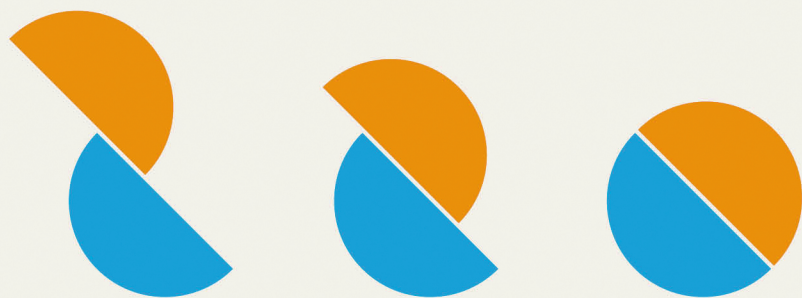


JAYSON GADDIS

FOUNDER OF *THE RELATIONSHIP SCHOOL*

GETTING TO ZERO



HOW TO WORK THROUGH
CONFLICT IN YOUR
HIGH-STAKES RELATIONSHIPS

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*How to Work Through Conflict in
Your High-Stakes Relationships*

Jayson Gaddis



NEW YORK

Most names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect them from recognition.

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First and foremost, this book is for me. May I take all my own advice and continue to get better at conflict in my own life.

To the parents who are willing to learn how to navigate conflict.

We can't expect our children to get this unless we model it every day. Thanks for being one of those people.

To all the schoolteachers out there. We expect way too much of you. This book's for you, too, so you and your students have a map on how to get back to a good place again. I want this book in every high school in the United States.

To all the growth-oriented people in the world who are willing to learn how to navigate conflict in a way that improves your relationships and the world around you.

PART 1

BEFORE CONFLICT—
WHAT IS CONFLICT AND
WHAT IS ZERO?

My Life of Conflict

Being able to resolve conflicts peacefully is one of the greatest strengths we can give our children.

—MISTER ROGERS

I CAME IN FROM RECESS, SAT DOWN IN MY SEAT DIRECTLY BEHIND Casey Henderson, and accidentally kicked the back of his chair. He turned around and asked if I wanted to fight after school. Fear washed over me. My mind went blank. Despite my tough exterior, I was actually a sensitive, emotional, and empathic sixth grader. The last thing I wanted to do was fight this kid. If I said yes, I'd risk getting my ass kicked. Or I could be true to myself and say no, yet risk the humiliation of being called a wimp or a loser. Two bad choices.

So, what did I do? I went against everything in me and agreed to a fight. Almost every boy in the sixth grade showed up to watch. Casey and I were on the far side of the playground surrounded by a circle of boys yelling, "Fight! Fight! Fight!" There was no escape. I remembered, suddenly, the words my dad had said to me a few times: "If you ever get in a fight, throw the first punch." I didn't know how to throw a punch, so I slapped him. There was a roar from the circle around

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us. Suddenly, Casey and I were on the ground. Casey was a wrestler and nearly had me. Then the animal in me took over; the adrenaline I summoned helped me throw him off.

As we got to our feet, I remember time stopping, just for a second, while Casey's fist came flying through the air and hit me right above my left eye. In the same moment, one of the boys yelled, "Mr. Tonnison is coming!" The principal was running full speed toward us, his tie flying in the wind over his shoulder. Everyone fled in all directions, and I ran home as fast as I could, crying in shame and fear the whole way.

At home, my mom was aghast that I'd gotten into a fight but quickly helped me with my swollen eye. When my dad got home from work, I couldn't look at him. Smiling, his first question was, "Well, did you throw the first punch?" He offered zero sympathy. After I spent a night filled with confusion and humiliation at home, I went back to school the next morning, my head hanging low. Our teacher, Ms. Jameson, pulled both Casey and me out into the hallway and shut the door behind her. "I heard you two got in a fight yesterday," she said. We nodded. "Well, say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry," I said. Casey said the same. She dismissed us back to the classroom and that was the end of our conflict.

Or was it?

WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT CONFLICT

Even though my father taught me to throw the first punch, I also got the message from him and my mother that conflict—fighting and arguments—was bad. After all, they *never* fought. At school, I thought that bad kids got into conflicts and good kids didn't. Casey was a "bad" kid, and now so was I. A few months later, I entered middle school with no friends.

That fight was the first of many to come. It was an initiation into conflict, the kind that leaves its mark. This pattern would last for

years: fighting, not speaking, leaving, more fighting, avoiding, and so on.

One contradictory lesson I took away from this experience was that when you get in a conflict with someone, you can simply say, “I’m sorry,” and everything is made better. But nothing about my experience and relationship with Casey was ever “better.” I eventually realized that apologies were like Band-Aids, simply covering up the wound: they got people off my case for a while and allowed me to move on, to a certain degree. But even though I kept apologizing, the conflicts never felt resolved. The wound still festered.

Like you, I have witnessed and experienced countless relationship situations go awry and never get resolved. I saw this at home, at school, during sports, and eventually at every job I had. Not to mention my own relationship failures that kept me stuck and depressed for years. As a kid, I continually felt disappointed in grown-ups, because they didn’t seem to know how to work things out. And these were grown-ups who supposedly cared about each other.

After feeling rejected, bullied, and lonely in middle school, I realized, in a much more profound way, how important relationships were. Fitting in, and being liked, became the only thing I really cared about. Belonging is a central need in the human experience. Relationships are everything.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development confirmed that good relationships are the cornerstone of a well-lived life.¹ The tapestry of our lives is woven by everyone we come into contact with, with the most important relationships taking up the most space, color, and meaning. Think about the most meaningful experiences in your life, both good and bad; they were likely shaped by other people, friends, family members, lovers, partners, and even coworkers. Other people provide us with the most joy and the most pain in our lives. Good human relationships are crucial for longevity and good health, and yet, more often than we realize, our unresolved conflicts gnaw at us, leading to ailments that keep us exhausted, stressed, and

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sick.² Without good people near us, loving us, and cheering us on, we feel alone. And it's said that loneliness is more lethal than obesity or smoking fifteen cigarettes per day.³

WHY CONFLICT IS IMPORTANT

If good relationships are so important, why do we struggle when things get hard in those relationships? Conflict in our closest relationships is scary because so much is at stake. If the disagreement or conflict doesn't go well, not only do we feel judged, hurt, and criticized, we could lose our marriage, our family, or our job, all of which are connected to our security and our survival. And we'll do just about anything to not lose those relationships, including avoiding conflict, betraying ourselves, and being dishonest. Ironically, these adaptations create even more conflict. This deep-seated fear of rejection and abandonment runs our lives, and it won't change unless we learn how to embrace conflict and work through it.

I've had years of study and training as a psychotherapist and direct hands-on experience with thousands of people as a relationship coach over the past two decades, and I see over and over again that the crux of good, strong, long-lasting relationships is not the absence of conflict but the ability and willingness to work through it. No good relationship can bypass learning about conflict. Conflict is the key to any relationship progressing from bad to good and good to great. And, of course, conflict can also be that thing that tears relationships apart.

If you don't work through adversity with other people, your relationships will never reach their potential, and you'll never know the magic of what a strong friendship or partnership is like. You'll stay stuck in superficial or failed relationships, where you don't feel emotionally safe or seen. You'll rob yourself of fulfillment and personal empowerment. And you might just blame all of that on others for the rest of your life.

The crux of good, strong, long-lasting relationships is the ability and willingness to work through conflict.

It's a fantasy that a "good" relationship is free from conflict. This cannot be further from the truth. As you will soon learn, great relationships are built over time through the ability and willingness to work through what I call the *Conflict Repair Cycle*. Changing your mindset about conflict is the key to having satisfying relationships.

MY JOURNEY

When I finally found a group of friends that accepted me in high school, I felt like I had a home, yet every girl that I liked didn't like me back. For years I faced rejection after rejection. After my awkward high school years and freshman year of college, I finally figured out a way to get girls to like me (thanks to a lame strategy taught by my best friend).^{*} Then I had no trouble attracting women, yet I kept them all at arm's length and avoided anything that resembled conflict. When things became remotely conflictual, I'd "fire" whoever I was dating and move on to the next woman. Rinse and repeat for ten years.

Had I been paying attention I would have seen that each of my intimate relationships held an invitation for deeper intimacy and self-understanding. I would have seen that the external conflicts I was avoiding could have guided me to resolve my growing inner

^{*} My friend was good with girls and I felt very insecure. So, I asked him how to get girls to like me. He said, "It's easy. Act like you don't care." I tried it and it worked. Isn't that interesting that women were drawn to me when I was dismissive of them. That should be very concerning. . . .

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conflict (more on this soon). But I continued to miss all of the signposts because I wasn't in enough pain yet. I was trapped in the valley of victimhood and looking for answers outside of myself. After all, my strategies were working—er, sort of. I had great friends and had no problem with dating. So nothing was wrong, right?

When things got hard in my intimate relationships, I'd drink, go skiing or climbing, or go to work. I did my best to find jobs where I could work outside and take my mind off my problems. I bussed tables, worked winters as a ski coach for young kids, and spent my summers with troubled teenage boys in a variety of wilderness therapy settings. Although I loved the work and was praised for helping these boys, I sometimes felt inadequate, like I didn't have the skills necessary to truly help them. Some of these kids were dealing with major internal and external conflicts, from depression and feeling suicidal to drug addiction. All had enormous family conflicts and problems. I needed more training.

THE BREAKUP THAT WOKE ME UP

About this time, I had chalked up six failed relationships over the course of nine years, and my frustration and pain were at an all-time high. By the time I turned twenty-nine, Andrea and I had been dating for almost a year, one of the longest relationships I'd had. She was amazing, and all my friends and family adored her. She wanted to get married and have kids. I wanted nothing of the sort. So, anytime she brought up this conversation, I'd find a way to dodge the question and change the subject. To me, it registered as "drama." And drama felt like conflict. And conflict was off-limits for me. For example, anytime she wanted to discuss her feelings, I'd get super uncomfortable, try to "fix" it by offering solutions to her issues, and then tell her I had plans or wasn't feeling great, or I'd change the subject. Anytime she wanted to talk about my feelings, I turned the attention back to her and her problems as a way to avoid mine.

Somehow, I bought into the notion that when you find “the one,” or meet the “right” person, it should always feel good and the two of you should never fight. Of course, this is absurd, but you’d be surprised how many people believe this. I concluded that the drama had to be because of her. She was making me feel this way. I had to end it. Best to just walk away, like I had so many times before.

But this would take me months to do. Breakups meant conflict, which might mean crying, anger, tears, and a bunch of other stuff I didn’t want (or know how) to deal with. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings like I had with so many other women. I kept hoping she would break up with me so I wouldn’t have to be the bad guy.

I was torn between two shitty choices. If I broke up with her, I’d be alone again and face-to-face with that empty feeling that I tried to fill with women (and drugs and extreme sports). And I’d be repeating this pattern yet again. Nothing really would be different. If I stayed with her, I’d be lying to her—and myself—implying that I wanted to continue the relationship, and that would feel like I was betraying myself each and every day the relationship continued.

The breakup talk eventually happened in Andrea’s car in the Whole Foods parking lot. We had agreed not to meet at my house or hers since the relationship was hanging on only by a thread, so we drove to the store separately. We needed neutral ground. Even though I’d had this kind of painful conversation many times before, I was still freaking out inside. But I was determined to be an adult and muster the courage to tell her face-to-face. I owed it to her.

As I sat in the passenger seat of her car, in my mind I kept rehearsing the speech I had come up with. “I need to be honest,” I said, breaking the awkward silence. (Looking back, I now know that I was experiencing a lot of compounding shame for all the previous failed relationship moments like this one.) Then I stumbled over the words: “I want to break up.” I was squirming. I wanted to run from the car.

Even though she knew it was coming, or so she'd later tell me, her first question was, "Why?"

My first thought was, *Because of you*. I genuinely felt like my relationships all ended because of the woman I was with, not because of anything I did or didn't do. And yet in the next moment, I thought of that old cliché, *It's not you; it's me*. In the past I had used this line as a cop-out, a dodge to make it look like I was self-aware and had a part. But this time, it felt true. Something clicked. It rocked me to my core. *Wait, it really is me!* For ten years straight, I'd rejected every good woman I dated. Ten fucking years of me not being able to figure out how to have an intimate relationship. That was my issue, *my* problem. I was the common denominator in all of these failed relationships. In that moment, the issue switched from being about her to being about me. The light started to seep in. I saw that if I was really the problem, then I also had the power to change it. I felt energy rush into me.

Excited, I looked at her and shared my insight. She wasn't exactly as fired up as I was, but she suggested, with both grace and tears in her eyes, that I get some counseling. I agreed even though I didn't know what counseling was. I wasn't even defensive. Breaking up was the right choice. It was time to go deal with my issues—alone. We hugged and wished each other the best. We'd managed to respectfully get through the breakup—the first conflict I'd ever experienced that came to a semi-successful completion.

I got back into the driver's seat of my own car, and as I drove away, I made a commitment to myself that I was going to learn everything I could about love, conflict, and relationships. I was determined to figure this out. I felt liberated, not because I'd weaseled out of another painful and uncomfortable conversation but because, for the first time in my relationship life, I was taking responsibility.

The combination of hitting a ceiling in my ability to help troubled boys and feeling like a failure in my intimate relationships led me back to school. I was finally ready to learn. I searched high and

low for a program that would force me into a petri dish to examine my own issues. One graduate program in psychology would train me to become a psychotherapist and require that I do thirty hours of psychotherapy as a client. Perfect! It was time to stop running away from my problems and start facing myself.

In grad school, I studied humanistic, transpersonal, and Gestalt psychology. (The fundamental principle in Gestalt is asking the client to take personal responsibility on a moment-to-moment basis, the opposite of what I'd been doing for decades.) I devoured everything I could that would get to the roots of my problems. I quickly signed on as a crisis worker for the local mental health center, then as a family therapist. I learned solution-focused therapy, motivational interviewing, strengths-based planning, and how to diagnose someone with a major mental illness. I even co-led groups for perpetrators of domestic violence. At the same time, I got extra training in a three-year Gestalt therapy program. And because I was determined to get to the bottom of my own relationship problems, I enrolled in very intense, regular therapy that lasted for years.

I also started meditating and joined a Buddhist community. Through the Buddhist teachings of meditation and mindfulness, I learned that when we resist our inner emotions and feelings, seeking pleasure but avoiding pain, we create more suffering for ourselves. Duh, why hadn't I learned this sooner! Meditation was helping me deal with my fears, feelings, and anxiety. Soon I became a meditation instructor.

After I received my master's degree, I became a family therapist at a local wilderness program and then eventually started my own counseling practice. I saw how terrified people were at working through conflict. Yet it appeared to be the root of people's problems. So I began to study trauma and how to resolve the conflicts between people.

In my second year of graduate school, I started dating the woman who is now my wife. Early in our relationship, I put on my training

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wheels around conflict. Instead of leaving the relationship, I stayed, even though every part of me wanted to run (I actually did run twice, but I came back both times). You can imagine two budding therapists trying to get to the bottom of an argument. It went something like this: “You’re projecting!” “No, you’re projecting!” Round and round we’d go. Practicing my new therapy tools, I’d try to process a fight or argument for hours, analyzing her reactions and telling her all the ways in which *she* was making it worse. I learned that approach was emotionally exhausting and took way too long. Needless to say, I was pretty slow and sloppy with conflict for the first three years we were together. However, over time, we got more efficient and learned how to dissolve arguments quickly.

Then, because I kept seeing similar issues with my clients, I’d take what I was learning at home and try it on them. My clients started having success working through conflict in their high-stakes relationships. I kept reading, attending workshops, and studying with the best teachers and mentors. I was always surprised that no one had a system for working through conflict successfully. So, I created one. And since then, I’ve discovered some incredible tools, made modifications, and developed the Getting to Zero method that I now teach to people all over the world.

I truly believe that I’ve come up with one of the most effective ways to work through conflict with fellow humans. I’ve put that program into this book for you to learn and practice in your own life. Because if we don’t start learning how to work through conflict, we’ll repeat what we’ve always done, and our high-stakes relationships will never reach their full potential.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Like me, you may have left a wake of relationship carnage behind you. You’ve probably blamed, run away, or shut down—actions that never help the relationships you care about get any better. Married

people get rid of their “difficult” partner all the time because, instead of learning how to work through conflict, they “fire” the person and feel better. They conclude the problem was the other person. But what happens when the next partner comes along?

Through my work as a therapist, coach, and founder of The Relationship School, I’ve met and worked with some of the most courageous people in the world. Mothers, midwives, monks, veterans, CEOs, professional athletes, and rock climbers. People who stare death in the face almost daily. People who seem to be fearless. Yet all of them, without exception, become deeply afraid when it comes to conflict with other people. They, like I was, are afraid that if they are really honest, the other person will leave. This is one of the most fundamental fears human beings have. And because of this fear, we end up trading our true self-expression in exchange for connection. As you will soon see, this tradeoff is at the root of our inner conflict as social mammals. Why do we do this? It all stems from an unwillingness and inability to engage in conflict and a lack of experience with the fact that conflict done well makes us and our relationships better. You can learn to work through fear and overcome just about any difficult or uncomfortable issue with another person.

Take Jared, for example. Jared is a talented extreme athlete, respected by almost everyone. His stories of climbing the world’s highest peaks are insane. The guy is a fearless beast when it comes to staring death in the face in big wilderness. But his interpersonal relationships were a mess. When things got hard with his girlfriend, he’d just shut down, shut her out, and go climbing. Eventually, Jared had to wake up to the fact that if he didn’t want to lose her, he’d have to become a student of conflict. I taught him the basics of the Getting to Zero method, and soon Jared’s girlfriend became his wife. Their conflicts shrank over time, and they got more efficient at moving through their disagreements. Now, Jared and his wife have become a strong resource for many people, and the results they see in their own life are incredible.

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Diane hadn't spoken to her sister in over eleven years. After learning the Getting to Zero tools outlined in this book, she reached out to her sister, took ownership of her part of the conflict that happened many years ago, and the door cracked open between them. Within two months, they were having dinner together and celebrating their newfound relationship.

Every day, I see people open their hearts to each other after hours, days, or years spent feeling hurt, resentful, and disconnected. Imagine what could be possible for you if you just apply yourself here in these pages and learn.

To see conflict as the incredible opportunity that it is, we have to remodel our beliefs about it and truly embrace the idea that conflict makes us better, stronger, and more relationally adept human beings. That's what we'll do here, chapter by chapter. By the end of this book, I guarantee you'll be armed to handle just about any hard conversation, especially with the person you care most about. You'll increase your self-worth and boost your self-confidence and in doing so improve and deepen your relationships. These are permanent and long-lasting changes because the Getting to Zero approach deals with how you are fundamentally wired.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

PLEASE NOTE

ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE REPORT THE TOOLS I EXPLAIN IN THIS BOOK help them work through conflicts that have been stuck for decades, this book is not meant to resolve trauma or get rid of pain. This book does not cover rape, murder, war, or other massive conflicts. In those tragic events, any of us would be a victim of a horrible act against us and many more resources outside the scope of this book would be needed. If you have significant

trauma, please continue to work through it with your own highly trained trauma specialist.

This book is also not meant to guide you through conflict in abusive relationships. Although some of the tools may help, the Getting to Zero method is not a recipe for the level of challenge someone faces living in fear and abuse every day. If you are in an abusive relationship, get out and find resources that will help support that move.

In a few cases, no matter how perfectly you do what's outlined in this book, nothing will work. I get that. There is one type of person for whom this method of working through conflict is barely effective because they can't and won't take personal responsibility for their part. I'll say more about this person later, but it's important to know you can't help people who don't want your help and you can't work through conflict with someone who won't even come to the table.

You'll hear me use the term *intimate relationships* in this book frequently. Intimate relationships are your closest relationships (family, deep friendships, and a partnership). These might also be your "high-stakes" relationships. It's important to make the distinction between "intimate" and "everyday" relationships, because more is at stake with intimate relationships than any other type of relationship and conflict tends to be more challenging with these people as a result.

This book takes you through the steps I've used countless times when I help two people move through a painful conflict and into a place of greater understanding and connection. You'll soon understand great relationships are earned, not given. And all great relationships have one common attribute: the willingness and ability to work through conflict. If you don't learn how to handle yourself and your reactivity, who will?

In the pages that follow, I will help you "get to zero." *Getting to zero* is a term that I use to help people measure their level of

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resolution and connection after a conflict. If we use a 0 to 10 scale, zero means that you have closure and you feel connected. Getting to Zero is the name of the process whereby you and another person in conflict move from disconnection to connection, acceptance, and understanding. Zero is that happy place where you feel good and content. This consilient approach blends spirituality, interpersonal neurobiology, attachment science, several branches of psychology, and my own experiences.

To go along with this book, I suggest you dedicate a journal to take notes and draw graphs and charts in. In addition, an accountability partner can help you integrate the material and see more tangible results. Whereas learning in isolation is fine, learning together is better. Think of an accountability partner as someone you can practice the skills with and someone who will hold you accountable to speaking up, setting a boundary, or finishing the book. Find someone you can share openly and honestly with about what you're learning, someone who will practice the listening and speaking exercises with you.

This is a personal growth book. *Personal growth* in this context means that you are investing time, money, and energy into learning how to work through conflict with the people you care most about. Because personal growth work is a privilege, it's important to mention that if you're in survival mode, it's much harder to face your inner life and apply what I'm about to teach you. To grow and develop in an optimal way, a certain level of physical and emotional safety is required. I'm grateful you are in a resourced enough place to take in what I'm about to share.

I can assure you, if you have avoided conflict your entire life or you've never seen it go well, it's not because of some personal defect in you. You are not broken and nothing is wrong with you. Working through conflict is a skill that anyone can develop.

The following chapters are laid out as a progression: before, during, and after conflict. Part 1 (before) sets the context for why conflict is so hard to face and what we are all up against. I dive into

what I call your *relational blueprint*. You'll learn how your earliest relationships laid the template for how you do conflict later in life. I cover the inner conflict, which will help you see where you might be stuck within yourself and with other people. Part 2 (during) gives you practice tools to calm yourself and the other person when in conflict, how to listen better, and how to speak better, and Part 3 (after) highlights the most common fights, the roadblocks to reconnecting, and how to establish agreements. The book concludes with some tips for you if you get stuck and what to do if people won't meet you halfway. And, at the very back of the book, you'll see a resource guide if you want to dig a little deeper, download some free meditations, or hire a coach.

If you're eager to use something tangible immediately, I recommend skipping to whichever chapter most applies to what you're wanting. You can always come back later and fill in the context. But no matter what order you approach the text, you must read "How to Listen During and After Conflict" because the tools in that chapter alone will change how you do conflict immediately.

Finally, you'll see that a few action steps are listed at the end of each chapter. These challenge you to reflect, practice, and integrate what you're learning. Here is an example of action steps to come. I suggest you pause, do these now in your journal, then proceed to the next chapter.

I'm grateful you are here with me and I look forward to being your guide.

ACTION STEPS ---

1. Write your "conflict story" in one paragraph. Here are a few sentence stems to get you started.
 - A. My current relationship to conflict is . . .
 - B. Growing up, conflict was . . .

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C. When conflict shows up in my relationships now, I typically . . .

D. The person I have the most conflict with is . . .

2. Share this with someone close to you or your accountability partner. Read it out loud and ask the other person not to judge you or laugh at you. Tell them to just be supportive for now.
3. Write down your accountability or practice partner's name here: _____.

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