



# The FSAP Update

a newsletter from the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program  
for University Faculty and Staff

Fall 2005

## Resolving Conflicts in Relationships *by Elizabeth Holtzman, FSAP Counselor*

### *The Faculty and Staff*

*Assistance Program provides assessment, brief counseling, and referral services for all faculty and staff regarding any personal or health-related problem which affects an individual's life and work.*

*FSAP services are free to faculty, staff, and family members and are completely confidential. The staff also provides consultation to supervisors when an employee's personal problems are affecting work performance or relationships.*

*For more information or to make an appointment, call 545-0350.*

### UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

#### **Alcoholism:**

#### **What Does it Look Like**

Amherst College, Terrace Rm, Valentine Hall

**October 25, 2005**

**3-5 p.m.**

#### **Holiday Blues**

Amherst College, Terrace Rm, Valentine Hall

**Nov 17, 2005**

**12-1:30pm**

These workshops are open to 5 College faculty, staff and personnel

**For more information please contact the FSAP at 545-0350.**

Conflict is a reality in any relationship. Whether between spouses, lovers, friends, parent and child, colleagues at work, or supervisor and employees, disagreements are inevitable simply because people have different wants, needs, ideas and expectations. The central issue for each of us is not to prevent conflict, but to recognize it and then respond effectively to keep a destructive process from forming.

A starting point for thinking about conflict may be to look at our expectations for ourselves and for others who are important to us. Most of us grew up certain that the way we learned to think, act, and relate to other people is the way that everyone else should. We know the best way to handle a fussy child, decide how the money should be spent, solve the crisis at work, or divide up the chores at home. So when someone confronts or disagrees with us, we may feel personally challenged and need to defend what is "right."

If we feel like we are being personally attacked, the conflict automatically

produces anxiety or fear. It takes on an importance larger than the immediate issue and can be considered an attack on our integrity. And when we feel threatened, we tend to defend ourselves, and respond in a less rational or flexible way. This prevents a positive resolution of the problem, and is destructive to the relationship.

When we think about the relationships we are in, we probably realize that we, and the people around us, have fairly consistent responses to conflict. They include ignoring the problem, verbally or physically lashing out, withdrawing into oneself, becoming rigid, compromising, giving in, talking directly to the person or with others, denying any conflict or smoothing it over. Many of these responses may be appropriate in certain circumstances. For instance, if your spouse has been drinking, and accuses you of being the cause of his/her problems, withdrawing may be the best immediate response. Certainly a discussion of the issue and your feelings would

not be helpful at that time. However, confronting the issue the next day can be a positive strategy.

How, then, can we minimize the fear and work towards productive ways of resolving conflicts in our family and work relationships? There is no one right or simple strategy which will be effective in all situations. The following are suggestions for beginning to explore and understand conflict in our current relationships.

1. Learn to recognize the **patterns** of conflict and attempts at resolution that are already occurring. Which are successful and which increase the conflict?
2. What are the **issues** which provoke conflict? Is it really the color of the couch or the lunch break schedule, or is there an underlying issue (such as power or control) which makes these specifics very important?

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*If there is no resolution, decide how important the issue is. Should you leave it unresolved or would it be helpful to use other resources? You can contact the FSAP office for help with these issues at **413-545-0350**.*



## Faculty and Staff Assistance Program

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[www.umass.edu/fsap/](http://www.umass.edu/fsap/)

## When you approach the other person:

1. Pick a time when you are both not angry.
2. Reassure the other person that you don't want to damage the relationship and acknowledge that he/ she may perceive the situation differently.
3. Know your goal. Are you planning to compromise, accommodate the other person or remain firm?
4. Be specific about the issue. Challenge the behavior or disagree on a specific problem, but don't attack the person.
5. Listen to the other person. Are there alternative solutions?  
What are his/her needs or priorities?

