


Understanding & Managing High Conflict Personality Disorders

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Core Issues of PDs:
#1: LACK OF SELF-AWARENESS


People with personality disorders lack awareness of:

- Why they are the way they are
- How they contribute to own problems
- How to change

-- Aaron Beck (1990)
Cognitive Therapy of Personality Disorders

- Why they feel upset right now
- How they affect other people
- What skills they have that *do work*

So they don't gain insights from feedback.




Core Issues of PDs:
#2: LACK OF CHANGE

When person loses "flexible adaptation" & takes a "non-reflective stance" in social interactions:

1. Behavior becomes rigidly patterned
2. This causes significant social impairment
3. Which causes significant internal distress
4. This rigid behavior "**evokes**" **responses in others** which "validate" their inflexible beliefs

-- Efrain Bleiberg (2001) *Treating Personality Disorders in Children and Adolescents*

HIGH CONFLICT

INSTITUTE

Core Issues of PDs:
#3: Externalizing Responsibility

“High Conflict People” (HCPs) externalize by focusing on specific person/group – their “Target of Blame”
This leads them into intense conflict & sometimes litigation against that individual or group:

“He’s the cause of all of my problems. Once he’s out of my life, everything will be fine.”

“I had to hit her, after what she said to me.”

“The children would be better off if my ex was dead.”

Disclaimer

- This seminar does not train you to diagnose personality disorders.
- It may be harmful to tell someone that you believe that they have a personality disorder.
- Just recognize potential patterns and adapt your approach accordingly.
- Just develop a Private Working Theory

“Love-You, Hate-You” Types (Borderline)

- Fear of abandonment: clinging & manipulation
- Seeks revenge and vindication
- Dramatic mood swings
- Sudden and intense anger, out of proportion
- Impulsive, risk-taking, self-destructive behaviors

**“Con Artist” Types
(Antisocial or Sociopaths)**

- Fear of being dominated
- Drive to dominate others in weaker positions
- Disregard for social rules and laws
- Constant lying and deception, even when easily caught (often don't keep track of lies)
- Lack of remorse.
- Some *enjoy* hurting people (psychopaths)
Psychopaths are 1% of general population

**“I’m Very Superior” Types
(Narcissistic)**

Fear of being inferior/powerless

Superior self-image from childhood to cope with adversity, or grew up feeling entitled

Absorbed in self, own needs, own viewpoint

Feels entitled to special treatment

Lacks empathy for others

**“I’ll Never Trust You” Types
(Paranoid)**

- Fear of being exploited
- Endless doubts about friends, professionals, etc.
- Misinterprets ordinary events or comments as demeaning or threatening
- Bears long-term grudges
- Misperceives others as attacking him or her, so “counter-attacks” first (pre-emptive strikes)
- Fears and expects conspiracies against self

“Always Dramatic” Types (Histrionic)

- Fears being ignored and left out
- Drive to be center of attention
- Constantly dramatic and theatrical
- Exaggerates and may make up stories, but also may be a victim
- Difficulty focusing on tasks or making decisions

CAUSES

- 1. Biological factors**, such as genetic tendencies and temperament at birth.
- 2. Early childhood factors**, such as early parenting “attachment” disruptions, child abuse or other trauma before age 5.
- 3. Social learning**, such as “invalidating environments”: being ignored for positive behaviors and getting more attention for mood swings and extreme emotions; family and community tolerance of bad behavior; role models w personality disorders.
- 4. Larger Culture:** Attention and rewards for Drama, Mood Swings, Narcissism & Violence

Prevalence of Personality Disorders (US NIH Study 2001-05)

National Institutes of Health study of over 35,000 people had following results for 5 “high conflict” personalities:

<u>Narcissistic</u>	=	6.2%
<u>Borderline</u>	=	5.9%
<u>Paranoid</u>	=	4.4%
<u>Antisocial</u>	=	3.6%
<u>Histrionic</u>	=	1.8%

All have substantial overlap with other personality disorders, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and suicide

----*Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 7/2004, 4/2008 & 7/2008

Prevalence of Personality Disorders (NIH Study by Age Groups)

Narcissistic = 6.2%
65+=3.2 45-64=5.6 30-44=7.1 20-29 = 9.4

Borderline = 5.9%
65+=2.0 45-64=5.5 30-44=7.0 20-29 = 9.3

Paranoid = 4.4%
65+=1.8 45-64=3.6 30-44=5.0 18-29 = 6.8

Antisocial = 3.6%
65+=0.6 45-64=2.8 30-44=4.2 18-29 = 6.2

Histrionic = 1.8%
65+=0.6 45-64=1.2 30-44=1.8 18-29 = 3.8

2 Hemispheres of Brain (approx.)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Left Hemisphere</u> • "Logical Brain" • Generally Conscious • Language • Thinks in words • Planning • Examines Details • Rational analysis • Systematic Solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Right Hemisphere</u> • "Relationship Brain" • Generally Unconscious • Observes relationships • Thinks in pictures • Creativity, Art, Intuition • Non-verbal Skills • Facial recognition & cues • Gut feelings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Emotions Calm, contentment, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative Emotions Hurt, anger, fear, etc.

Corpus Callosum

- The "bridge" wiring between the hemispheres.
- Aids in the flow of information back and forth.
More flow is better.
- It's smaller in repeatedly abused children.
- It's smaller in adults with borderline personality disorder (possibly the result of abuse in childhood).
- Some people get stuck in rt. brain upset emotions; can't access their left brain problem-solving skills.

**Amygdala in
Non-Verbal Communication**

Amygdala of the brain:

- Alarm center; “Smoke Detector” of brain
- “Hijacks” brain for fast, unconscious defensive responses -- faster than “thinking”
- Shuts down logical, analytical thought processes
 - Daniel Goleman
 - Emotional Intelligence* (1995)
- Attentive to facial expressions, specifically Rt. Amygdala:
 - fear and anger** (not other neg. emotions)
 - Allan Schore
 - Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (2003)

Mirror Neurons

- Recent discovery in brain research
- Neurons in our brains automatically “mirror” activities we watch, to prepare to do the same
- Emotions are mirrored: smiles, sadness, anger
- Empathy may be a mirroring activity
- You can over-ride mirroring and act opposite (respond to anger with empathy; sadness with hope; upset emotions with problem-solving)
 - *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*, Iaconboni (2008)

4 Key Skills for Managing
High Conflict Personalities

C.A.R.S. Method

1. CONNECTING with E.A.R.
2. ANALYZING options and dilemmas
3. RESPONDING to misinformation
4. SETTING LIMITS on behavior

**1. CONNECTING:
Empathy, Attention & Respect**

You'll be frustrated by the HCP's emotional reactivity and thinking distortions. It's easy to get "emotionally hooked," and to withhold any positive responses. It's easy to feel a powerful urge to attack or criticize.
Instead, consciously use your E.A.R.:

- EMPATHY
- ATTENTION
- RESPECT

E.A.R. Statement

- Example: "I can *understand* your frustration – this is a very important decision in your life. Don't worry, I will pay full *attention* to your concerns about this issue and any proposals you want to make. I have a lot of *respect* for your commitment to solving this problem, and I look forward to solving it too.

See article: *Calming Upset People with E.A.R.*

Fears and EARs for HCPs

<u>Their Fears</u>	<u>Your EAR Responses</u>
• Being abandoned	• I want to help you
• Being seen as inferior	• I respect your efforts
• Being ignored	• I'll pay attention
• Being dominated	• I'll listen
• Being taken advantage of	• Its just rules we all have to follow
	• I understand this can be frustrating
	• I'll work with you on this
	• I know this can be confusing

Cautions about E.A.R.

- Avoid believing or agreeing with content.
- Avoid volunteering to “fix it” for them (in an effort to calm down their emotions).
- Be honest about empathy and respect (find something you truly believe)
- Keep an arms-length relationship.
- You don’t have to listen forever.
- You don’t have to use words or these words.

**2. ANALYZING Options
(Give them a Choice)**

- **In high-conflict situations, don’t focus on feelings.**
You won’t resolve their emotional issues. Just acknowledge their frustrations. Talk to the right brain.

Focus the upset person on a choice:

- The goal is to get the upset person focused on problem-solving, away from his or her emotions.
- This puts responsibility on the person to help solve the problem; puts responsibility on the person for making the choice.
- It gives them some power, when they feel powerless.

**2. Analyzing Options
(Make a Proposal)**

Teach clients to Make Proposals:
Any concern about the past can be turned into a proposal about the future.

Proposals usually contain:

WHO does
WHAT,
WHEN and
WHERE.

If they get stuck blaming or talking too much about the past, then simply ask:
“So, what’s your proposal?”

3-Steps for Making Proposals

1. **Propose:** WHO will do WHAT, WHEN and WHERE.
2. **Ask questions:** The other person then asks questions about the proposal, such as: "What's your picture of what this would look like, if I agreed to do it?" "What to you see me doing in more detail?" "When would we start doing that, in your proposal?"
3. **Respond:** Other person then responds with: "Yes." "No." Or: "I'll think about it."

And if you say "No," then you make a new proposal.

3. Responding to Inaccurate Information

- Remain skeptical of the accuracy of the person's information. There may be many thinking distortions.
- Let them know that you will never know the full story. It is *possible* the extreme statements they are making are true. And *possibly* not true. **"You might be right!"**
- But decisions can still be made about the future. Next steps can be taken.

3. Responding with B.I.F.F Response

Brief: Keep it brief. Long explanations and arguments trigger upsets for HCPs.

Informative: Focus on straight information, not arguments, reactions, emotions or defending yourself (you don't need to)

Friendly: Say thank you for writing and/or a friendly closing (have a nice weekend) and/or you respect their efforts (E.A.R.)

Firm: Calmly close the door to further argument or give two choices and ask for response date

See Handout: *B.I.F.F. Article*

4. Setting Limits on High Conflict Behavior

- HCPs need limits because they can't stop themselves
- With HCPs, focus on **external reasons** for new behavior (rather than focusing on negative feedback about past behavior):
- "Our policies require us to ..."
- "The law requires me to ..."
- "It might appear better to _____ if you..."
- "I understand, but someone else might misunderstand your intentions with that action..."
- "Let's take the high road..."
- "Choose your battles..."

4. Setting Limits (con't)
Educate About Consequences

- HCPs do not connect realistic CONSEQUENCES to their own ACTIONS, especially fear-based actions.
- They feel like they are in a fight for survival, which blinds them to realities.
- Their life experiences may have taught them different consequences than most.
- They can be educated by a caring person.

Summary of Key HCP Skills

1. **CONNECTING:** Listen closely (briefly), then respond with Empathy, Attention and Respect (E.A.R.)
2. **ANALYZING:** Get upset person to write a list or make a proposal or ask for a proposal
3. **RESPONDING:** Be Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm (B.I.F.F.)
4. **SETTING LIMITS:** Don't make it personal. Focus on "external reasons" for limit and help person deal with policies and procedures.

Specific Strategies for Borderline “Love-You, Hate You” Types

- Stay calm and matter-of-fact.
- Keep a moderate balance: Don't engage too much and don't reject too much.
- Have clear boundaries—what the rules and procedures are.
- Be consistent and predictable.
- Don't expect to give them insights about self.
- New therapies that teach relationship skills are having some success with them lately.

Borderline: Some Parenting Concerns

- Fear of Abandonment – parent clings to child
- Over-identifies with child
- Lack of boundaries with child in all areas
- All-or-nothing approach; “splitting” children
- Physical abuse alternating with neglect
- Mood swings-hits, attacks child, apologizes
- Impulsive behavior with child, excuses DV
- Can't tolerate child's independence

BORDERLINE - Treatment

Treatment: **Hopeful**

2-5 years, with highly-effective therapist and learning skills, may overcome diagnosis

Types: Individual

Psychodynamic Individual Therapy

Secure relationship

Balance support and gentle confrontation

Group for learning relationship skills

DBT: Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Thoroughly researched as very effective

IF done right (group plus individual plus consult)

Other cognitive therapies (Schema Therapy, etc.)

Specific tips for Antisocial "Con Artist" Types

Maintain healthy skepticism. Avoid believing their many stories of being a victim. Look at evidence.
Pay attention to your gut feelings—they often are the first to tell you to be wary.
A pattern of antisocial behavior tells you they are unlikely to change. The most biologically-based (hard-wired) personality.
May not be able to stop themselves.
Be firm, clear and simple - focus on consequences.
Watch out for their charming dispositions.

Antisocials: Some Parenting Concerns

- Dominates child—psychological as well as physical abuse
- Teaches child antisocial behaviors
- Engages child in antisocial schemes
- Teams up with child against adult partner
- May not abuse child, while abuses partner
- Or may sexually abuse child for dominance
- Or, no interest in child; child seen as inconvenient

ANTISOCIAL - Treatment

Treatment: **Slightly Hopeful – BEFORE adulthood**
Multiple childhood interventions (parenting, tutoring, drug prevention, vocational skills) 10-yr NIH study
Dodge. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Jan. 2015
After adulthood, extremely unlikely to change
 May change a specific behavior (drugs, domestic violence) in intensive program, but not personality
Therapy Types: Individual: Not recommended
 Manipulate therapists, all people better
 Group: Disrupt group therapies
Best treatment is threatening jail and putting in jail

Specific tips for
“I’m Very Superior” Types

Be respectful and resist insulting them (even though you will be tempted because of their arrogance and insensitivity to others).

Resist their efforts to receive special treatment. Reassure them they are important, but that you have to follow the rules and policies.

Praise them for some positive effort/skill.

**Narcissists:
 Some Parenting Concerns**

- Sees child as possession--extension of self
- Belittles child as inferior
- Authoritarian, controlling discipline style
- More angry at child than normal parent
- Spans child more often and “hard”
- “Power-assertive” responses to conflicts
- But also swings to permissive parenting; or swings to no interest in child at all
- Child sexual abuse as “right” of ownership
- Has child join in belittling other parent

NARCISSISTIC - Treatment

Treatment: **Slightly Hopeful**

Usually don’t stay in therapy
 5 years, with highly-effective therapist
 and learning skills, may overcome diagnosis

Types: Individual

- Psychodynamic Individual Therapy
- Secure relationship
- Balance support and gentle confrontation

Group – does best in Substance Abuse groups

Cognitive Therapies:

- Schema Therapy
- DBT?

Specific tips for Paranoid
“I’ll Never Trust You” Types

- Avoid making it personal. Explain that policies and laws *require* your actions.
- Don’t expect them to open up about their problems, even if they’re obvious.
- Respect their caution and desire to only reveal what they have to.
- Avoid making threats or threatening tone
- Use sympathetic limit-setting

Paranoid
Some Parenting Concerns

- Tells child to fear everyone else in the world (Except this parent)
- Suspicious of other parent – uses child to snoop or ask questions
- Conspires with child against other parent
 Wants total control of child so can have a relationship without fear

PARANOID - Treatment

Treatment: **Minimally Hopeful**
 Usually don’t stay in therapy
 Very slow to trust

Types: Individual

- Psychodynamic Individual Therapy
- Secure relationship
- Balance support and gentle confrontation
- Some cognitive therapy skills may help

Group – generally not recommended

**Specific tips for Histrionic
“Always Dramatic” Types**

Don't get hooked by their stories. You can always interrupt the drama and move on.

Plan to spend more time getting ordinary tasks done with them.

Emphasize how they can help themselves. Give them a sense of empowerment.

**Histrionics
Some Parenting Concerns**

- Often neglectful
- Role reversal with child
- Overly protective, dramatic about child
- May exaggerate minor health complaints
- Highly inconsistent parenting

HISTRIONIC - Treatment

Treatment: **Hopeful**
Usually don't stay in therapy
5 years, with highly-effective therapist
and learning skills, may overcome diagnosis

Types: Individual
 Psychodynamic Individual Therapy
 Secure relationship
 Balance support and gentle confrontation

Group – can be disruptive

Cognitive Therapies:
 Schema Therapy
 DBT?



Calming Upset People with E.A.R.

By Bill Eddy, LCSW, ESQ.

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Everyone gets upset some of the time. High conflict people get upset a lot of the time. A simple technique called an “E.A.R. Statement” can help you calm others down. This is especially helpful if you are in a close relationship or a position of authority. High conflict people tend to emotionally attack those closest to them and those in authority, especially when they are frustrated and can’t manage their own emotions. The intensity of their uncontrolled emotions can really catch you off-guard. But if you practice making E.A.R. statements you can connect with upset people and usually help them calm down.

E.A.R. Statements

E.A.R. stands for Empathy, Attention and Respect. It is the opposite of what you feel like giving someone when he or she is upset and verbally attacking YOU! Yet you will be amazed at how effective this is when you do it right.

An E.A.R. Statement connects with the person’s experience, with their feelings. For example, let’s say that someone verbally attacks you for not returning a phone call as quickly as he or she would have liked. “You don’t respect me! You don’t care how long I have to wait to deal with this problem! You’re not doing your job!”

Rather than defending yourself, give the person an E.A.R. Statement such as: “Wow, I can hear how upset you are. Tell me what’s going on. I share your concerns about this problem and respect your efforts to solve it.” This statement included:

EMPATHY: “I can hear how upset you are.”

ATTENTION: “Tell me what’s going on.”

RESPECT: “I respect your efforts.”

The Importance of Empathy

Empathy is different from sympathy. Having empathy for someone means that you can feel the pain and frustration that they are feeling, and probably have felt similar feelings in your own life. These are normal human emotions and they are normally triggered in people close by because emotions are contagious. When you show empathy for another person, you are treating them as a peer who you are concerned about and can relate to as an equal in distress.

Sympathy is when you see someone else in a bad situation that you are not in. You may feel sorry for them and have sympathy or pity for them, but it is often a one-up and one-down situation. There is more of a separation between those who give sympathy and those who receive it.

But you don't even have to use the word "empathy" to make a statement that shows empathy. Here are some examples:

"I can see how important this is to you."

"I understand this can be frustrating."

"I know this process can be confusing."

"I'm sorry to see that you're in this situation."

"I'd like to help you if I can."

"Let's see if we can solve this together."

The Importance of Attention

Getting attention is one of the most important concerns of high conflict people. They often feel ignored or disrespected and get into conflicts as a way of getting attention from those around them. Many have a lifetime history of alienating the people around them, so they look to others – professionals, friends and new acquaintances – to give them attention. Yet they rarely feel satisfied and keep trying to get more attention. If you show that you are willing to pay full attention for a little while, they often calm down.

There are many ways to let a person know that you will pay attention. For example, you can say:

"I will listen as carefully as I can."

"I will pay attention to your concerns."

"Tell me what's going on."

"Tell me more!"

You can also show attention non-verbally, such as:

Have good "eye contact" (keeping your eyes focused on the person)

Nod your head up and down to show that you are attentive to their concerns

Lean in to pay closer attention

Put your hand near them, such as on the table beside them

(Be careful about directly touching an upset HCP – it may be misinterpreted as a threat, a come-on, or a put-down)

The Importance of Respect

Anyone in distress, and especially HCPs, need respect from others. Even the most difficult and upset person usually has some quality that you can respect. By recognizing that quality, you can calm a person who is desperate to be respected.

Many high conflict people are used to being disrespected and being independent and "not needing others." This characteristic often leads them into conflict with those around them, who don't wish to see them as superior and are tempted to try to put them down. This just makes the HCP even more upset.

Here are several statements showing respect:

“I can see that you are a hard worker.”

“I respect your commitment to solving this problem.”

“I respect your efforts on this.”

“I respect your success at accomplishing _____.”

“You have important skills that we need here.”

Why E.A.R. is so Important

Upset people, especially high conflict people, may not be getting empathy, attention and respect anywhere else. They have usually alienated most of the people around them. It is the last thing that anyone wants to give them. They are used to being rejected, abandoned, insulted, ignored, and disrespected by those around them. They are starving for empathy, attention and respect. They are looking for it anywhere they can get it. So just give it to them. It's free and you don't sacrifice anything. You can still set limits, give bad news, and keep a social or professional distance. It just means that you can connect with them around solving a particular problem and treat them like an equal human being, whether you agree or strongly disagree with their part in the problem.

Many HCPs also have a hard time managing their own emotions. Since brain researchers have learned that we “mirror” each other's emotional expressions, it makes sense to respond to upset people with a calm and matter of fact manner – so that they will mirror us, rather than us mirroring their upset mood (which is what most people do much of the time – and it just makes things worse).

Managing Your Amygdala

Of course, this is the opposite of what we feel like doing. You may think to yourself: “No way I'm going to listen to this after the way I've been verbally attacked!” But that's just your amygdala talking, in an effort to protect you from danger. Our brains are very sensitive to threats, especially our amygdalas (you have one in the middle of your right brain and one in the middle of your left). Most people, while growing up, learn to manage the impulsive, protective responses of their amygdalas and over-ride them with a rational analysis of the situation, using their prefrontal cortex behind the forehead.

In fact, that is a lot of what adolescence is about: learning what is a crisis needing an instant, protective response (amygdala) and learning what situations are not a crisis and instead need a calm and rational response (prefrontal cortex). High conflict people often were abused or entitled growing up, and didn't have the secure, balanced connection necessary to learn these skills of emotional self-management. Therefore, you can help them by helping yourself not over-react to them. Just use your own prefrontal cortex to manage your own amygdala – which will help the upset person manage theirs.

It's Not About You!

To help you stay calm in the face of the other person's upset, remind yourself “it's not about you!” Don't take it personally. It's about the person's own upset and lack of sufficient skills to manage his or her own emotions. Try making E.A.R. statements and you will find they often end the attack and calm the person down. This is especially true for high conflict people (HCPs) who regularly have a hard time calming themselves down. All of the E.A.R. statements above are calming statements. They let the other person know that you want to connect

with him or her, rather than threaten him or her. It's their issue and you don't have to defend or explain yourself. It's not about you!

What to Avoid About E.A.R.

Don't Lie:

Upset people are often hyper-sensitive to lying. If you really can't feel empathy for the person, find something that you can respect that he or she has done. If you really can't respect the person, then simply pay attention. You can always just say: "Tell me more." This calms the person, because it tells him or her that you will listen without needing to be persuaded to do so. If your body language shows you are open to listening, most upset people feel better and will calm down enough to tell you what's going on.

You don't have to listen forever:

E.A.R. doesn't mean just listening. It's a statement in response to the person's upset mood, which you can use at any time. It can help you wrap up a conversation, if you need to do something else. High conflict people are known for talking endlessly. Keep in mind that high conflict people often don't get a sense of relief from telling their story or talking about their pain – they have told it many times and it is stuck. Often, they are stuck trying to get others to give them empathy, attention and respect, so that if you just give them an E.A.R. statement, they may not feel the need to keep talking or talk so long. You can interrupt an upset person much of the time, by saying how you can empathize with and respect the person.

E.A.R. doesn't mean you agree or disagree:

Giving your empathy, attention and respect helps you connect with an upset person as a human being. It doesn't mean that you agree or disagree with their point of view. Too often, people get stuck on arguing about an "issue." But with high conflict people "the issue's not the issue" – it's their inability to manage their own emotions and, sometimes, their behavior. If you are challenged about whether you agree or not, simply explain that you care or want to be helpful.

Maintain an "arms-length" relationship:

Giving your empathy, attention and respect to an upset person doesn't mean that you have to have a close relationship. You can still maintain a professional relationship, co-worker relationship, neighbor relationship, etc. In fact, it is wise not to become too close to a high conflict person, so that you don't raise their expectations of you becoming responsible for their welfare or planning to spend more time together than you intend.

Conclusion

Everyone gets upset some of the time. You don't have to be a high conflict person to be upset. At moments of trauma, anger and sadness, we really need the human connection of knowing that someone has empathy for us, is paying attention and still has respect for us. You can give anyone an E.A.R. statement to help them calm down. Nothing in this article is intended to mean that only HCPs get upset.

Making E.A.R. statements – or non-verbally showing your Empathy, Attention and Respect – may help you calm or avoid many potentially high-conflict situations. It can save you time, money and emotional energy for years to come. But it takes lots of practice. You can start today!

Bill Eddy is a therapist, lawyer and mediator. He is the President of the High Conflict Institute and the author of ***It's All Your Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything*** which explains the use of E.A.R. statements further. This book and several other books and articles about managing high conflict people and situations are available at www.highconflictinstitute.com.



Making Proposals

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Any problem in the past can be turned into a proposal about the future. Proposals don't have to be complicated. You can just blurt one out during a conversation with anyone or during a meeting with any group. Proposals get attention, because they are solutions to past problems by focusing on the future. Most of us are relieved to talk about the future, rather than what we've done wrong in the past. On the other hand, most of us easily slip into talking about the past – or even get stuck talking about the past – including what everyone else has done wrong. This article focuses on how to make proposals in a way that is easy and can be done at any time.

WHAT'S IN A PROPOSAL?

Ideally, proposals will include: **Who** does

What

When and

Where

For example: "I propose that you be the one who picks up Johnny after school and takes him to his soccer practice. Then, you can keep him overnight and bring him back to school the next morning."

This is much better than saying: "You never took Johnny to any of his soccer practices. You always left it up to me. Then you showed up on Saturday at his games and made it look like you were such an involved parent. I want some respect here for all that I've done!" And then the other parent attacks back: "You never gave me a chance...." And on and on.

Can you see how it would have been so much simpler to just ask for what you wanted in the future by making a proposal? It saves all of the blame and defensiveness that people get stuck in talking about the past.

So proposals are always about the future. They are not about the past or about the other person's intentions or *Why* they made the proposal. *Why* questions easily turn into a criticism of the other person's proposal. "*Why* did you say that?" It really means: "I think that's a bad idea." And of course, if you think a proposal is a bad idea, then the best thing to do is to make another proposal – until you can both agree on something.

PROPOSING SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS

Most problems have many solutions. For example, here are some:

In a divorce dispute: "If you're going to be late after work all the time to pick up the kids on Fridays, then I propose we just change the pickup time to a more realistic time. Instead of 5pm, let's make it 6:30pm."

And the other person might propose: “I’m going to talk to my boss and see if I can get out earlier on Fridays. I’ll let you know in a week. If not, then I’ll agree to your proposal. If I can, then let’s just leave it the way it’s scheduled now.”

Or in a workplace dispute: “I propose that we talk to our manager about finding a better cubicle for you, since you have so many phone calls that need to be made and I often hear them.”

And the other person might propose: “I can try to make my phone calls when you’re away from your cubicle. I know you’re in and out. Are there any regular times that you’re away each day?”

These people can keep making proposals back and forth until they can agree on something. If each proposal takes into account what the other person was concerned about, then there is a good chance for success. It’s just a matter of time before they can fit their concerns together.

ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT A PROPOSAL

After one person has made a proposal, the other person may not be sure whether they can agree or not. Therefore, it often helps to ask questions. One of the best questions is to ask “What would your proposal look like in action?” This way you can get clearer on the Who, What, Where and When of the proposal. You might even ask: “What’s your picture of how this would work? What would you do? What would I do, if you could picture your proposal actually happening?”

But of course, you don’t want to ask “Why” questions, because that usually starts up the defensiveness. And if someone’s defensiveness is triggered, then it makes it hard for them to think of solutions to problems. Why questions are usually really criticisms, not questions.

Responding with YES, NO, or I’LL THINK ABOUT IT

Once you’ve heard a proposal and asked any questions about it, all you have to do to respond to such a proposal is say: “Yes.” “No.” or “I’ll think about it.” You always have the right to say: “Yes.” “No.” or “I’ll think about it.” Of course, there are consequences to each choice, but you always have these three choices at least. Here’s some examples of each:

YES: “Yes, I agree. Let’s do that.” And then stop! No need to save face, evaluate the other person’s proposal, or give the other person some negative feedback. Just let it go. After all, if you have been personally criticized or attacked, it’s not about you. Personal attacks are not problem-solving. They are about the person making the hostile attack. You are better off to ignore everything else.

NO: “No, I don’t want to change the pickup time. I’ll try to make other arrangements to get there on time. Let’s keep it as is.” Just keep it simple. Avoid the urge to defend your decision or criticize the other person’s idea. You said no. You’re done. Let it drop.

I’LL THINK ABOUT IT: “I don’t know about your proposal, but I’ll think about it. I’ll get back to you tomorrow about your idea. Right now I have to get back to work. Thanks for making a proposal.” Once again, just stop the discussion there. Avoid the temptation to discuss it at length, or question the validity of the other person’s point of view. It is what it is.

When you say “I’ll think about it,” you are respecting the other person. It calms people down to know you are taking them seriously enough to think about what they said. This doesn’t mean you will agree. It just means you’ll think about it.

MAKE A NEW PROPOSAL: After you think about it, you can always make a new proposal. Perhaps you'll think of a new approach that neither of you thought of before. Try it out. You can always propose anything. (But remember there are consequences to each proposal.) And you can always respond: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." (And there are consequences to each of those choices, too.)

AN EXAMPLE

William and Natasha have a four-year-old daughter, Halle. They recently separated and have a hard time talking to each other right now, because they usually argue. However, they both love Halle and want the best for her. They need to decide how they will share parenting time with Halle. They are going to meet with a Family Mediator to help them reach an agreement. They are each to prepare a proposal and have each read articles that say different things about the best parenting plan.

Natasha has read that young children should have the stability of one primary parent, with the active involvement of the other parent. The article said this is especially true with children up to age 3 or older. William has read an article that recommended sharing parenting 50-50. It seemed to suggest that this works best after children are at least 5 years old.

They were both told by their Family Mediator that the best plan is always one that both parents can agree upon. The children should feel that their schedule is normal and routine, and that their parents aren't always stressed out or fighting over the schedule. Neither William or Natasha want to keep fighting about this.

Here are their initial proposals:

Natasha's First Proposal: *"I read an article that says its best for young children to have one primary household, but that the other parent is involved every week. So I propose that Halle live with me most of the time, but that she spend one day and overnight each week with you. In my proposal you would also have half of the major holidays each year, then we could alternate the following year."*

William's Question: *"I have a question about your proposal. What day and overnight were you picturing that I would have each week?"*

Natasha: *"I was thinking you'd have Friday nights and all day Saturdays each week."*

William's Response: *"Ok, I think I understand your proposal. I would say No to that, as I read an article that says that it's best for children to have approximately equal time with each parent."*

William's First Proposal: *"I propose that Halle spend 6 days and nights with me in a two-week period, so you would have 8 nights in the same period, as I recognize she's been with you more of the time up to now. After she's five, I'd like a 50-50 schedule, so this would be a transition."*

Natasha's Question: *"Which nights would you be thinking of having with her?"*

William: *"I'd like a weekday overnight every week – like Wednesdays – and I would alternate weekends Friday at 5pm through Monday morning back to daycare one weekend and Friday overnight the other weekend."*

Natasha's Response: *"Well, my answer to that would be No. I think she's way too young to be spending that much time away from me, as I've been her primary caregiver for all these years. And*

that just seems like too much back and forth for a girl that young. However, I might be willing to consider that she spend a little more time with you, especially as she gets older.

William: *“But I want to be fully involved in her growing up – weekdays with her schoolwork as well as weekends. So here’s another proposal…”*

These are at least 3 possible proposals for William to make now. No one proposal is right for everyone’s situation, and there is usually more than one solution to a problem. Here are a few:

Option 1: 3 nights/11 nights in two weeks

William’s New Proposal: *“I would agree to have three nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and Friday night and all day Saturday every other week.”*

Option 2: 4 nights/10 nights in two weeks

William’s New Proposal: *“I would agree to have four nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and alternate weekends from Friday at 5pm to Sunday at 5pm.”*

Option 3: 5 nights/9 nights in two weeks

William’s New Proposal: *“I would agree to have five nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and alternate weekends from Friday at 5pm to Monday back to school.”*

Some parents would agree on Option 1, some on Option 2 and others on Option 3. The reality is that there is not a huge difference between these options. William and Natasha could go back and forth asking questions of each other and making proposals until they reach an agreement – with the assistance of a mediator, collaborative professionals, a therapist or lawyers. The idea is that the process of making proposals helps build an agreement that can end up working the best for the people involved. Be patient and creative, and you can probably come up with a good solution.

CONCLUSION: AVOID MAKING IT PERSONAL

In the heat of the conflict, it’s easy to react and criticize the other person’s proposals—or even to criticize the other person personally, such as saying that he or she is arrogant, ignorant, stupid, crazy or evil. It’s easy and natural to want to say: “You’re so stupid it makes me sick.” Or: “What are you, crazy?” “Your proposal is the worst idea I have ever heard.” But if you want to end the dispute and move on, just ask for a proposal and respond with “Yes” “No” or “I’ll think about it.”

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HOW TO GIVE A BIFF RESPONSE^(SM)

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Hostile email, texts and other electronic communications have become much more common over the past decade. Most of this is just “venting,” and has little real significance. However, when people are involved in a formal conflict (a divorce, a workplace grievance, a homeowners’ association complaint, etc.) there may be more frequent hostile email. There may be more people involved and it may be exposed to others or in court. Therefore, how you respond to hostile communications may impact your relationships or the outcome of a case.

Do you need to respond?

Much of hostile e-communication does not need a response. Letters from (ex-) spouses, angry neighbors, irritating co-workers, or attorneys do not usually have legal significance. The letter itself has no power, unless you give it power. Often, it is emotional venting aimed at relieving the writer’s anxiety. If you respond with similar emotions and hostility, you will simply escalate things without satisfaction, and just get a new piece of hostile mail back. In most cases, you are better off not responding. However, some letters and emails develop power when copies are filed in a court or complaint process – or simply get sent to other people. In these cases, it may be important to respond to inaccurate statements with accurate statements of fact. If you need to respond, I recommend a **BIFF Response^(SM)**: Be Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm.

BRIEF

Keep your response brief. This will reduce the chances of a prolonged and angry back and forth. The more you write, the more material the other person has to criticize. Keeping it brief signals that you don’t wish to get into a dialogue. Just make your response and end your letter. Don’t take their statements personally and don’t respond with a personal attack. Avoid focusing on comments about the person’s character, such as saying he or she is rude, insensitive or stupid. It just escalates the conflict and keeps it going. You don’t have to defend yourself to someone you disagree with. If your friends still like you, you don’t have to prove anything to those who don’t.

INFORMATIVE

The main reason to respond to hostile mail is to correct inaccurate statements which might be seen by others. “Just the facts” is a good idea. Focus on the accurate statements you want to make, not on the inaccurate statements the other person made. For example: “Just to clear things up, I was out of town on February 12th, so I would not have been the person who was making loud noises that day.”

Avoid negative comments. Avoid sarcasm. Avoid threats. Avoid personal remarks about the other’s intelligence, ethics or moral behavior. If the other person has a “high conflict personality,” you will have no success in reducing the conflict with personal attacks. While most people can ignore personal attacks or might think harder about what you are saying, high conflict people feel they have no choice but to respond in anger – and keep the conflict going. Personal attacks rarely lead to insight or positive change.

FRIENDLY

While you may be tempted to write in anger, you are more likely to achieve your goals by writing in a friendly manner. Consciously thinking about a friendly response will increase your chances of getting a friendly – or neutral – response in return. If your goal is to end the conflict, then being friendly has the greatest likelihood of success. Don’t give the other person a reason to get defensive and keep responding.

This does not mean that you have to be overly friendly. Just make it sound a little relaxed and non-antagonistic. If appropriate, say you recognize their concerns. Brief comments that show your empathy and respect will generally calm the other person down, even if only for a short time.

FIRM

In a non-threatening way, clearly tell the other person your information or position on an issue. (For example: “That’s all I’m going to say on this issue.”) Be careful not to make comments that invite more discussion, unless you are negotiating an issue or want to keep a dialogue going back and forth. Avoid comments that leave an opening, such as: “I hope you will agree with me that ...” This invites the other person to tell you “I *don’t* agree.”

Sound confident and don’t ask for more information if you want to end the back-and-forth. A confident-sounding person is less likely to be challenged with further emails. If you get further emails, you can ignore them, if you have already sufficiently addressed the inaccurate information. If you need to respond again, keep it even briefer and do not emotionally engage. In fact, it often helps to just repeat the key information using the same words.

Example

Joe’s email: “Jane, I can’t believe you are so stupid as to think that I’m going to let you take the children to your boss’ birthday party during my parenting time. Have you no memory of the last six conflicts we’ve had about my parenting time? Or are you having an affair with him? I always knew you would do anything to get ahead! In fact, I remember coming to your office party witnessing you making a total fool of yourself – including flirting with everyone from the CEO down to the mailroom kid! Are you high on something? Haven’t you gotten your finances together enough to support yourself yet, without flinging yourself at every Tom, Dick and Harry? ...” [And on and on and on.]

Jane: “Thank you for responding to my request to take the children to my office party. Just to clarify, the party will be from 3-5 on Friday at the office and there will be approximately 30 people there – including several other parents bringing school-age children. There will be no alcohol, as it is a family-oriented firm and there will be family-oriented activities. I think it will be a good experience for them to see me at my workplace. Since you do not agree, then of course I will respect that and withdraw my request, as I recognize it is your parenting time.” [And that’s the end of her email.]

Comment: Jane kept it brief, and did not engage in defending herself. Since this was just between them, she didn’t need to respond. If he sent this email to friends, co-workers or family members (which high conflict people often do), then she would need to respond to the larger group with more information, such as the following:

Jane: “Dear friends and family: As you know, Joe and I had a difficult divorce. He has sent you a private email showing correspondence between us about a parenting schedule matter. I hope you will see this as a private matter and understand that you do not need to respond or get involved in any way. Almost everything he has said is in anger and not at all accurate. If you have any questions for me personally, please feel free to contact me and I will clarify anything I can. I appreciate your friendship and support.” [And that’s it]

Conclusion

Whether you are at work, at home or elsewhere, a BIFF Response can save you time and emotional anguish. The more people who handle hostile mail in such a manner, the less hostile mail there will be.

Bill Eddy is an attorney, mediator and therapist, and the author of several books including:

- [*BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns*, 2nd Ed. \(Unhooked Books, 2011, 2014\).](#)
- [*So, What’s Your Proposal? Shifting High-Conflict People from Blaming to Problem Solving in 30 Seconds* \(Unhooked Books, 2014\).](#)
- [*SPLITTING: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder* \(New Harbinger, 2011\)](#)
- [*It’s All YOUR Fault! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything* \(HCI Press, 2008\)](#)



Bill Eddy is also the President of the High Conflict Institute, which provides speakers, training, consultation and resources for professionals and anyone dealing with high conflict disputes at work or in their personal lives. High Conflict Institute has given trainings in over 25 states, several provinces in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France and Sweden.