

# Underlying Needs: The Cause and Solution for Conflicts

It is really important to understand needs in order to skillfully resolve conflicts in ways that are satisfying to all the people involved. When “needs” are mentioned in relation to conflict resolution, we aren’t talking about, “I need that new pair of shoes,” or “I need the video game coming out today!” “Needs,” also known as “underlying needs” or “basic human needs,” refers to those things that allow us to survive and thrive as human beings.

All human beings, regardless of where they are from, how they were raised, or what they believe in, have the same basic human needs. Human needs are requirements for survival and healthy physical, social, intellectual, and emotional development and contentment.

Examples of different needs are:

- Sustenance (basic physical needs for food, air, water, shelter, physical health)
- Safety (physical safety, emotional safety)
- Love (affection, support, appreciation)
- Understanding (empathy, learning, respect)
- Creativity (self-expression, work, contribution)
- Community (belonging, connection, acceptance)
- Rest/Recreation/Play (sleep, joy, renewal)
- Autonomy (self-governance, choice, freedom)
- Meaning (purpose, beliefs, faith, hope)

So, in the examples used above about shoes and a video game, the needs might be for community acceptance and recreation. Wearing new, trendy shoes and playing video games are not the needs, but rather, strategies chosen for meeting the larger needs.

**The basis of all conflict is when underlying needs are not met.** Therefore, identifying and addressing the needs of all parties are the key to resolving a conflict. Listening to the other person can help you identify and empathize with their needs. When you can identify needs, this helps you to really understand the other person and their point of view in a conflict. By truly understanding the point of view of the other person, you can focus on collaborating in order to meet each others' needs to resolve the conflict. But remember, it is always important to clarify with a person what needs they are trying to meet.

**As we are trying to satisfy our needs, we take specific actions to meet them. These actions are called strategies.**

**Example:** For Sustenance, I feed myself through the food I buy with the paycheck I get from working. Alternatively, I could steal food from a store to feed myself. (This is also a strategy, even though this particular approach may prevent others from meeting their needs. Remember, a strategy is simply the action taken to meet the need. In resolving conflicts, it is important to choose strategies that will meet everyone’s needs.)

Identifying needs is not always an easy thing to do. What people say in a conflict often reflects their positions, which indicate what they think should happen. Positions are certain strategies that people get stuck in, thinking they provide the only way to solve the issue.

**Positions are often presented as demands, accusations, and judgments, and the positions held by the people involved in a conflict are often at odds with one another.** For example, you want to go to a party and have a curfew of 1am, while your mom says you better be home by 10:30pm. You want to spend time with your friends and stay out as long as they do because you need to relax and be accepted by your community. Your mom wants you to come home because she knows you need to get adequate rest and be safe. She thinks this is the appropriate time because she feels it is the time a good parent would choose and she needs to get meaning through providing good parenting.

Once needs are identified, though, creative solutions may be found which can meet the needs of all the people involved.

In order to bridge positions and needs, identify people's interests in order to come up with strategies that work for everyone involved. Interests are broader desires that are expressions of needs. For instance, one girl may take the basketball that another girl has been playing with for over an hour. The position of the girl whose ball is taken might be "Give me back my ball right now!" while the position of the other girl may be "Why should I? My friends and I want to play!" The needs of both may be those of play and autonomy. The interests of the girl already playing may be, "I'm really stressed out and playing basketball helps me think things through," while the interests of the one who took the ball may be, "I want to hang out with my friends and play basketball together." By highlighting the interests involved, the girls could come up with strategies that allow both to meet their needs – perhaps playing basketball together, or maybe coming up with a time when the person already playing stops so the others can have their turn.

No matter what, focusing on interests and needs rather than positions help people come up with creative strategies for resolving conflict!