

Dignity:
The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict
Donna Hicks

Dignity is "a missing link in our understanding of conflict: our failure to recognize how vulnerable humans are to being treated as if they don't matter." — p. 2

Research suggests that we are just as programmed to sense a threat to our dignity—to our sense of worth—as we are to a physical threat. — p. 7

It appears that the feeling of loss is at the heart of human vulnerability—loss of dignity, loss of connection to others, and loss of life itself. — p. 7

The human experience of worth and vulnerability is fundamentally emotional; it emanates from one of the oldest parts of our brains, from what neuroscientists call the limbic system. When we sense that our worth is being threatened, we are flooded with dread and shame—with destabilizing feelings that are painful and aversive. Most of us would do just about anything to avoid these dreaded feelings, which are part and parcel of an injury to dignity. When we experience harm, our self-preservation instincts are very strong, inciting feelings of humiliation, rage, and self-righteous revenge. ... This highly sensitive aspect of humanity—our vulnerability to being violated by others—serves a critical, though odd, function: it promotes our survival. It warns us when danger is imminent, when someone or something threatens us; it tells us to take action to eliminate the threat. Our self-protective instincts are primed for safety, making us ready to either fight or withdraw in the service of self-preservation. ... Just as our limbic system can quickly signal us to disconnect from a person who harms or threatens us, it can quickly flood us with feelings of love, empathy, and compassion [oxytocin], compelling us to connect with another person, to find comfort in that person, to feel safer and less vulnerable, more worthy [tend-and-befriend]. ... Self-preservation seems to have dominated, not self-extension, and we are experiencing a multitude of conflicts as a result... . — p. 7-9

[Self-preservation became dominant about 10,000 years ago, when the rapidly expanding human population began to experience a sense of limitations, and began to have to work the land to produce food, creating a "fixed pie" mentality. Land began to be divided up, creating opportunities for raiding and stealing. "Us and them" mentalities developed, and fear-based notions of the "other." Humans became each other's predators. From the new need for "security," hierarchies developed. Some humans were used as tools. Humiliating practices were condoned as part of the need for protection. *Evelyn Linder drawing on work of William Uhry, as described by Hicks, pgs. 9-10*]

When we perceive that we are being offended or hurt by others—when someone violates our dignity—our instinctive, self-protective hardwiring tells us that what matters most is our own well-being and survival, not the survival of the friendship. — p.13

THE TEN ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS of DIGNITY

What we extend to others and would like for ourselves

- **Acceptance of Identity**—Approach people as neither inferior nor superior to you; give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged; interact without prejudice or bias, accepting how race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. are at the core of their identities. Assume they have integrity.
- **Recognition**—Validate others for their talents, hard work, thoughtfulness, and help; be generous with praise; give credit to others for their contributions, ideas and experience.
- **Acknowledgment**—Give people your full attention by listening, hearing, validating and responding to their concerns and what they have been through.
I want us to give our full attention to each other by listening, hearing, validating and responding to our concerns and what we've been through.
- **Inclusion**—Make others feel that they belong at all levels of relationship (family, community, organization, nation).
What do we need from each other to feel we belong?
- **Safety**—Put people at ease at two levels: physically, where they feel free of bodily harm; and psychologically, where they feel free of concern about being shamed or humiliated, that they feel free to speak without fear of retribution.
- **Fairness**—Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way, according to agreed upon laws and rules.
- **Independence**—Empower people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.
- **Understanding**—Believe that what others think matters; give them the chance to explain their perspectives, express their points of view; actively listen in order to understand them.
- **Benefit of the Doubt**—Treat people as trustworthy; start with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.
- **Accountability**—Take responsibility for your actions; if you have violated the dignity of another, apologize; make a commitment to change hurtful behaviors.

THE TEN TEMPTATIONS TO VIOLATE DIGNITY

How we can be tempted to violate others' dignity, and our own

- **Taking the bait**—Don't take the bait. Don't let the bad behavior of others determine your own. Restraint is the better part of dignity. Don't justify getting even. Do not do unto others as they do unto you if it will cause harm.
- **Saving Face**—Don't succumb to the temptation to save face. Don't lie, cover up, or deceive yourself. Tell the truth about what you have done.
- **Shirking Responsibility**—Don't shirk responsibility when you have violated the dignity of others. Admit it when you make a mistake, and apologize if you hurt someone.
- **Seeking False Dignity**—Beware of the desire for external recognition in the form of approval and praise. If we depend on others alone for the validation of our worth, we are seeking false dignity. Authentic dignity resides within us. Don't be lured by false dignity.
- **Seeking False Security**—Don't let your need for connections compromise your dignity. If we remain in a relationship in which our dignity is routinely violated, our desire for connection has outweighed our need to maintain dignity.
- **Avoiding Conflict**—Stand up for yourself. Don't avoid confrontation when your dignity is violated. Take action. A violation is a signal that something in a relationship needs to change.
- **Being the Victim**—Don't assume that you are the innocent victim in a troubled relationship. Open yourself to the idea that you might be contributing to the problem. We need to look at ourselves as others see us. [Not in the case of sexual abuse, sexual violence, relationship violence]
- **Resisting Feedback**—Don't resist feedback from others. We often don't know what we don't know. We all have blindspots; we all unconsciously behave in undignified ways. We need to overcome our self-protective instincts and accept constructive criticism. Feedback gives us an opportunity to grow.
- **Blaming and Shaming Others to Deflect Your Own Guilt**—Don't blame and shame others to deflect your guilt. Control the urge to defend yourself by making others look bad.
- **Engaging in False Intimacy and Demeaning Gossip**—Beware of the tendency to connect by gossiping about others in a demeaning way. Being critical and judgmental about others when they are not present is harmful and undignified. If you want to create intimacy with another, speak the truth about yourself, about what is happening in your inner world, and invite the other person to do the same.

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