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# How Intent and Impact Differ and Why It Matters



Medically reviewed by [Tiffany Taft, PsyD](#) — Written by Taneasha White on April 27, 2021

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Misunderstandings are a part of life. Everyone has a different perspective, lived experience, and set of biases that drive their actions — whether that's their approach to grocery shopping or how they handle [conflict](#) with a co-worker.

People often try to explain their actions based on their intentions, but others may have a very different perception of the overall impact of those actions.

At best, this can lead to a harmless mix-up. In other cases, though, this disconnect between someone's intent and the actual impact of their actions can lead to major conflict.

While the issue of intent versus impact often comes up in conflict management and trauma-informed care, it also makes frequent appearances in everyday conversations and conflict.

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## How they're different

Before getting any further, it's important to understand how someone's intent differs from their impact.

Someone's intent is what they think or feel during an action or conversation. It's usually the reason or motivation behind the situation. Someone might explain their intent by saying, "Well, I said it that way because..."

Impact refers to how that action or conversation makes the other person feel. They might bring up the issue of the impact by saying, "It seemed like you were..."

In a nutshell, intent refers to what you thought you were doing. Impact refers to how that action was perceived by the other person.

## Everyday examples

The idea of intent versus impact shows up more often than you might think in day-to-day life.

Some examples of situations that you might find yourself in:

- Your partner makes a joke that upsets you. You know that they didn't mean any harm, but it still stings. Their **intent** was lighthearted, but the **impact** is that your feelings are hurt.
- A friend comes to you to talk about an issue they're having at work. You offer them advice, but your friend is defensive and ends the conversation. You later learn that they felt like you were telling them they handled the situation poorly. Your **intent** was to offer an action plan, but the **impact** was that they felt judged.
- Your supervisor institutes a new policy at work under the guise of improving the culture, but the staff feels like it's just more work and surveillance, exacerbating the lack of trust in the office. Your supervisor's **intent** was to add processes for efficiency, but the

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- Your teen brings home a report card that has grades lower than what's typical of them. You sit them down to have a conversation about the importance of doing their best, and they shut down. Turns out, they feel like your words are coming from a place of disappointment, not love or encouragement. Your **intent** was to foster a conversation about the future, but the **impact** is that your teen feels judged.

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**Which is more important?**

During any kind of conflict, either side is likely to take the stance that supports their individual reality.

Ever heard the saying, “The truth lies somewhere in the middle”? That line of thinking applies here in that there’s no one-size-fits-all answer.

One person’s intentions and another’s perception or experience are both valid, so context can be key when talking about intent versus impact.

Context matters when it comes to intent versus impact.

**In therapeutic settings**

Within person-centered work, especially with survivors and trauma-

trauma-informed care, the goal is to understand the impact of the client's experience on their behavior and to help them understand the impact of their behavior on others. This is a key component of trauma-informed care.

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For example, if someone's undergoing counseling after experiencing domestic abuse, their care would be focused on the impact of the abuse, regardless of whether the other person intended to harm them.

### **In restorative justice**

An emphasis on impact also tends to come up in movements around transformative and restorative justice, a practice of having people who commit crimes repair any harm they've done to the victim.

Say someone sprays graffiti on a storefront. A restorative justice approach might involve them meeting with the shop owner, talking through how the graffiti impacts their business, and helping them remove the paint.

### **In oppressive systems**

In situations rooted in oppressive systems, like racism or homophobia, impact is typically more significant.

Microaggressions are a great example of this.

Imagine someone has a new friend from a different country with a cuisine that's very different from what they're used to. This new friend invites them over to enjoy a traditional meal they've prepared, so they can try the cuisine for themselves.

The invited friend takes a bite and says, "Whoa, this is actually really good!"

While the invited friend's intention was to pay a sincere compliment, the friend who cooked feels like it was a subtle dig at their culture and its food.

In close personal relationships, this might not be a big deal. Maybe the friend who cooked knows the other person's heart was in the right place, so they don't pay much attention to what was said.

But the stakes are higher in other scenarios.

Consider the way many white people [posted black squares on social media](#) to show solidarity with those supporting the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Many of these posts used the hashtag "#blacklivesmatter."

While the intention of those posting the black squares was to amplify the cause of Black Lives Matter, the impact was quite different.

Rather than raising awareness about the issue of police brutality, these

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## If your impact doesn't match your intent

Ever found yourself saying, “But that’s not what I meant”?

You aren’t alone. Everyone tends to measure their responses based on their own interpretation of a situation, meaning that unintentional harm is bound to happen — none of us are above an accidental “ouch.”

If someone discloses that you hurt or offended them, the remainder of your relationship, whether it’s professional, romantic, or platonic, can depend on how you handle the situation.

Here’s how to get things back on track:

- Listen with the goal of understanding where they’re coming from, not with the goal of defending yourself. It can help to use the [active listening](#) technique of repeating back exactly what you hear.
- Center their feelings, not yours. It’s normal to feel a little prickly when someone tells you that you did something wrong, and you disagree. But take a beat and a deep breath, and know that you can talk about your feelings later.
- Genuinely apologize or acknowledge the impact that your actions had on them. Steer clear of “I’m sorry if,” “I’m sorry you,” or “I’m sorry but,” as these all lack accountability and put the blame on the one who was hurt. A simple “I’m sorry for doing that, and I’ll do better next time” can go a long way.

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## If you want to talk about someone’s impact

On the other hand, bringing up hurt feelings to someone you care about or work with can be nerve-racking. No one wants to feel like they’re overreacting or causing a fuss.

But if you intend to keep this relationship in good standing, it’s best to bring up your concerns.

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- Focus on your feelings and use “I” statements. For example, you could say “I felt really hurt when...” instead of “You hurt me when...” This centers the conversation on the impact the action had on you versus the situation itself or placing blame on the other person.
- Be willing to hear their side after you’ve expressed yours. This doesn’t mean you have to agree with it, but it’s best to come into the conversation with open ears.
- Discuss how the situation could have been handled differently. Is there anything the other person could do differently if this situation happens again? Now that they know the impact of their action, how can you hold them accountable in the future?

When having these conversations, keep in mind that it’s not your responsibility to manage someone else’s emotions.

If they become hostile or angry, or if you feel unsafe, you have no obligation to continue the conversation.

Consider hitting pause by saying something like, “I can tell this makes you upset. Why don’t we talk about this another time, after we’ve both had a chance to process things?”

## The bottom line

Intent versus impact isn’t a black-and-white issue. Both matter, but, depending on the context, one may be more significant.

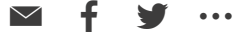
If you feel hurt but aren’t in physical danger, don’t ignore the impact of someone’s actions, especially if you plan to stay in touch with them. It’s usually best to address this kind of conflict head-on.

If you learn that you hurt someone else, despite your good intentions, try to set aside your own thoughts and feelings to center the impact that your actions had. While it can be difficult, it’s a key part of maintaining healthy relationships.

*Taneasha White is a Black, queer lover of words, inquisition, and community, and has used her role within both literary and organizational spaces to make room for folks who are often cast aside. She’s the founder and editor of [UnSung Literary Magazine](#), a flash fiction and poetry publication focused on offering artistic space for marginalized voices; a guest editor with [Quail Bell Magazine](#); and co-host of the podcast “[Critiques for The Culture](#),” where media is dissected through humor and a sociopolitical lens. You can find more of her work [here](#).*

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