

Peaceful Coexistence

Due to the smaller buffer zone of neighbors in many homeowner associations, conflicts are more likely to happen. Things that bother you slightly (your dog barking, your screaming kids) can cause your neighbors to go ballistic, much in the same way that their behavior affects you. The key to minimizing conflict with your neighbor is to *take responsibility for being a good neighbor*. What does being a good neighbor look like? It doesn't mean that you have to be best friends or spend time together. Simple consideration and appropriate communication with your neighbor is all that is necessary.

Here are some helpful suggestions for achieving a peaceful coexistence with your neighbor:

Before There is a Concern:

Meet your neighbor. Introduce yourself at the mailbox, when taking a walk, or when you see the moving boxes arrive. Learning your neighbors' name and regularly offering a cordial "good morning" or "hello" can be the start of a positive relationship. Don't worry about whether or not they reciprocate. The important thing is that you are making an effort. Don't wait until you have a problem to meet your neighbor.

Keep your neighbors informed. Contact your neighbors before you do something that might affect them—such as hosting a big party, building a fence, cutting down a tree, or getting a new dog. Informing your neighbors ahead of time allows them to make plans or tell you how your project will affect them. Getting their input lets you act in a way that avoids problems.

Observe the Golden Rule. Treat your neighbors the way they would like to be treated. Set an example by being considerate about noise from vehicles, tools, stereos, group activities and pets.

Be aware of differences. Differences in age, ethnic background, years in the neighborhood, etc. can lead to conflicting expectations or misunderstandings unless you make an effort to communicate and understand each other.

Consider your neighbors' view. How does your compost pile, dog run, or son's car parts look from your neighbors' backyard or windows? Keep areas that are in others' view reasonably presentable.

Be appreciative. If your neighbor does something you like, tell them! They will be pleased that you noticed the yard work or the new paint job. It will be easier to talk later when they do something that you don't like.

When There is a Problem:

Don't assume that discussing it will aggravate your neighbor. Your neighbors can't help resolve a problem they don't know exists. Focus on:

- Learning rather than delivering a message
 - Understanding rather than blaming
- Joint problem solving rather than who is at fault

If you use these approaches, the conversation will usually go better than you think. Neighbors are often not aware that their actions are negatively affecting others. Usually, people are willing to make changes if you approach them respectfully.

Don't assume you know your neighbors' intentions. If your neighbor does something that irritates you, don't assume that it was done on purpose. Presume the neighbor doesn't know about the annoyance. Giving them the benefit of the doubt will make it easier for you to talk about the situation.

Don't wait to talk about things that bother you. If your neighbor does something that bothers you, let them know. By communicating early and calmly, you take a big step forward toward resolving the problem. Don't wait until a minor irritation becomes a major issue and makes it difficult to discuss.

Separate the person from the problem. Conflict can happen whenever two or more people interact with one another. It occurs because we are all unique individuals with different perspectives, values, and needs. Focusing on *the issue, not the person* will allow you to take care of the problem while maintaining or improving your relationship with your neighbor.

Be respectful. Talk directly with the neighbor involved with the problem. Don't gossip or spread rumors with other neighbors. Gossip damages relationships and can hurt other people. Problem solving is only possible when we treat each other with respect.

Be calm. If a neighbor approaches you accusingly about a difficulty, listen carefully and thank them for telling you how they feel. You don't have to agree or justify your behavior. If you can listen and not react defensively, then their anger will subside, the lines of communication will remain open, and there is a good chance of working things out.

Listen well. When you discuss a problem, try to understand how your neighbor feels about an issue and why. Understanding is not the same as agreeing, but will increase the likelihood of a solution that works for you both. Summarize what you hear and ask questions to clarify your understanding of their view of the problem.

If things get heated, take a break. If you need to, take a break to calm down and think about what you and your neighbor have discussed. Arrange a time to finish the conversation later, and then do so. It's hard to problem solve when you are having a heated discussion.

Constructive communication can resolve conflict, and talking things over directly is the best way to handle problems, and avoid enforcement or the courts.

From the City of Beaverton Oregon Dispute Resolution Center.