circles. My goal is to help you achieve emotional freedom—what I call “equanimity”—from conflict. This freedom allows us to look at the big picture, approach conflict with a greater sense of neutrality, and achieve more satisfying compromises and conclusions. Instead of spending hours replaying arguments over and over in your head, mourning friendships that crumbled after unforgivable blow-ups, or circling around the same points of contention for weeks, months, or even years, you'll instead learn

to accept conflict as part of every relationship—and use it as a valuable opportunity to grow and achieve balance in your life.

Finding equanimity starts with looking inward. Though many of us think of conflict as outward-facing, the truth is that our experience of conflict is largely subjective and springs from our internal perceptions, habits, and narratives. In other words, conflict happens not only because of a difference of opinion on a matter; it can also arise due to the deep-seated habits, perceptions, and mind-sets that govern everything we do.ⁱⁱ

The YES Method is neither a purely prescriptive guide to mediation nor about getting what you “want” out of conflict. Rather, it is a method that is designed to help you make your relationships better and, maybe more importantly, to reach a state of inner balance. Noticing where we hit a wall of disagreement with others (and within ourselves) is illuminating. It is an opportunity both to reach greater understanding of what makes us tick as well as to successfully navigate the sometimes incredibly annoying world around us.

As you go through these pages, you will start to become more aware of your role in your conflict, and you’ll receive coaching to help you examine how your habitual ways of thinking, acting, and reacting are contributing to your conflict. This inner clarity offers a pathway for recalibrating your relationships from the inside out. You will learn to unpack the emotional story and shelve heated conversations to avoid unnecessary or unproductive conversations. As you read on and embrace the YES

Method, you will **see how small changes have big impact**. And you will become more self-aware, more thoughtful, and more finely attuned to the bigger picture as you navigate the pitfalls and obstacles of life and human relationships.

The Secret: The YES Method

The YES Method consists of three key steps: understanding *your* role in the conflict (your part of the dynamic, your relationship goals, and your attitudes and habits), unpacking the *emotional* story (understanding each other's true needs and our own inner narratives), and *shelving* (implementing pausing behaviors tailored to reroute potential conflict and to make conversations go more smoothly). These steps have an intentional progression from inner agency to outer behavior.

Recognizing that conflict is a gift that helps a relationship evolve has enabled me to resolve hundreds of complex mediations. Better yet, it has allowed me to maintain a rich network of friends and colleagues who have vastly different viewpoints from me and one another. The YES Method encourages more measured interactions, deeper conversations, and, most of all, an emotionally uplifting sense of equanimity at home, at work, and in life. By using the YES Method, you will gain a renewed ability to engage with your inner self and the world around you.

Even when the most seismic discord breaks loose—pandemics, political divisions, and institutional wrongdoings—you can always turn to the YES Method. The most exciting part

of the YES Method is that the process fundamentally changes how we interact with and respond to others without us having to change a thing in our lives—other than our minds. It's a roadmap to free you from the quagmire of seemingly unmanageable conflict.

To help you learn and implement the YES Method in your life, *The Secret to Getting Along (And Why It's Easier Than You Think)* is divided into four sections: "Part I: Your Role in the Conflict," "Part II: The Emotional Story," "Part III: Shelving Heated Conversations," and the secret weapon at the end of the book: "Part IV: Yes, You Can Get Along."

Part I: Your Role in the Conflict. This first section demonstrates why conflict is always a two-way street. Consciously or unconsciously, we tend to assign full blame to the other party with whom we're in conflict, relinquishing our role in the dynamic.ⁱⁱⁱ In this section, I'll instruct you to look deeply at *your* role in the conflict in your life and to identify the relationship dynamics that are causing you the most anguish. I'll also invite you to think carefully about your goal for a given relationship when in conflict and to consider what you truly stand to gain from trying to "win" an argument. This section will further illuminate how powerfully our habitual ways of thinking and acting can shape our interactions.^{iv} By mindfully paying attention and making small changes to habitual thought patterns and behaviors, you will find that you can spend less time arguing and more time enjoying your relationships.

Part II: The Emotional Story. Once you gain awareness of your role in conflict and an understanding of how it might be beneficial to restructure your habits, I'll take you further inward and teach you how to listen in a way that will help you achieve better outcomes. Specifically, this section will cover how to listen for what you are actually arguing over—or the *why* versus the *what* in conflict. I will also stress the all-important need to be aware of your inner narrative. Only by carefully listening to the underlying source of our reactions can we begin to figure out what's really motivating us. At the same time, you'll learn to genuinely listen to what the other person is saying and to ask questions designed to develop a true understanding of their position. You'll be encouraged to take the time to fully process what you're hearing rather than immediately reacting to how it makes you feel. Calling upon the self-knowledge and habits gained in Part I, you'll be able to temper your reaction to conflict and stay open to the deeper meaning underlying each party's words and actions.

Part III: Shelving Heated Conversations. This third section will help you bring your more mindful inner behavior into alignment with your outer behavior. By shelving or pausing when conversations and relationships become heated, you will radically alter the outcomes both in your own behavior and in your relationships. Making space to think and emotionally settle before reacting will help you identify the words and actions that will elicit more of what you want out of interactions. Even if you're the only one engaging in this process, you'll become less defensive

and will learn to create firmer boundaries in addition to learning behavioral shifts that will prove vital in changing how you respond to others, from negative to neutral and even positive.

Part IV: Yes, You Can Get Along. Even despite your best efforts in enthusiastically adopting the practices described in the first three sections, deeply entrenched conflict may still flourish. This section invites you to strategize how to go deeper by getting vulnerable with your vision of any particular relationship, whether it is with another person or more importantly, with yourself. I will teach you strategies to prepare for future conflict by taking a step backward before moving forward. I'll stress how it's possible to get more of what you want out of all your relationships by embracing your vulnerabilities and visualizing your goals, thereby bringing them into reality.

This final section will also address the reality that the YES Method is an ongoing process. Compromise, concessions, and allowances are necessary in all our interactions. The ultimate goal is for you to get the most out of your relationships and interactions over time. Inner and outer alignment with a healthy dose of patience is key, as is recalling always that as long as we remain open, our relationships are always evolving.

Rather than avoiding most difficult or uncomfortable conversations, using the YES Method enables you to engage in more important interactions in a more productive way. In reality, the YES Method brings us a better way to handle conflict that allows for positive evolution in our relationships. We tend to think of

conflict as bad or unhealthy. However, with the tools of the YES Method, even the most entrenched conflicts can become opportunities for not only interpersonal growth but incredible personal growth as well.

Conflict is part of life. There's simply no avoiding it. Relationship conflicts of any kind can make us feel sad and powerless, and they carry the potential to upend our lives. But conflict can also be a gift. It gives us a rare opportunity to build and deepen our connections with others. By learning the YES Method, we can meaningfully restructure and sustain our relationships in a world brimming with conflict. We cannot only resolve the greatest conflict in our lives, but also transform our relationships and reshape our lives from the inside out.

With the YES Method, you can free yourself from needless conflict and chart a better path forward. Once you master all the steps within, you'll move from confusion to clarity, from crisis to calm. One day at a time, one conversation at a time, you'll achieve emotional freedom from conflict.