

You've met them: difficult clients. One definition of "difficult" is "needing much effort or skill to accomplish, deal with or understand". They require effort and skill and they are important.

"Difficult" clients challenge us in both positive and negative ways. Sometimes "difficult" clients also push you to do your very best work. They question your ideas and assumptions. They require you to explain what you're doing and not operate on autopilot. At times, their demands and oversight verge on micro-management, and we may feel defensive and annoyed. They require that you apply your skills and expertise and also your emotional intelligence. They can make you better.

"Difficult" cases and difficult conversations at the table can trigger emotions and require a high degree of self-awareness and skill to manage well. At the end of the day, defining "difficult" is a uniquely personal thing. What is challenging for one may be a breeze for another. Understanding your personality, preferences, and triggers can help you to recognize the types of people and situations that feel difficult for you.

When managed with C.A.R.E, "difficult" clients can result in deeper, stronger relationships with the professional team and with the clients. In this workshop, a mental health professional and a lawyer each present views of the "difficulty" we face at the table and we will teach you skills to help you when you are confronted by a "difficult" relationship or situation, to re-frame it as a challenge that will allow you to use "difficulty" as an opportunity to deepen the relationship and build trust. Our workshop will review 4 core approaches to transforming difficult client relationships with C.A.R.E: Curiosity, Acceptance, Rolling with Resistance, and Equanimity.

What is C.A.R.E?

C – Curiosity

The process into collaborative divorce and collaboration itself relies on questions and curiosity but the thing about curiosity nowadays is that it is short lived. For us to be successful as collaborative practitioners we find ourselves having to work in a curious fashion if we want to really get to the heart of the matter.

The challenge in our cases, with so much information and heightened emotions swirling around, much of which is confusing for the clients, is that most clients only go as deep as we ask them to. When we stay at the surface without getting to the heart of the issues, it is not enough for us to really understand the client's hopes, fears, concerns, goals, relationships, challenges (i.e., interests) and how we as a team can support them during this very important time of transition.

Maybe our education and our professionalism work against us, at times. Generally, we assume we know what we need to know – and we hate to admit we don't know things in the event it makes us look less than perfect. We're experienced professionals after all!

Lack of curiosity leads to complacency and that means we don't ask questions and aren't open to learning. More than that, we don't challenge our clients or our colleagues at the table. Attitudes and ideas start to ossify. That means a lack of innovation on one side, and on the other, the inability to think differently, to appreciate and understand contrary positions – in other words, a recipe for trivial disagreements and conflict at the collaborative table, resulting in wasted time, money, and client disappointments.

Curiosity can be encouraged as part of giving people the skills they need to have better, more open, trusting and positive conversations – or Conversational Intelligence (CI).

We will explore curiosity through a conversational Intelligence framework. A framework for knowing what kind of curious questions trigger the lower, more primitive brain; and what activates higher-level intelligences such as trust, integrity, empathy, and good judgment.

We will teach, demonstrate, and role play ways to improve CI levels, developing practitioners in terms of their situational awareness, reflective listening, empathy, self-awareness -in order to be able to use conversations in ways that move the clients forward in the collaborative process, and help us to better understand their needs.

A – Acceptance

When we accept where our clients are in their own stage of divorce, we can better align our work to meet their needs at each specific stage of change. Rarely is anyone prepared for the end of their marriage. This is almost as true for the spouse who initiates the divorce, as it is for the spouse who is being left. Marriages are very difficult to end and everyone goes through a period of emotional transition, which can be described as a series of stages. The stages may occur in a specific order, though they may also blend and overlap. Occasionally, someone skips a stage. We will review the common stages of divorce, discuss reasons why spouses are at different stages as they progress through the divorce process, and how to work with couples to be effective at each stage.

R – Roll with Resistance

Often when a collaborative practitioner attempts to move a client toward change too quickly, they adopt a coercive or authoritative style. If the client is ambivalent about change (which most divorcing clients are!), this approach will commonly be met with resistance from the client.

We will discuss how resistance takes many forms, and explore the most commonly occurring behaviors: interrupting or arguing with the practitioner, discounting the practitioner's expertise, excusing their behavior, minimizing the effects of their behavior, blaming other people for their behavior, being pessimistic about their chances to change or being unwilling to change altogether.

Motivational Interviewing techniques will be introduced, explored, and practiced. Rolling with this resistance involves approaching resistance without judgement and interpreting these responses as a sign that the client holds a different perspective to the practitioner. Strategies such as simple reflection of the resistance, emphasizing the individual's choice to change or not ('it's up to you'), shifting the focus of the discussion or simply reframing what the person has said, will be further explored from the roles of the professional team members to demonstrate how to "roll with resistance" in order to prevent resistance from affecting engagement in the collaborative process.

E – Equanimity

We feel that equanimity is the "secret sauce" of collaborative practice.

The dictionary defines equanimity as "mental calmness and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation." It refers to a mind that is at peace even in the face of stressful and unpleasant experiences.

you "start where you are" or "start where the client is". Stop trying to change circumstances over which you have no control and, instead, start where you are. Don't try to predict the outcome of the case from the first meet-and-greet with a client. How many times have you said or heard, "this case should be pretty easy"...and then, all comes crashing down and it is the hardest case you've had!

Don't confuse the calm acceptance of equanimity with resignation or indifference. The latter two are characterized by aversion to the way things are; then we feel stuck and unable to act. By contrast,

equanimity is characterized by that "evenness of temper" from the dictionary definition—an open acceptance that's not a deterrent to action.

And so, with equanimity, collaborative teams are able to remain pro-active, always looking for new options and ways to support the clients and the team. Start each meeting with “where are we?” then, "Start where you are," suffering and all. Then look around to see what the team has to offer and the clients have to offer.

When the going gets rough, seeing the ever-changing nature of life helps me maintain that "mental calmness and evenness of temper." We engage in what we call "weather practice," recognizing that stressful thoughts and emotions are as changeable as the weather. They blow in and blow out like the wind.

We also like to think of stressful thoughts or emotions as waves on the ocean of life. They rise and they fall. Instead of going rigid in the face of them, we try to calmly and steadily ride the ups and downs (like a sailor or a surfer).

Seeing clearly the ever-changing nature of life in the collaborative process is a tremendous relief because it helps not to identify with particular thoughts or emotions as all that the client is or all that you are as a professional. When we see that the client is not just frustration, not just sadness, it helps to calmly find ways to support the client as we wait for things to change.

Being content to take baby steps. This "letting go" practice helps cultivate the mental calmness and evenness of temper that are at the heart of equanimity. If you can't "let go" a lot, let go a little. You can almost always nudge the mind a bit toward letting go of that longing for something to be other than it is. And if I can't let go even a little, with compassion for myself and/or the client, I "let it be" until that universal law of impermanence kicks in ... and things change so that I can let go a little. Each baby step makes it easier to take the next one.

We will explore ways to cultivate equanimity no matter what challenges you face with your clients, your team, your collaborative meetings, or your own work/life balance.

Timed Agenda

(Please note this is based on a 90-minute presentation, we can easily expand to a 3hr workshop!)

00:00-00:05

What makes a case “difficult” for you? – This will be a presenter-led exercise in self-examination and insight into each participant’s individual experiences as a human and a collaborative professional. Exploration of how our life experiences (past and present) intersect with our professional lives to help or hinder us at the collaborative table, and in our individual roles on the collaborative team and with our clients.

00:05-00:07

Overview of the presentation and What is C.A.R.E.?

00:07-00:37

C- Curious

We will explore techniques used by each professional to gain an understanding of the hopes, fears, concerns, goals, relationships, challenges (i.e., interests) and how we as a team can support them during this very important time of transition. Introduction to the concept of Conversational Intelligence (CI).

We will explore curiosity through a conversational Intelligence framework. A framework for knowing what kind of curious questions trigger the lower, more primitive brain; and what activates higher-level intelligences such as trust, integrity, empathy, and good judgment.

00:37-00:47 - A – Acceptance

Overview of the stages of change. Understanding of how we can recognize and meet each client's needs based on stage, to support the clients where they are and as they transition between stages.

00:47-1:10 – R- Rolling with Resistance

We will discuss how resistance takes many forms, and that “resistance” can be reframed into an opportunity to explore more deeply to help the client transition through the divorce process. We will explore the most commonly occurring behaviors: interrupting or arguing, discounting, minimizing, blaming, being pessimistic about their chances to change or being unwilling to change altogether. We will explore techniques to enhance individual and team competence identifying the underlying causes of resistance and managing the behaviors at the Collaborative table.

1:10-1:20 – E- Equanimity

We believe that equanimity is the “secret sauce” of collaborative practice (...and life in general!!). We will explore self-care for resilience at the table and after the collaborative meeting ends. This expands upon the IACP (2018) presentation “Healing the Helpers: Understanding and preventing compassion fatigue in collaborative professionals” presented by Dr. Gilman and Lisa Standish.

Emphasis on the neuropsychology of stress and healing, and explore how mindfulness, yoga, and physical activity can create (plasticity) positive brain changes (dopamine) that increase resilience, calmness, and joy. Research has shown that practices like yoga, meditation, and physical exercise generate joy without any external rewards or cues and improve resilience in the face of external difficulties.

1:20-1:30 – Wrap Up and Questions