

Role-Plays & Role-Player Resources

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High Conflict Mediation: Managing Conflict and Complexity in Mediation

Guidelines for Role-Players

You can choose anyone for your role-players provided they meet the following criteria:

1. Role-players can be hired or volunteers;
2. Role-players may be classmates from this or other courses;
3. Role-players must have at minimum completed the National Introductory Mediation course, or another interest-based mediation course in which they themselves have participated as both mediator AND as one of the parties;
4. They are ready, willing, and able to give you, the mediator, the level of conflict you need to demonstrate your skills/techniques/attitudes/approaches. If your potential role-player is not comfortable or able to give you high conflict behaviours and moments, choose someone else;
5. Role-plays must NOT be rehearsed, or scripted. This means that role-players need to be ready, willing, and able to properly prepare a detailed backstory that includes a) interests, b) how the interests came to be, c) sore spots/high conflict triggers, d) an intermediate level of understanding that people with high conflict behaviours are nuanced individuals who act the way that they act for a reason that is founded in the need to protect themselves from a real or perceived danger/harm. Your role-players should not come off as caricatures of “bad people” (If need be, you may coach them in this regard).

Role -players may:

1. Confer with their counterpart (the other party) so that they can be on the same page in terms of any backstory and points of high conflict;
2. Receive non-confidential information regarding high conflict behaviours from the mediator;
3. Research high conflict behaviours to help them provide a “full picture of the person”;
4. Ask questions to the mediator about high conflict behaviours;
5. Use the resources included in this package (starting on page 19) to develop their role

High Conflict Mediation: Managing Conflict and Complexity in Mediation

Role-Play 1: Nate & Mila

Nate

Known to All

Mila and Nate met at work five months ago and it was love at first sight. Mila was swept off her feet by his kindness, sweetness and overall charm. Nate worshipped the ground Mila walked on.

Nate and Mila had been fighting at work because Mila wasn't ready to move in with him. After an intense fight at the office, Mila broke up with Nate in front of all of his coworkers.

Nate went to HR to complain about Mila abusing her power and taking advantage of the power imbalance. HR has investigated and determined it was a personal issue and not a workplace issue and has offered mediation between the parties to deal with the spillover.

Nate (*high conflict – borderline personality disorder*)

You can't believe Mila would leave you. It is your worst fear come true. You're going to show her what a mistake it was to leave you. She might get demoted or even fired for abusing her power. Maybe you'll take her back if she comes crawling on her hands and knees.

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Role-Play 1: Nate & Mila

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Mila

You feel like you've been living in a nuthouse for the last few months. One day Nate loves you the next he hates you. One day you're the best girlfriend ever, the next you are the worst girlfriend. Nate is also causing problems for you at work. You are embarrassed by his constant fighting with coworkers and hypersensitivity to constructive criticism. You can't do your job like this and you definitely can't stay in this relationship. You've been wanting out for a while now (most of the time), but you've been afraid of what it would be like at work. Now you might be disciplined because he has gone to HR. Unbelievable!

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Role-Play 2: Frannie & Sophie

Sophie

Known to All

Frannie and Sophie are sisters and Sophie lives in Frannie's basement on and off. Frannie and her two kids (Grace, 8 and Mary, 5) live upstairs. Sophie was always a bit wild – selling drugs and partying in high school. Now 28 years old, Sophie has been fired from her past four jobs, once for being high at work. Last week Sophie came home so intoxicated that she passed out on the floor of Mary's bedroom. Frannie was horrified and is concerned Sophie doesn't seem to be able to appreciate that her actions/choices have grave consequences for Frannie and her family.

Frannie has begged Sophie to grow up and start acting responsibly but she just laughs at her or goes off the rails. Frannie is scared for her daughters and is afraid to let Sophie upstairs anymore.

Frannie and Sophie are meeting in mediation to discuss Sophie's use of drugs and alcohol in the home. Frannie is ready to kick Sophie out.

Sophie (*anti-social personality disorder*)

Frannie is not the boss of you. You have every right to come and go as you please, you pay rent most of the time. You'll definitely pay her back. You've been able to get by despite the job changes (you have a low boredom tolerance and some of those jobs were excruciatingly dull). Recreational drug use is no big deal. You're not addicted. What's the big deal? And if you toss back a few shots with friends after a long day at a boring job, who can blame you?

So, you came home and passed out in Mary's bedroom. You just wanted to say hi. Mary is your favourite. As usual, Frannie is over-reacting.

Frannie can't kick you out. What is she going to do, call the police? Change the locks? No way.

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Role-Play 2: Frannie & Sophie

Frannie

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Frannie and Sophie are sisters and Sophie lives in Frannie's basement on and off. Frannie and her two kids (Grace 8 and Mary 5) live upstairs. Sophie was always a bit wild – selling drugs and partying in high school. Now 28 years old, Sophie has been fired from her past four jobs, once for being high at work. Last week Sophie came home so intoxicated that she passed out on the floor of Mary's bedroom. Frannie was horrified and is concerned Sophie doesn't seem to be able to appreciate that her actions/choices have grave consequences for Frannie and her family.

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Frannie

Sophie spends a lot of time with friends who are criminals and drug users/dealers. There is no way you are going to let Sophie to continue to live in your house if you can't keep your daughters safe from her. Not only is she a bad influence on your daughters, always dismissing your rules, bringing home strange men, she is also dangerous when she is high. One day she could hurt your girls. This was not the life you signed up for.

You are extremely worried about Sophie and don't want to see her staying somewhere unsafe. But she is also manipulative, arrogant, and generally not easy to deal with – even at her best. You are willing to kick her out, change the locks, and even call the police if it comes to it.

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Role-Play 3: Simon & Valeri

Simon

Known to All

Simon and Valeri are father and daughter. Simon moved to Canada with his pregnant wife, Ani, 16 years ago from Georgia as political asylum seekers. Ani died a year after Valeri was born and since then it has just been Simon and Valerie. Now, Valeri is 15, and seeking out her independence, and carving out her identity separate from her father. Lately, Simon and Valeri have been fighting about rights and rules. Simon has denied Valeri's request to get a learners' permit and has implemented a strict 7:00 p.m. curfew. Simon accuses Valeri of sneaking out and smoking pot with her friends.

Simon has now installed a security system and cameras at the house. He has threatened to call the police on Valeri's friends and even went through her room looking for drugs.

Simon

You are convinced Valeri is doing drugs and having sex. You are sure that she is sneaking out at night so you installed a security system and security cameras at your house so you can be alerted to Valeri's comings and goings. Valeri denies this, but Canadian teens are wild. You have to work long hours and you can't watch her like you need to.

Sometimes, when Valeri talks back to you, you get so angry you think you might explode. Children in Georgia would never act like this. You can't eat or sleep and you keep having nightmares that Valeri will be arrested. You and Ani spent time in jail in Georgia and you don't want that for your daughter. It's your job to keep her safe.

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Role-Play 3: Simon & Valeri

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Valeri

Your dad is out of control. He keeps threatening your friends, digging through your garbage, and yelling about what a terrible child you are. You are not a child. He needs to let go.

Sure, you have been sneaking out at night, smoking pot, and drinking, but it's not a problem. It's just a bit of fun. Now you have an older boyfriend who has taught you to drive and your dad won't let you even get your learner's permit. You don't have money to pay for the test for yourself because your curfew makes having a job nearly impossible. You cannot believe how crazy he is. He's got some serious old-world issues. We're not in Georgia anymore.

High Conflict Mediation: Managing Conflict and Complexity in Mediation

Role-Play 4: Tatiana & Max

Tatiana

Known to All

Tatiana and Max are co-workers in a private career college. Two months ago, Tatiana put in a harassment complaint against Max for which there was an investigation and discipline. Now Max is returning to work after having a two-week suspension. He and Tatiana have the same level of responsibilities, have to work together frequently, but are in different departments. On some occasions Tatiana is the project leader and others Max is the leader, depending on the project. Because of the investigation and discipline both Tatiana and Max are expected to put it all behind them, but there are major roadblocks to creating a collaborative work environment, not least hurt egos and feelings for both. Before it all boils over again, you have been asked to come in and mediate this longstanding, and clearly unresolved conflict.

In case development, both parties have noted that the workplace is a toxic environment of borderline fraud and financial predation on marginalised potential students, as well as rampant co-worker competition, nepotism and cliques, arbitrary firings and high turnover. In confidence, they both note to the mediator that sometimes they struggle with the after-work party culture and drinking to excess to deal with the stress and moral distress of working for this company. They both “need the job and experience” even if working there is causing problems in other parts of their lives.

Tatiana

Max is such a slime ball. He’s started a few too many rumours about you, your sex life, your private life, and your work ethic for you to be willing to put up with it anymore. Yes, he did get punishment, but it was really just a two-week vacation and a note on his file. It’s not like he’s learned anything. OK, yes, you have yelled at him a few times, but he was being obtuse and doing the minimum on purpose. It’s like when a kid doesn’t want to do a chore at home, so they just do it poorly and won’t be asked again. So childish. But you’re no push over, and when he does a bad job on one of your projects it reflects poorly on you or you have to take over and do it all yourself anyway! You have an eye on advancing your career and he is intentionally standing in the way and trying to make you look bad and unreliable.

He way crossed the line when he told the boss that you had called in sick because you were partying the night before. Yeah, you went out for drinks with your coworkers, but you went home when everyone else did (and *he* stayed at the bar partying and doing lines of coke with his “bros”!). Calling in sick had nothing to do with the night before. Yeah, you sure were hungover, but nothing to call in sick about, nothing you don’t breeze through on any other day of the week. The problem is that it’s none of his business, not his place, and people in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones! What a coked-up joke.

He’s also just a sexist pig. Like, it’s the 21st century, so his behaviour cannot be tolerated anymore.

Role-Play 4: Tatiana & Max

Max

Known to All

Tatiana and Max are co-workers in a private career college. Two months ago, Tatiana put in a harassment complaint against Max for which there was an investigation and discipline. Now Max is returning to work after having a two-week suspension. He and Tatiana have the same level of responsibilities, have to work together frequently, but are in different departments. On some occasions Tatiana is the project leader and others Max is the leader, depending on the project. Because of the investigation and discipline both Tatiana and Max are expected to put it all behind them, but there are major roadblocks to creating a collaborative work environment, not least hurt egos and feelings for both. Before it all boils over again, you have been asked to come in and mediate this longstanding, and clearly unresolved conflict.

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Max

First of all, you cannot believe that Tatiana went to management about a few rumours. Such a cry baby. Not to mention the hypocrisy of it all! It’s not like she hasn’t stabbed you in the back or gossiped about you on more than one occasion. She is such a filthy lying cow. Now you have this investigation and ruling against you on file. You’ll be stuck in this position as you see her climbing. You will be damned before you let her call the shots to you as your boss. You don’t need more women telling you how to do your job or how to behave (your mother was domineering, your father was a weakling, and your ex-wife was always yelling, nagging, complaining and making fun of your job and education). There’s just too much politically correct BS these days. You can’t say what you mean anymore, and you can’t just stick up for yourself without some woman complaining.

Not only that, but this shrieking harpy takes every chance she gets to belittle you and *tries* to emasculate you in front of the boys at work. If she wants to lead like a man, be “just one of the guys”, she has got to learn how to talk like a man, stop the manipulations, whining, and crying and start by being direct and clear... the first time!

You have also noted to the mediator that you spent the entire suspension partying and may drink too much and do cocaine sometimes, but mostly it’s under control.

Resources for Role-players

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) & Trauma

- More than half of adult Albertans have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience.
- Adverse Childhood Experiences have been shown to closely correlate to problems throughout the life course, contributing to physical and health mental health issues (depression, anxiety, suicide, PTSD), increased risky behaviours (substance use, smoking, unsafe sex), and reduced opportunities (education, occupation, income)^{1 2}
- Some groups of people may have higher a prevalence of exposure to trauma than others. But not everyone with a trauma experience will develop a mental illness or PTSD. Some medical classifications are not consistent with all worldviews.
- Mental health issues (including PTSD) do not present in real life as they are depicted in the movies.
- Each experience of trauma puts people at risk of additional trauma.
- The prevalence of trauma experiences increases among vulnerable and marginalized populations³ and is multiplied with each interlocking oppression. Everyday and ongoing experiences of inequality, deprivation, marginalization, and discrimination associated with interpersonal and structural racism, sexism, classism, ableism, colonialism, homophobia can be traumatizing. However, marginalized groups and communities
- Individuals, families, groups, and communities with trauma experiences are not inherently sick or broken. Many who have trauma experiences are ALSO resilient. All are doing the best they can with the tools they have available to them.

¹ (Centers for Disease Control, 2020)

² (McDonald, Kingston, Bayrampour, & Tough Mail, 2015)

Why vs How People Act

Experiences of trauma may (or may not) lead to physical, emotional or cognitive, spiritual, interpersonal, and/or behavioural challenges having wide reaching effects on life and relationships. Manifestations of past-unresolved trauma⁴ can all contribute to, complicate, escalate, or prolong conflict.

This course is built on the belief that people do not act badly because they are bad, broken, deficient, mean, stupid, immature, criminals, or weak. People act the way they act because, at one time, their behaviours served to protect them from danger and harm.

Someone who is emotionally stable, polite, calm, secure, and assertive, learned that those behaviours protected them just as someone who displays emotional dysregulation, chaotic, insecure, blaming, or aggressive behaviour patterns learned that these behaviours protected them. We *ALL* use the tools that we have available to us at any given time to deal with life's challenges and dangers.

When developing your role's persona and planning behaviours, *try to understand why you would be acting a certain way as much as how you are acting*. You will likely not be asked by the mediator to disclose your traumatic backstory, but you will draw on it to give your role's persona depth and to understand the level of conflict needed for this role play and where that conflict may be coming from.

The following pages are designed to help you think about behaviours and patterns that are associated with high conflict.

³ (Arthur, et al., 2013)

⁴ (Goodman, 2017)

High Conflict Behaviours

- Rigid and uncompromising, repeating failed strategies
- Unable to accept or heal from a loss
- Negative emotions dominate their thinking
- Unable to reflect on their own behavior
- Difficulty empathizing with others
- Avoid any responsibility for the problem or solutions
- Preoccupied with blaming specific targets
- See their targets as all-bad, with no positive qualities at all
- Frequently misinterpret events and other people's intentions
- Get easily stuck in conflicts over minor events
- Extreme emotional intensity about blaming their targets
- Recruit others to attack their targets
- All or nothing thinking
- Jumping to negative assumptions
- Personalization
- Emotional reasoning (I feel in danger, therefore I am in danger)
- Mind reading
- Wishful thinking (eliminate the Target and life will be perfect)
- Tunnel vision
- Exaggerated fears
- Projecting (seeing own feelings and behaviors in others and not in him/herself)
- Splitting (seeing people as all bad or all good)⁵

Blame

- A person with high conflict behaviours may be constantly in conflict
- They may be unable to accept responsibility and will be preoccupied with confronting the person/people responsible (anyone but themselves).
- They may be on the lookout for someone blame, including the mediator or the other person in the mediation.
- Blaming helps people to feel better about themselves, helps people unconsciously feel safer and stronger.
- People with high conflict behaviours may be unaware that this negative behavior is self-defeating. They are unable to see the connections between their own behavior and their problems, which continue to escalate conflict.
- They may have traits that are marked by self-defeating and socially inappropriate behaviors. They may lack self-awareness and an inability to accept or learn from feedback about their behavior.
- They may lack the ability to change their behavior to fit changing social situations. Emotionally intense and out of proportion to the issues
- It's very personal: about the other's intelligence, sanity, memory, ethics, sex life, etc.
- It's all the other's fault: they may not feel any responsibility for problem or solution
- Blame is out of context: it ignores all the good the other has done and all of the bad they themselves have done
- Blame is often shared with others to emphasize how blameworthy the other is and how blameless the speaker is⁶.

⁵ (Eddy, 2008)

⁶ (Eddy, 2008)

The Cycle of High Conflict Thinking

- Step 1: The person with high conflict behaviours and thought patterns perceives some kind of danger (e.g., social/emotional ridicule)
 - They experience intense internal distress
 - Feel others are a danger to them
 - Distorted perceptions are not checked out
- Step 2: In response to unchecked feelings of danger, they engage in Behavior that is Aggressively Bad (this is a defense mechanism)
 - Go on the attack/taking aggressive action
 - Seek someone to blame
 - Logic is overruled
- Step 3: They receive Negative Feedback (sarcasm, put-downs, threats, blasts of anger, lawsuits, EVEN constructive feedback) for their negative behaviours, which triggers Mistaken Assessment of Danger and the cycle repeats⁷.
- Feeling heard and respected can help break this cycle!

Source of Bad Behaviours

Some bad behaviours are part of a cycle of:

1. **Negative Experience** (abuse, neglect, abandonment, domination, etc...)
2. **Response** to Negative Experience (characterized as either “Bad Behaviour”/ Protective Mechanism)
3. **Other’s Reactions** to “Bad Behaviours” that mimic Negative Experience (e.g., abandonment, rejection, belittling, ignoring etc) = Negative Experience
4. Fear of Negative Experience
5. “Bad Behaviour”
6. **Other’s Reactions** to “Bad Behaviours” ...

⁷ (Eddy, 2008)

Examples:

Alternating Clinging and Raging may be a response to **Abandonment**

Alternating Clinging and Raging may also lead to **Abandonment**

Superior and Insulting attitudes may be a response to **Belittlement and Helplessness**

Superior and Insulting attitudes may also lead to **Belittlement and Helplessness**

Dominating, Manipulative, Deceptive behaviours that cause harm may be a response to being **Dominated**

Dominating, Manipulative, Deceptive behaviours that cause harm may also lead to being **Dominated**

Dramatic, Intense, “Attention Seeking” behaviours may be a response to being **Ignored**

Dramatic, Intense, “Attention Seeking” may also lead to being **Ignored**

Holding Grudges and Attacking First may be a response to **Betrayal**

Holding Grudges and Attacking First may also lead to **Betrayal**

Common Signs of Poor Mental Health ⁸

- Feeling sad or down, Excessive fears or worries, or extreme feelings of guilt
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Withdrawal from friends and activities (depression, schizophrenia)
- Significant tiredness, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations (schizophrenia, manic phase of bipolar)
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Trouble understanding and relating to situations and people
- Alcohol or drug abuse, major changes in eating habits, Sex drive changes
- Excessive anger, hostility (or violence)
- Suicidal thinking
- Sometimes symptoms of a mental health disorder appear as physical problems, such as stomach pain, back pain, headache, or other unexplained aches and pains.
- Flat vocal and facial affect, slow speech, disconnected speech (go off on tangents), repeating speech (difficulty getting the story out)
- Avoid eye contact, fatalistic disengagement, seem to have no stake in the outcome, expect bad results
- Rapid and loud speech, or speech without pauses, runs on sentence, “no room to get a word in edgewise” (anxiety, manic phase of bipolar disorder)
- Expectation they will be cheated (anxiety, paranoia)

Some Common Traits Associated with Personality Disorders⁹

Borderline → *volatile and intense interpersonal relationships and extreme impulsiveness severe difficulty with relationships, placing yourself in danger, making decisions that turn out to be very bad for you*

Antisocial → *disregard for, and violation of the rights of others and the laws of society, risky and dangerous behaviours, easily bored*

Histrionic → *highly emotional and in need of constant attention from others*

Narcissistic → *focused on self and own needs, lack of empathy for others, grandiose, dismissive, manipulative, self-protection*

Avoidant → *social isolation and extreme sensitivity to opinions of others*

Dependent → *submissive and clinging*

Paranoid → *distrustful, suspicious, negative interpretation of others' intentions*

Note that this is one way of look at personality disorders and one way of talking about them. These have been included for use in role-play development only to illustrate some commonly associated **behaviours**, not to label groups of people as having “bad/disordered personalities” or as only having negative traits.

⁸ (Mayo Clinic, n.d.)

⁹ (Mood Disorders Society of Canada, 2009)

Stress, Trauma, and Substance Use Disorders

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse summarizes the relationship between stress, trauma, and substance use disorders as follows:

- The relationship between stressful / traumatic events and substance use is supported by research.
- Exposure to traumatic events can increase alcohol and drug use, leading to additional traumatic experiences and substance use; there may be a stress-substance use cycle.
- The human stress response can help us survive but it can also lead to unhealthy or negative outcomes/behaviours in some people.
- Quality social support is essential in dealing with stressful events¹⁰ but is often lacking for people with substance use issues.
- Substance use may be an attempt to cope with emotionally dangerous situations rather than an attempt to feel good.
- People with a substance use issue may sense a lack of (emotional) safety and may struggle to engage accurate judgement in emotional situations¹¹.
- Many people who struggle with substance use may not have developed conflict resolution skills and have a need to rebuild trust in their relationships¹².
- Sometimes substance use is present, but not the driver of the conflict; or the person who is using substances is not the driver of the conflict. Do not assume that the person with the addiction is always the party with high conflict behaviours.

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¹⁰ (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2009, p. 16)

¹¹ (Goodman, 2017, p. 193)

¹² (Flanagan, et al., 2018)