

# CONFLICT SPIRAL

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## CONFLICT SPIRAL

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Social Psychology, Conflict Resolution, Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Behavior

### 1. Core Definition

The **Conflict Spiral** is a fundamental concept describing a destructive, self-perpetuating escalation cycle in which two or more interacting parties reciprocate increasingly hostile or aversive actions. This trend is characterized by the tendency for each party's response to be more severe, reactive, or radical than the preceding action taken by the opponent, thereby generating advancing friction and deepening the underlying conflict. The primary mechanism driving the spiral is the belief that one must defend against, or retaliate for, the perceived aggressive behavior of the other party, ensuring that the interaction rapidly deteriorates from minor friction into full-blown antagonism.

In essence, the Conflict Spiral represents a positive feedback loop of negativity. Party A commits an action interpreted as threatening or damaging by Party B. Party B responds with an amplified counter-measure, which Party A then perceives as an even greater threat, justifying a further, stronger retaliation. This cyclical pattern quickly drains resources, damages relationships, and often pushes the involved parties toward positions that are mutually destructive, even if such outcomes were initially unintended. A common example observed in personal dynamics, as described in foundational psychological literature, involves infidelity where the initial transgression is met by extreme emotional retribution, leading to cycles of blame and counter-blame that ultimately destroy the foundational relationship, preparing the wife for divorce, for instance.

The progression of the spiral is not necessarily linear; rather, it often involves qualitative shifts in tactics and objectives. Initial stages might involve mild communication failures or minor disagreements over resources. As the spiral tightens, the focus often shifts from solving the original problem to harming the opponent or winning at all costs, regardless of the consequences to the relationship or the organization. This shift in motivation is a hallmark of highly escalated conflicts and demonstrates the powerful psychological inertia embedded within the spiral dynamic, making self-de-escalation increasingly challenging without external intervention.

### 2. Disciplinary Context and Related Theories

The study of the Conflict Spiral is deeply embedded within the broader academic field of **Conflict Escalation**, which examines the processes by which conflicts intensify over time. Key theoretical contributions from scholars like Morton Deutsch and Dean G. Pruitt established the framework for understanding destructive conflict cycles. Pruitt, in particular, categorized these escalating dynamics, noting that the spiral is often driven by either perceived injury (retaliation spiral) or

defensive measures stemming from fear (deterrence spiral). While the mechanisms differ--one is backward-looking and punitive, the other forward-looking and defensive--both result in the continuous, upward trajectory of hostility.

Within organizational and international relations contexts, the concept is frequently linked to the **Arms Race** model, where nation-states continuously increase their military capacity in response to real or perceived threats from adversaries. This mirrors the psychological spiral in dyadic conflicts: one party's attempt to achieve security (through armament or aggressive communication) is interpreted by the other as a direct threat, necessitating a counter-increase, which paradoxically leads both parties to a less secure and more volatile state. This theoretical connection highlights the universality of the spiral mechanism across micro- and macro-level conflicts.

Furthermore, the Conflict Spiral intersects with concepts from Game Theory, particularly the Prisoner's Dilemma when played iteratively. When parties adopt non-cooperative strategies, believing the other will defect, they enter a predictable sequence of mutual defection that maximizes individual losses while minimizing collective gain. The psychological interpretation of this dynamic is that distrust and the expectation of negative reciprocity become the self-fulfilling prophecy that fuels the spiral, locking participants into suboptimal, competitive patterns of interaction that are difficult to break.

### 3. Mechanisms of Escalation

The transition from mild disagreement to a full-blown conflict spiral is powered by several interlocking psychological and behavioral mechanisms. One critical mechanism is **Mirror Imaging**, where each party views the other as fundamentally aggressive, unethical, and responsible for the conflict, while perceiving their own actions as purely reactive, defensive, and justified. This cognitive distortion prevents parties from taking responsibility for their own contribution to the escalation, ensuring the blame game continues indefinitely and solidifying the mutual perception of threat.

Another powerful mechanism is the shift in **Tactics and Goals**. Early in the conflict, parties might use mild coercive tactics (e.g., threats, minor sanctions). As the spiral advances, tactics become increasingly severe, often involving hard-line coercion, deception, or even violence. Simultaneously, the goals change: the initial goal of achieving a specific outcome (e.g., securing a resource) morphs into an adversarial goal of hurting the opponent or protecting one's identity or reputation, often prioritizing punitive action over constructive resolution. This shift from instrumental goals to expressive (or destructive) goals accelerates the spiral's momentum.

Finally, the concept of **Entrapment** plays a role in sustaining the spiral. Entrapment refers to the process by which parties become psychologically committed to a course of action because of the previous investments--of time, effort, or emotional energy--they have already made in the conflict.

The longer the fight continues and the greater the costs incurred, the harder it is for a party to back down or compromise, as doing so would imply that all previous sacrifices were meaningless. This sunk-cost fallacy reinforces the commitment to continued aggression, making de-escalation feel like defeat rather than resolution.

#### 4. Key Behavioral Characteristics

**Reciprocity of Hostility:** Conflict participants exhibit automatic and immediate negative responses to the other party's actions, ensuring that aggressive behavior is consistently met with equal or greater aggression.

**Attributional Bias:** Parties consistently attribute their opponent's hostile actions to stable, internal, and malicious dispositions (e.g., "They are mean and destructive"), while attributing their own hostile actions to external circumstances or necessity (e.g., "I had no choice but to defend myself").

**Expansion of Issues:** The focus of the conflict broadens beyond the original single point of disagreement to include past grievances, character attacks, and unrelated issues. The conflict becomes total, encompassing all aspects of the relationship.

**Rigidity and Commitment:** Positions become increasingly entrenched and inflexible, often due to public statements or commitments made during moments of intense escalation, making compromise appear politically or socially untenable.

**Communication Deterioration:** Communication shifts from informative and exploratory dialogue to coercive, accusatory, and defensive statements, characterized by shouting, interrupting, and the cessation of genuine listening.

#### 5. Cognitive Distortions in the Spiral

The Conflict Spiral is sustained not only by overt behavior but also by profound cognitive distortions that warp the interpretation of reality. One of the most damaging distortions is **Selective Perception**, where individuals filter out information that contradicts their view of the opponent as malicious or their own actions as justified. Parties actively seek out and prioritize evidence confirming their negative hypotheses about the other, reinforcing the moral righteousness of their destructive path and ignoring any olive branches or attempts at reconciliation.

Another critical distortion is the phenomenon of **Dehumanization**. As the spiral intensifies, the opponent is increasingly viewed as less than human, less worthy of ethical consideration, or inherently evil. This psychological distancing serves to lower the moral barriers against inflicting significant harm, making extreme or radical replies--the key elements of the escalating friction--easier to justify. Dehumanization is particularly dangerous in intergroup or political conflicts, as it provides the necessary psychological cover for severe collective action.

Furthermore, participants often suffer from **Exaggerated Threat Assessment**. Even minor or

ambiguous actions by the opponent are interpreted through a lens of maximum hostility and danger. A simple question or request might be perceived as a strategic maneuver or a covert attack. This hyper-vigilance and paranoid interpretation of non-verbal cues and language ensures that the parties remain perpetually defensive and ready to launch an immediate counter-attack, thus guaranteeing the continuation of the cyclical escalation pattern.

## 6. Interpersonal vs. Intergroup Spirals

While the fundamental mechanism of reciprocal hostility remains constant, the dynamics of the Conflict Spiral differ significantly between interpersonal (dyadic) and intergroup (collective) contexts. In interpersonal conflicts, the escalation is often fueled by intense emotional investment, personal history, and relational identity threats. The breakdown of trust between two individuals, such as in the case of a marriage breakdown following infidelity, centers on highly localized emotional pain and betrayal, leading to radical and often emotionally charged responses.

In contrast, **Intergroup Spirals** (such as those between nations, political factions, or departments within an organization) are mediated by group norms, leadership decisions, and collective identity. Here, cognitive distortions are amplified through processes like in-group bias, where solidarity within one's own group reinforces hostility toward the out-group. The actions of the opponent are seen not just as individual threats but as existential threats to the collective identity, resulting in massive mobilization of resources and highly rigid negotiation stances, making de-escalation exponentially more difficult due to the pressures of maintaining group cohesion and loyalty.

Moreover, the concept of the **Organizational Conflict Spiral** is unique because it often involves structural and power imbalances. For example, two departments fighting over budget allocations may enter a spiral where bureaucratic maneuvers are used as weapons. Responses are often formalized through memos, reports, and appeals to senior management, masking the underlying emotional hostility with a veneer of professional procedure. This formalization, however, does not mitigate the destructive feedback loop; it merely channels the aversive and radical replies through official, yet equally damaging, organizational channels.

## 7. Phases and Dynamics of De-escalation

Breaking a deeply entrenched Conflict Spiral requires deliberate action to reverse the psychological and behavioral momentum. The initial phase of de-escalation involves **Reframing the Conflict**, shifting the focus away from winning or punishing the opponent and back toward solving the original substantive problem. This often necessitates acknowledging one's own contribution to the escalation, a difficult step given the strong attributional biases present in the spiral.

A primary strategy for initiating de-escalation is the use of **Graduated and Reciprocated**

**Initiatives in Tension-reduction (GRIT)**, a method proposed by psychologist Charles Osgood. GRIT involves one party announcing a small, verifiable, and unilateral concession or peace-making gesture, inviting the opponent to reciprocate. This strategy aims to rebuild minimal trust by demonstrating genuine commitment to reducing tension without demanding immediate concessions, thereby challenging the opponent's expectation of continued hostility and slowing the retaliatory cycle.

Furthermore, effective de-escalation often requires the intervention of a neutral, third-party mediator. Mediators help restructure communication, interrupt the pattern of reciprocal negative replies, and introduce cognitive complexity by challenging the parties' reliance on selective perception and dehumanization. By creating protocols for respectful dialogue and focusing on underlying interests rather than entrenched positions, the mediator can guide the parties toward constructive problem-solving, replacing the destructive conflict spiral with a cooperative cycle.

## 8. Significance and Impact

The concept of the Conflict Spiral holds immense significance across various fields because it provides a clear, causal model for understanding why certain disagreements become intractable and destructive. In psychology, it underscores the fragility of relationships under stress and the immediate need for effective communication training to prevent minor frictions from becoming catastrophic, whether in personal life or professional teams. It highlights that the process of interaction is often more damaging than the content of the disagreement itself.

In the realms of international relations and political science, the Conflict Spiral serves as a cautionary model for diplomacy. It explains why security dilemmas often lead to war or sustained low-intensity conflict, emphasizing the crucial need for transparency, verifiable treaties, and mechanisms for confidence-building to prevent misinterpretation of intentions--the fuel for the spiral. Understanding this dynamic is foundational to maintaining stability and preventing rapid military or economic escalation between rival powers.

Ultimately, the impact of recognizing the Conflict Spiral lies in its therapeutic and preventative value. By identifying the key behavioral and cognitive triggers (e.g., attributional biases, immediate retaliation), practitioners in conflict resolution, therapy, and negotiation can diagnose escalating conflicts quickly and implement targeted interventions. The spiral is a powerful reminder that inaction in the face of initial friction can be catastrophic, as the momentum of the cycle rapidly diminishes the potential for rational, non-coercive solutions.

## 9. Debates and Ethical Criticisms

While the Conflict Spiral model is widely accepted, debates often center on its universality and the precise role of rationality. Some critics argue that the model, particularly in its psychological

interpretation, oversimplifies the motivations for conflict, sometimes reducing deep-seated political or structural grievances to mere communication failures or cognitive errors. They assert that in conflicts involving genuine injustices or asymmetrical power, destructive behavior may be a rational response to systemic oppression, not merely an error in a feedback loop.

Another area of discussion focuses on the ethical implications of intervention. When a conflict is viewed purely as a "spiral," the responsibility for de-escalation is often placed equally on both parties. However, if one party is significantly more powerful or initiated the aggression, requiring the weaker party to make the first conciliatory move (as suggested by GRIT) might be seen as ethically questionable or strategically disadvantageous. Ethical considerations therefore demand that interventions based on the spiral model must account for pre-existing power differentials and historical injustices.

Furthermore, research continues to refine the distinction between the "retaliation spiral" (driven by anger and punishment) and the "deterrence spiral" (driven by fear and defensive measures). The debate here is whether these are truly distinct mechanisms requiring separate interventions, or merely two manifestations of the same underlying failure of trust and communication. While conceptually distinct, in real-world conflict, these mechanisms often merge, making the precise identification and reversal of the primary psychological driver a continuous challenge for conflict resolution specialists.

## Further Reading

[Conflict Resolution](#) (Wikipedia)

[Morton Deutsch](#) (Wikipedia)

[Conflict Escalation](#) (Wikipedia)

[Dean G. Pruitt](#) (Wikipedia)

[Psychology Dictionary: Conflict Spiral](#) (Original Source Context)