Free Yourself from Conflict
at Work, at Home, and in Life

optimal outcomes

"Not every conflict can be solved by negotiation. With engaging real-world examples and a proven method, *Optimal Outcomes* will transform how individuals and organizations approach conflicts of all kinds." —Doug Stone and Sheila Heen, coauthors of the *New York Times* bestseller *Difficult Conversations*

Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler, Ph.D.

Conflict map reprinted with permission from Robert Louis-Charles.

FIRST EDITION

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Introduction

I had been teaching executive leaders and graduate students to free themselves from recurring conflict for years before I decided to take on one of the persistent challenges in my adult life.

I love my mother dearly. She is my rock, my biggest supporter, and often the first person I go to for counsel. Still, a few years ago, a long-simmering conflict between us exploded. I'm embarrassed now to admit it, but I gave her the classic "shape up or ship out" ultimatum, delivered via the central medium of our conflict: the cell phone. From my home office, I screamed at her, flung down the phone, and burst into tears. Twenty miles away in her apartment in the Bronx, my mom stewed in her own fury.

My threat was made in the heat of anger, and I later retracted it, after a week spent feeling angry, guilty, and unable to focus on anything else.

What got me so upset? My mom called me on the phone. If that sounds harmless, allow me to explain.

As with most working parents, each day is a delicate Rube Goldberg machine of moving parts; if I shift my attention away, missing one of the steps of the sequence, the ball drops and the game is over. At least it seems that way.

When my mother called me, often in the middle of the day's hectic march—which is to say, between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m.—I often responded with a huffy "I'm sorry, Mom, I don't have much time to talk right now."

My mother did not like that answer. "But you never call me! How can you not have time for your mother?" she'd ask. Often, complaining about my not calling was the singular purpose of her call.

That happened again and again. At some point, I stopped answering most of her calls. That made her even more critical and carping about a wider range of things, which made me even more combative.

As often happens, one fight led to another and the conflict became harder and harder for my mother and me to escape. And each time a flare-up occurred, our relationship was diminished, bit by bit. This was almost inevitable.

The day I committed to breaking free from our conflict loop, I didn't make the commitment in private. I did it standing before a seminar of twenty graduate students and four teaching assistants in my class on Optimal Outcomes at Columbia University. I hoped using this real, raw episode in my life would help my students see that the practices I'd be presenting over the course of the three-day workshop could successfully be applied to any conflict, no matter how close or seemingly cataclysmic. I also wanted them to understand that good things come from making yourself vulnerable.

But I was still nervous. I was opening myself up to a seminar full of graduate students, who at that point were still strangers to me.

Would they think it was odd to dedicate class time to my mother and me? Would my being so personal alienate them?

I found out quickly that I had nothing to fear. As I described our conflict in more detail—which I'll do for you, too, a bit later—I saw heads nodding and eyes sparkling with engagement.

Of course they got it. Aside from the fact that they had parental figures in their own lives, they also had conflicts so potent, so frustrating, that they had gone to tough places, too.

Me, you, and everyone: we all deal with conflict all the time. It doesn't matter how much we love our family, respect our colleagues, or like our neighbors. Conflict happens.

You do your best to manage it well, of course. Sometimes your efforts pay off. Other times, no matter what you do, the same problem keeps coming back again and again *and again* despite your best attempts to resolve it.

Like me, you feel stuck. You've tried everything.

And you're at a complete loss for what to do next.

That's where I was the day I let my students into my story. Being stuck in conflict was taking time and energy that I wanted to spend in an affirming way with the people I cared about, including my mother. Instead, everywhere I went I was thinking about the situation: while brushing my teeth, commuting, putting my kids to sleep, listening to people who had come to me for counsel. I was even dreaming about it.

Let's face it: being stuck in conflict can make it difficult to be present with what you're doing and contribute the way you'd like to the people and world around you.

If any of this sounds familiar, the first thing I want you to understand is that you're not alone. Getting stuck in conflict is prevalent—even among the most seasoned leaders in business, academia, and

government, some of whom I've consulted with and whose stories I share throughout the book.

I have changed identifying details such as names and industries to protect my clients' and students' privacy. However, each of these stories reflects my experience working with leaders on some of the toughest problems they've faced in their professional and personal lives.

How I Got Here

In my work as an organizational psychologist at the company I founded, Alignment Strategies Group, I've used the Optimal Outcomes Method over the past thirteen years to help turn around challenging situations facing executives at some of the world's leading organizations, universities, and public institutions. As a professor, I've spent more than a decade teaching the Optimal Outcomes Method to midcareer professionals and students who come to Columbia University's Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution from an array of Columbia's graduate schools: business, international affairs, psychology, education, religion, and law. At the end of the three-day workshop, people who entered the room grappling with daunting conflicts leave revitalized with fresh perspective and a new sense of freedom.

I have written this book with the hopes that it will bring that sense of freedom to you as well.

The Optimal Outcomes Method reaches beyond what you may have encountered if you've read books on conflict resolution in the past. In my early career, I served as a facilitator at Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation (PON), the world's most respected resource on dispute resolution and negotiation. That put me into

the classrooms and conference rooms of two men who today remain giants in the field: the late Roger Fisher (who coauthored the seminal *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* in 1981) and Bruce Patton (a coauthor of *Getting to Yes* and also of the 1999 game changer *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, whose firm I joined around the time the latter book was published). I had worked hard to get there, and it was an exciting, dynamic time, as Fisher and those he influenced moved the field away from competitive, winner-take-all-style negotiation to the collaborative, we-all-can-win approach that thankfully persists today.

It was a formative experience for me, yet as the years passed, I found myself asking questions that weren't adequately addressed by the methods I was teaching. My academic background was in social psychology, but surrounded by lawyers, I began to notice that my colleagues saw conflict and its resolution as infinitely possible but tangible and finite. Every case had an end. Yet when I looked around at my own life and at the world's most destructive struggles, I saw conflicts that seemed intractable, often resurfacing most violently just when resolution seemed near. For example, after several hopeful years of negotiations facilitated by a team of international diplomats who had been trained in "win-win" methods, the Oslo peace process between Israelis and Palestinians broke down and renewed cycles of violence took its place.

I wondered whether there was any hope for people who couldn't seem to negotiate their way to resolution through the "win-win" methods I had been advancing.

I was also intrigued by how emotions such as anger and sadness contribute to conflict. I had grown up in a family of screamers and door slammers, of which my grandfather was the most extreme example. He had fled Vienna in 1938 in anticipation of the Nazi invasion, and he had eventually landed in New York, where he had

rebuilt his life. Today I can just barely comprehend the pain he endured, the grief and guilt of leaving people he loved behind forever. He never saw his father again. One of his brothers remained in Europe and was murdered by the Nazis for refusing to turn in other Jews. Two of his other brothers ended up in Australia, safe but far-flung for the rest of their lives. My grandfather never spoke about his pain, but I believe I experienced the visceral effects of his repressing it: occasional bouts of anger and rage that many times left me and my little brother cowering in a corner of his apartment in the Bronx.

On the other side of my family, my maternal grandmother, Florence, was the quintessential conflict whisperer. All she had to do was say, "Shh, shh," which was her gentle way of quieting us down, and everyone would become calm. I suspect that learning how to deal with my grandfather's anger, and being inspired by my grandmother's calming influence, helped me to become a calming presence for my family, too, and eventually for my clients, students, and friends. I hope not only to be that presence for you in these pages but also to teach you how to become that kind of force in your own life.

My desire to understand seemingly intractable conflict led me to the PhD program in social-organizational psychology at Columbia University in September 2002, where I found others exploring similar questions. One year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I was granted a graduate research fellowship by the US Department of Homeland Security and spent the next five years studying the effects of humiliation on aggression in the context of conflicts such as global terrorism.

It was a journey deep into the emotional causes of serious long-term conflict. I spent time on the ground in the Middle East with Palestinian, Jordanian, and Israeli teachers and students facilitating dialogue and cross-border relationships. And I discovered

research that spoke to the experiences I'd had with my grandfather regarding how painful emotions such as anger and humiliation contribute to aggressive behavior, which in turn often causes further aggression, perpetuating cycles of devastating conflict.

Today, as an organizational psychologist, I help leaders deal productively with their anger so it doesn't come out in aggressive bursts as my grandfather's did. I also help people learn to deal with *others'* anger-fueled attacks productively, so that everyone grows from the experience. In these pages, you'll meet some of my clients, and I hope and trust you'll find their stories illuminating and helpful.

Conflict *Can* Be Good for You

Getting stuck in conflict is common partly because conflict itself is inevitable.

Generally speaking, conflict is a natural, normal, healthy part of everyday life. For example, according to the renowned marriage researcher John Gottman, the presence of *some* amount of conflict in a marriage (as opposed to none or too much) is a typical marker of a happy, healthy relationship.

Conflict can also be productive and lead to innovative solutions. For instance, diverse teams, in which team members engage in conflict as a result of naturally arising differing perspectives, have been found to be more creative, innovative, and productive than teams in which everyone looks, sounds, and thinks alike.

Interesting plotlines in books, plays, and movies—and to some degree life itself—depend on the protagonist facing an inner or outer conflict and learning how to overcome it. For example, think of the main characters in the world's best-known pieces of literature, from Gilgamesh to Moses, from Mohammed to the Buddha,

all of whom face and overcome gargantuan conflicts—both inside themselves and with others. The renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell has noted the archetypical nature of these stories. He offers us the language of the "hero's journey," where the main character must wrestle with an inner conflict or a conflict with someone or something else that is difficult to control. Campbell says that what makes life interesting and worth living is for each of us to meet and overcome the inner and outer conflicts that inevitably appear along our paths in life.

In short, without conflict, the world would be a much less productive, less interesting, perhaps even less worthwhile place.

Some conflict—a healthy amount of it—is and should remain part of a well-functioning life, team, organization, and society.

However, conflict that returns no matter how many times you try to resolve it tends not to contribute to your health and growth. Instead, it makes it hard to enjoy life or achieve your goals.

Conflict Begets Conflict

In the 1970s, Dr. Morton Deutsch, widely considered the father of conflict resolution, made a simple but profound discovery about the nature of conflict: it's self-perpetuating. Specifically, through a series of experiments, he found that once a conflict begins, by its very nature, it is likely to lead to more conflict.

For example, when we experience conflict with someone else, we tend to think, feel, and act in ways that cause more conflict, which leads to thoughts, feelings, and actions that cause more conflict, and so on. Throughout this book, we'll explore several reasons *why* conflict leads to more conflict. For now, let's simply note that conflict recurrence is the nature of the beast. I call it the *conflict loop*.

What I've discovered is that when you're stuck in a conflict loop, you develop conflict habits, including blaming or avoiding others, blaming yourself, and relentlessly seeking "win-win" solutions even when other people refuse to cooperate. And your conflict habits interact with other people's conflict habits to form a pattern of interaction that keeps you stuck in the conflict loop.

After five years in graduate school studying the factors that contribute to intractable conflict, I understood something about how we get ourselves stuck in a conflict loop. What I still didn't know then was: *How can we get ourselves out?*

But now, over more than a decade, I have helped leaders free themselves from recurring conflicts. This book describes a method, grounded in research and practice, that will help you do the same.

The Optimal Outcomes Method

The Optimal Outcomes Method is a set of eight practices you can use to free yourself from the habits and patterns that reinforce the conflict loop.

In Practice 1, I help you notice and stop engaging in the often unconscious habits that make conflict worse, such as avoiding it until it explodes, acting in the heat of the moment in ways you'll later regret, blaming yourself unnecessarily, or relentlessly seeking to collaborate even when others are not willing to do so.

In Practices 2, 3, and 4, I show you how to step back from a conflict, no matter how heated it may be, and observe it so you can figure out what's really causing it. Doing this gives you new insight into the situation, which helps you break the conflict pattern by taking constructive action that is different from what you've done before.

In Practices 5, 6, 7, and 8, I help you imagine, design, test, and choose a new path to an Optimal Outcome—which sometimes substantially differs from what you once thought would be an ideal outcome. Though you might begin the process with firm ideas of how your conflict *should* be resolved, an Optimal Outcome will likely bring you greater personal satisfaction and more lasting harmony than your original goal ever could have.

In order for the practices to free you from the habits that you may (intentionally or not) have spent years honing, you'll need to practice them, sometimes over and over again, to build your proficiency.

Before we explore the eight practices in depth, we need to acknowledge two fundamentals of the Optimal Outcomes Method that are woven throughout each practice: developing the capacity to *observe* and taking *pattern-breaking action*.

Pause to Observe

Today, mindfulness—learning to stay engaged with the present moment—has been widely acknowledged as a valuable tool to break free from past experiences and future expectations, so that we can better experience the here and now. *Pausing* is a mindfulness practice that enhances your awareness of wherever you are. It helps you notice the nuances in a situation that are easy to miss when you approach life from a less attentive state. Pausing helps you see things from a different perspective. It also allows you to acknowledge what is happening *without needing to change it*, which is, paradoxically, essential to freeing yourself from conflict.

Pausing is about taking a moment to notice what *is*. I'll show you how to do this throughout the book. Whether you've spent years sitting quietly on a meditation cushion or you've never taken a moment's pause before, the practices in this book are deep enough to

provide you with new insight and simple enough to be done by anyone.

Take Pattern-Breaking Action

The purpose of pausing is ultimately to help you not only identify, but also to break, the pattern and free yourself from the conflict loop. As I'll explain in a moment, pausing often breaks the conflict pattern all by itself, while other times pausing happens first and pattern-breaking action follows.

In part I of the book, pausing will help you recognize how your own conflict habits interact with others' to form a conflict pattern. Sometimes, pausing to observe a conflict situation will be pattern breaking in and of itself. If you've been taking action to try to make the conflict go away, just observing it will break the pattern.

The practices in part II of the book will help you break free from the conflict pattern by *first* pausing to acknowledge the factors that have contributed to it so you can *then* take pattern-breaking action. Pattern-breaking action happens when you create a new response to a familiar scenario. This will help you start moving in a different direction.

In part III, you'll pause to imagine your Ideal Future (a "prototype" of an Optimal Outcome); then you'll design a Pattern-Breaking Path to move you toward your Ideal Future; and finally, you'll turn your prototyped Ideal Future into an Optimal Outcome so you can exit the conflict loop for good.

What Is an Optimal Outcome?

In recurring conflicts, we tend not to be very good at imagining what we want. Instead, we're focused on what went wrong in the past and who is to blame. If we do think about the future, we tend

not to look honestly at the reality we're facing. (It's much easier to fantasize about idealized scenarios that could never happen in real life than to face up to the often cold, hard reality of other people's experiences, desires, and needs.) To account for this, as the graph below illustrates, the degree to which you are able to create an Optimal Outcome is determined *both* by your ability to imagine an Ideal Future *and* to acknowledge the reality of the situation and people you're dealing with. We will explore how to distinguish fantasy from reality in Practices 1 and 8.

Breaking free from a conflict loop can be challenging. The habits and patterns that reinforce it have a strong inward pull. In order to break free, you'll need a force from outside the loop to pull you out. The Optimal Outcome is that force, and in Practice 8, I'll show you how to create it to pull you away from the conflict loop and toward freedom.

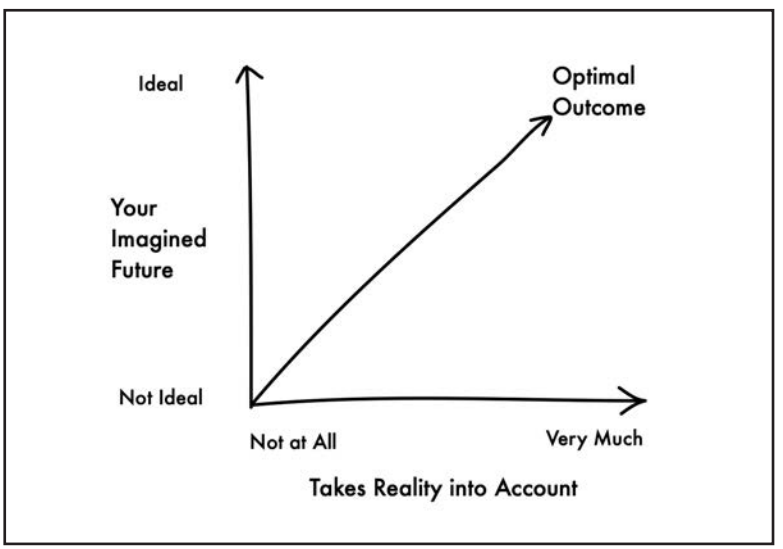


FIGURE 1: An Optimal Outcome maximizes your imagined future and reality.

What Is Conflict Freedom, Anyway?

With all this talk about freeing yourself from conflict, I need to be clear about something. The goal of this book is *not* to help you rid yourself of all conflict. Instead, when your repeated attempts to resolve conflict fail, the practices in this book will help you notice and free yourself from the habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that have held you captive in the past. This will help you free yourself from the conflict loop in any given situation.

The beauty of having conflict freedom as your goal is that *you already have the ability to become free within yourself*. You don't need to wait for anyone else to change or to agree with you. *You can free yourself even without anyone else's cooperation.*

Similarly, though help from skilled people can be useful if you have access to it, in most cases, you don't need a coach, talent management professional, or mediator in order to become free. You can achieve an Optimal Outcome on your own. The practices in this book will show you how.

When you break free from a conflict loop that's had a hold on you, there's a moment when you'll suddenly feel free—physically lighter, exhaling a huge sigh of relief, and free from the sense of powerlessness that kept you stuck before.

When I experienced that magical moment myself in the situation with my mom, I felt the release of physical tension in my body—the sudden lightness in my step, the unclenching of my jaw. I've witnessed these changes with my students and clients as well. Their shoulders broaden and relax; their mouths turn from frowning to smiling; their scrunched-up brows become smooth. There's a physical and emotional freedom that accompanies conflict freedom.

I know this is possible for you, too.

A Note About Language

This book is about how to become free from conflict, and I've found that language can either help or hinder that process. Research on priming suggests that how we describe people and situations influences the way we think about and experience them. The words we choose matter.

For example, even using the word *conflict* to describe a situation can influence how you think about it and therefore can impact your outcome. When you hear the word *conflict*, your brain makes connections with similar words such as *fight* and *disagreement* and with concepts such as the idea that conflict must be difficult. As a result of the priming effect, you are more likely to assume that a conflict is inescapable than to look for new ways to approach it.

Similarly, using a conflict-oriented word such as *counterpart*, *party*, or *opponent* to define your relationship with someone doesn't represent the complex nature of most relationships and doesn't leave much room for your relationship with that person to change over time.

I want to leave the door open to the possibility of change, so whenever possible, I try to use more neutral or informal descriptors, such as *brother*, *friend*, *leader*, *colleague*, *them*, *theirs*, or *others*. I have also done my best to use words such as *situation* and *experience* to describe what you're facing. However, sometimes I use the word *conflict* in order to be as clear as possible about what I am talking about. I encourage you to experiment with the words you use and notice how they impact the way you view what is possible.

Given the insidious nature of the priming effect, it may not be realistic to avoid it altogether, but it is worthwhile to try to use language that will support, rather than hinder, what you are trying to

achieve. Even simply acknowledging the power of the priming effect has the potential to be helpful.

Identify a Situation to Use Throughout the Book

In my course at Columbia, I ask every student to choose a conflict situation they care about, ideally from their own life, to which they can apply the Optimal Outcomes Method throughout the course. Some students have no problem thinking of one.

But in every class, there are one or two students who have trouble identifying a situation. When I first started teaching the course, one of those students was Jordana, a twenty-eight-year-old manager at a software company from a large family in Maryland.

When Jordana's mind came up blank, I asked about where she worked and lived. Still nothing came to her. Then I asked about her family. After a hesitant pause, she started speaking slowly.

Jordana said, "Well, my parents have been divorced since I was two years old. My father had an affair over twenty years ago, and my mother has never forgiven him. He's been remarried for most of my life, but my mom has been single since they got divorced. They can't stand each other, and whenever they have to talk or see each other, all hell breaks loose. Now my middle sister's wedding is coming up in a few months, and I have no idea how we're going to handle my parents being in the same room for the wedding. And my oldest sister is pregnant. Who will get to be the first to visit the baby in the hospital? Plus I'll be finishing school soon, and I want both of my parents to come to my graduation."

Jordana was like the proverbial fish who can't see the water she's swimming in—because the water is everywhere. She had been

living with her parents' conflict since she was two years old. It had surrounded her so completely that she didn't even think of it as conflict; she just thought of it as her life.

Now that she was an adult, she saw how her parents' conflict could make many years of future family gatherings challenging for herself and her two sisters. Once she identified her parents' conflict, she had the power to work with it.

From experience, I know that the best way to understand the Optimal Outcomes practices is to apply them to a situation you care about. That's why, in every chapter, I'll ask you a series of questions to help you apply the practices to *your* situation.

Just as Jordana did, take a moment now to consider a variety of situations in your life. Think about recurring conflict situations you care about at work, in your family, your community, or in the national or international arenas.

In order to get the most out of this book, choose a situation to which the following three statements apply:

1. *I am directly impacted by the situation.* I am not simply an observer in someone else's dispute.

2. *I or someone else has tried to resolve the conflict in the past and failed.*

3. *I can do something to help.* The situation is still happening; it is not a closed case.

If you're still grappling with various different situations, choose the one that is most pressing for you.

Now take a moment to write down your answers to the questions below:

Who is involved in the situation?
What is the conflict about? In other words, what are the people concerned about?

Finally, see if you can pinpoint exactly *why* you want to achieve an Optimal Outcome. Your answer will motivate you to do the practices in this book, even when the going gets tough. And it may get tough. At some point, the practices will require you to look honestly at yourself and consider ways you can change to achieve the results you're looking for. This can be difficult even for the most courageous and flexible among us. But research shows that if you know why you are making a change, it can be easier to commit and stick to it. So take a moment to write down your answer to the following question:

Why do I want freedom from this conflict?

Once you know why, the rest of this book will help you focus on *how*: it will help you understand exactly how you got stuck *and* show you how to break free from the conflict loop, even without anyone else's agreement or cooperation. You'll take a hard look at where things stand today, and you'll learn how to free yourself, both now and in the future.

Summary

- Conflict is inevitable. A healthy amount of conflict is part of a well-functioning life, team, organization, and society. However, recurring conflict makes it hard to be present or contribute the way you'd like to the people and world around you.

- By its very nature, conflict begets conflict in a self-reinforcing loop. Once a conflict begins, it is likely to lead to more conflict.

- Not all conflicts can be resolved neatly. In those instances when resolution seems impossible, freeing yourself from the conflict loop first requires simply noticing the conflict pattern. Part I of the book will show you how to do this.

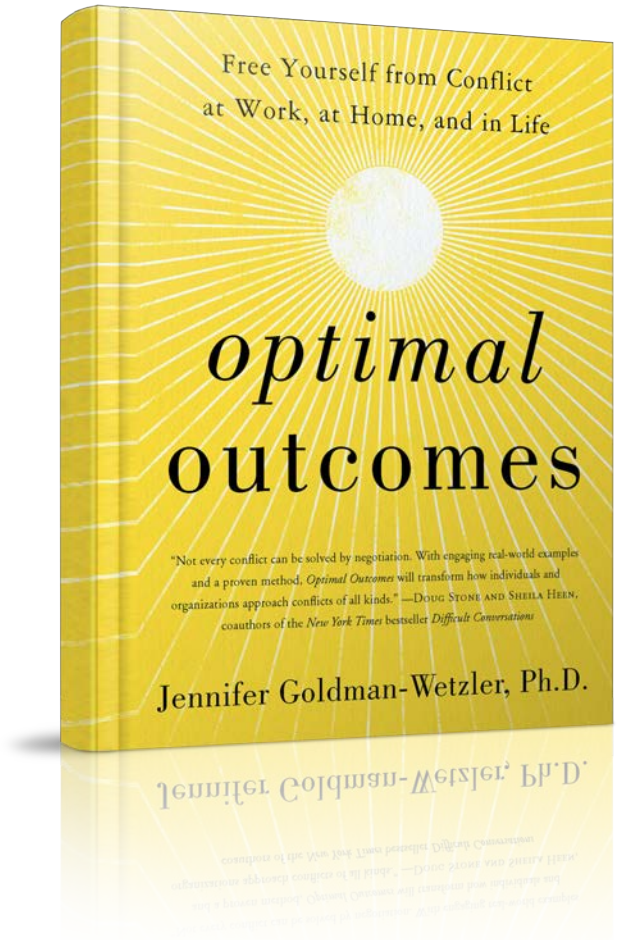
- The practices in part II will help you pause to observe the existing conflict pattern in more depth and then take *pattern-breaking action*. Pattern-breaking action is any constructive action that is *different from* what you've been doing.

- To free yourself from the conflict loop, the practices in part III will help you imagine, design, test, and choose a path to achieve an Optimal Outcome. An Optimal Outcome is an ideal scenario that also takes into account hard truths about the reality of the situation you're facing. It is the force that pulls you away from the conflict loop toward freedom.

Get Started

Choose a recurring conflict that impacts your life so you can apply the practices to it throughout the book. Take a moment now to consider:

- Who is involved in the situation?
- What is the conflict about? In other words, what are the people concerned about?
- Why do you want freedom from this conflict?



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