



A Short Course for Navigating and Defusing Toxic Conflict

Objective:

A fundamental human challenge is that we are so easily drawn into toxic conflict—into high-animosity, team-based ways of seeing the world and people around us. To build a healthier, more functional, and more peaceful future, we need more people to see the importance of engaging with others in more respectful, collaborative, and optimistic ways.

The goal of this short course is to give you some basic information and skills to help you navigate toxic conflict, work across emotionally charged differences, and be a leader in high-conflict environments. This course is very short and introductory: the hope is that if the ideas interest you, you'll set out to learn more about these topics.

Sections and summaries:

- [Section 1: The Ease With Which We Can Disagree](#)
 - You'll learn about the ease with which rational, caring people can disagree, and why it's good to aim for humility and avoid arrogance
 - [Section 2: How Conflict Deranges our Thinking and Interactions](#)
 - You'll learn how contempt, anger, and fear can create a self-reinforcing conflict cycle, and how that can weaken and derange our thinking and interactions with the "other side"
 - [Section 3: Navigating and Resolving Toxic Conflict](#)
 - You'll learn some strategies for engaging with those on the "other side," or helping others navigate their disagreement
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Section 1: The Ease With Which We Can Disagree

Overview: It's natural and expected for people to disagree. The world is a complex place: determining the truth can be difficult. Also, even when we *do* agree on facts, we'll often have different moral views on what constitutes harm, and different views about which harms are most important. *It's simply easy for rational and kind people to passionately disagree with each other.* Seeing the ease with which people can disagree in turn helps us see the importance of aiming for intellectual humility and at minimally contemptuous ways of engaging.

Recommended short resources:

- [“How Do Reasonable People Disagree?”](#) about Kevin Dorst's work on polarization ([his Substack](#))
- [“What Does Intellectual Humility Look Like?”](#) by Mark Leary
- [“Why We Fight About Morality and Politics,”](#) a TEDx Talk by psychologist Kurt Gray ([his Substack](#))
- [“11 Questions About the Certainty Trap.”](#) by sociologist Ilana Redstone ([her Substack](#))

Go deeper with these resources about the temptation and pitfalls of highly certain and arrogant ways of thinking and approaching disagreement:

- Ilana Redstone's book [The Certainty Trap](#)
- Taylor Dotson's book [The Divide](#) ([his Substack](#))
- Kevin Dorst's [Substack on “rational polarization”](#)

Section 2: How Conflict Deranges our Thinking and Interactions

Overview: In the first section, we focused on the ease with which rational people can disagree and the importance of intellectual humility. But it's also true that toxic conflict skews our thinking and leads us to behave in irrational, team-based ways. The perception that we're fighting a high-stakes war with a morally faulty “other side” can distort and harden our beliefs (for example, we'll often see the entire “other side” as much more extreme and hateful than they are). We can find ourselves caught in a self-reinforcing feedback loop where contempt amplifies contempt, and more extreme views lead to more extreme views on the “other side.”

This section will help you understand how conflict can degrade our ability to think clearly, and make us more extreme and unwilling to compromise.

Recommended short readings:

- [“Why We Get so Angry When People Disagree with Us.”](#) by Elizabeth Niedbala
- [“Polarization: One Reason Groups Fail,”](#) by Reid Hastie and Cass R. Sunstein
- [“Undue Hate: Why Disagreement Tends to be Overly Disagreeable.”](#) by Daniel F. Stone
- [“The Perception Gap.”](#) by More In Common
- [“How Animosity Helps Create the Very Behaviors That Upset Us.”](#) by Zachary Elwood

Go deeper with these books on how toxic conflict can lead us to acting in unreasonable and conflict-amplifying ways:

- Daniel F. Stone’s book [Undue Hate](#)
 - Amanda Ripley’s book [High Conflict](#) ([her Substack](#))
 - Zachary Elwood’s book [Defusing American Anger](#)
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Section 3: Navigating and Resolving Toxic Conflict

Overview: So far, you’ve learned about a) the ease with which we can disagree, and b) how our disagreement can lead to toxic, dysfunctional ways of thinking and engagement. Now you’ll learn some tips for engaging and collaborating across strong differences, or for helping mediate such disagreement. A major part of navigating and healing a toxic conflict is learning to avoid arrogant, contemptuous, us-vs-them language and approaches.

Recommended short readings:

- [A summary of the book “Conflicted.”](#) by Ian Leslie
- [A summary of the book “Getting To Yes.”](#) by Roger Fisher and William Ury
- [8 Tips for Activists Who Want to Reduce Polarization](#), by Zachary Elwood

Go deeper with these books on navigating and resolving toxic conflict:

- Robert Talisse’s book [Civic Solitude: Why Democracy Needs Distance](#)
 - Adam Kahane’s book [Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don't Agree with or Like or Trust](#)
 - Ian Leslie’s book [Conflicted: Why Arguments Are Tearing Us Apart and How They Can Bring Us Together](#), by Ian Leslie
 - Roger Fisher and William Ury’s book [Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In](#)
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Details on course creation: This course was created by Zachary Elwood with help from polarization researcher [Daniel F. Stone](#). For questions or suggestions for improvement, contact [Zach Elwood](#).