

Family

Techniques for handling high-conflict clients in separation and divorce

By Cheryl Suann Williams



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(March 20, 2018, 11:15 AM EDT) -- It is important to remember that despite your efforts to convince them otherwise, people with high-conflict personalities truly feel that their behaviour is correct and lack awareness of: why they are the way they are; how they contribute to their own problems; and how to change.

A number of years ago, in his presentation titled "Understanding and Managing High Conflict Personalities in Legal Disputes," American clinical social worker turned lawyer and mediator Bill Eddy offered the following skills for managing people with high-conflict personalities:

- **Lowering your expectations for change** — the behaviour has likely been long term and your efforts may not result in change;
- **Listening to high-insistent emotions (without getting hooked)** — it may not be your objective opinion that is being sought;
- **Understanding their fear-based logic** — almost anything you say can seem insulting or demeaning;
- **Focusing on tasks** — your help to turn overwhelming problems into tasks for their completion helps them think and solve the problem;
- **Maintaining a healthy skepticism** — remain skeptical of information received but advise that it is possible that they may be right;
- **Engaging in reality testing** — we can make decisions about the future without knowing all about the past. Accept uncertainties and move forward;
- **Using indirect confrontations** — avoid attacking the person or your relationship, instead use external forces, i.e. "A judge may see things this way"; "It might be better if you ..."; or "Let's be seen as taking the high road";
- **Emphasizing their strengths** — their weaknesses may be obvious, but focusing on their strengths is more productive to focus their attentions off their helplessness, give them hope, and solve the problems;
- **Educating about consequences** — explore various possible outcomes of the dispute and explore consequences if no agreement is reached;
- **Including a positive advocate** — often a high-conflict person has a negative advocate who reinforces and drives their dispute rather than a positive advocate who is a problem solver; and
- **Making recommendations** — the goal of the recommendation is to help high-conflict clients resolve their own dispute.

This is part three of a series. Read part two [here](#). Read part one [here](#).

Cheryl Suann Williams is managing partner of Williams Family Lawyers, Markham, Ont., and can be reached at Cheryl@williamsfamilylawyers.com.

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