

Grief and High Conflict Divorce

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Abstract

This paper explores grief and high-conflict divorce. Divorce, like death, involves coming to terms with loss. Grieving is an important part of the divorce process. The loss experienced in divorce goes beyond loss of spouse. How a person responds to the loss is based on that person's lifestyle. The paper will go on to describe many contributing factors of lifestyle and how lack of grief prolongs and promotes conflict. On-going conflict prevents productive and respectful co-parenting. Often times in high conflict divorces, the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, are overlooked and replaced with anger, resentment, guilt and lack of self-esteem. In order for conflict to be resolved, the entire family needs time to grieve and rebuild. When the loss of the original family system is not grieved a predictable cycle of conflict will continue.

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Grief and High Conflict Divorce

The legal process of divorce itself brings stress and conflict. Understanding the important stages a person goes through while grieving can reduce the conflict. Allowing denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance into the process can reduce on-going conflict. It is in the children's best interest for divorcing parents to commit to co-parenting. When one or both partners ignore loss and replace it with conflict then it prevents co-parenting in a productive and respectful way. It is possible for one parent to grieve the loss and reduce conflict for themselves and the children in the absence of cooperation from the other parent. The behaviors and responses to divorce are based on the individual's perspective and has a great deal to do with his or her own lifestyle.

Impact of Grief and Divorce

The long-term effects of how a couple handles their divorce can have lasting effects on the individuals getting divorced, their children, extended family, and community as a whole. The divorce rate in the United States suggests that 50% of all marriages will end in divorce. This results in a high percentage of children, along with their parents, who will experience the intense feelings of loss that a divorce brings. Kressel (1985) characterizes the divorce process as "one of the more demanding tasks that rational beings are expected to perform" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 43). The couple who understands this and gets help coping with the grief, especially in high-conflict divorces, can reduce the amount of anger and conflict in their own lives and the lives of their children.

Grief represents the particular reactions that a person experiences while in a state of bereavement (Sanders, 1998). There is a sense of loss in all divorce, regardless of the circumstances. There are many reasons and many varying degrees in which divorcing couples

react to the loss of partnership, loss of self, loss of trust, loss of hope, loss of security, and loss of family as it was known. In grief, people lose an essential part of what has become the inner experience of themselves and their assumptive world. They, therefore, must change their ideas about identity to match the new reality emerging from the loss and incorporate these changes into a new assumptive world (Archer, 1999). The assumptive world can be thought of as a ‘new kind of normal’ that replaces what was assumed for their life. Hopes and dreams lost in divorce are replaced with realities that are overwhelming and painful. The grieving process allows individuals to accept the changes and choose ways to grow from the experience, regardless of how difficult that time may be.

The divorce process emphasizes the legal battle and often does not allow time for the divorcing couple to tackle the battle of grief. The emotional divorce precedes the legal divorce, often by years, and sometimes is not completely over with until long after the marriage has ended. It is the psychological, rather than the legal, ending of a marriage that makes the “true” divorce (Whitehead, 1996). The psychological task of mourning the relationship can become arrested or derailed for many reasons. Failure to successfully negotiate this task results in an inability to let go of the other person and adapt to new circumstances (Demby, 2009). The financial and custody agreements that a divorcing couple must make, during a time of great sadness and hurt, are the two main obstacles that inhibit the mourning process.

Divorce is usually conceptualized as a stress process or as a grief process. Each one of these considerations has important implications for interventions with divorced persons. (Yaroz, Plazaola, Etxeberria, 2008). At the same time that the divorcing couple is experiencing feelings of grief and loss, they are automatically thrown into making difficult decisions about what new life will look like for them and for the children. Decisions need to be made with regard to things

such as living arrangements, financial decisions, parenting time, holidays, weekends, and potentially adding new members to the family. It is no wonder that conflict arises. Divorce is not a single event. It can potentially become a never ending roller coaster for the divorcing couple and their children. There will be constant reminders for the children about the fact that mom and dad are not together and life is not the way the children thought it would be. The decisions made during the divorce process will be questioned and revisited emotionally and legally in on-going high-conflict divorces, for years to come. Dealing with grief and understanding the loss and hurt from the beginning can help reduce conflict that any new stressors may bring over time.

The ambiguous feelings of grief brought by the death of a marriage usually are a mixture of shock, denial, hurt, abandonment, anger, bitterness, panic, hatred, and even relief or excitement. Anger keeps divorcing couples from seeing the good qualities in ex partners, and their perceptions of the other become blurred when conflict arises in divorce. One person might respond with anger and seek revenge, while another might respond with courage and hope for the future. When understanding the grieving process, one can learn that what feels like hatred and anger toward an ex-spouse can, and should, coincide with feelings of love and affection and the memories grieved when that partnership is ending. Grieving allows the divorcing couple the opportunity to choose the way they want to act and react to the intense feelings that divorce brings. It also defines the way they will survive a loss.

Divorce, unlike death, is not final. The person who has died to you emotionally is the same person who stands next to you at a soccer field, graduation ceremony, and child's wedding. The psychological process of divorce, in many ways, parallels grieving the loss of a loved one, but with one fundamental difference: in divorce, the one who has died to you is usually still in

your life (Netter, 2002). It is only when the divorcing person can mourn the death of the marriage and understand grief that he is able to stand next to that “corpse” at a special event and see her as a parenting partner and someone he once loved and then lost. Denying grief promotes the feelings of hurt and bitterness. Revenge, stemming from hurt, is a safeguarding mechanism pursued through conflict.

Multiple Losses and Grief

When a couple decides to divorce there are a number of losses that they will each need to accept and grieve in order to move forward in a healthy manner. Losses in divorce entail the loss of the partner, the loss of wholeness of the family, and parts of oneself. Mourning the losses is recognized as essential to the divorced persons’ adjustment and to their ability to go on with their lives (Baum, 2003). There is the obvious loss of the relationship. In high-conflict divorces, it is often the case that one person has already started to grieve the loss of the relationship while the other is only beginning to grieve when divorce is decided. The transition from being a team, a partnership, and a family shifts to “mine” and “yours” and to each having a new kind of family. No longer can a person count on the other person to be on her side.

In cases where there is conflict, with intense anger and pain, the couple is thrown into a legal battle where, instead of grieving the loss of the marriage, they are immediately forced into one winning and one losing side. The painful and emotional process between one man and one woman, one father and one mother, simply put, two human beings, becomes a process of introducing other people and professionals who are choosing sides and creating two opposing camps: his and hers. “The alignment of professionals and others on one side or the other tends to escalate spousal conflicts, contributing to the damaging effects of the divorce on family members, especially children” (Ehrich, 2001, p. 307).

It is important for legal professionals to understand that spouses in high-conflict divorces tend to distort reality in order to protect their self-esteem and avoid overwhelming feelings of pain and grief. A person who denies a spouse's attributes, the attributes that were viewed as mainly positive and added value during the marriage, is trying to hold on to whatever self-esteem she has left. Affection and appreciation are no longer options, because they are too painful. Denial and distortion become coping mechanisms for feelings of grief, shame, and rejection. It would be helpful for the divorcing couple to understand that the love, affection, and admiration that was felt during the marriage may now be unbearable for one or both individuals during the divorce process. The following are examples of basic distortions that may take place.

*The breadwinner who was valued and respected for providing security and stability in the marriage becomes the greedy ex-spouse.

*The stay-at-home spouse who was viewed as nurturing and providing emotional security and stability for the children in the family becomes needy and lazy.

Erich states that:

The psychological factors that distort the divorcing partners' view of family dynamics and circumstances are crucial for lawyers to understand so they can offer alternatives and responses that calm the storm rather than add to it. The distortion in these divorces can be understood in terms of the painful emotional process of trying to disengage from a loved one. (Erich, 2001, p. 308)

The loss of the dream may be the overall loss that tends to stay with people the longest. There are immediate dreams that are lost, like a vacation that has been planned, an upcoming event to be shared as a family, and basic time spent with spouse and children. There is the loss of the dream that marriage means forever, and will be grounded on values of commitment, love,

forgiveness and trust. There is the potential loss of continued relationships with the exes' family or friends that can be an enormous loss, and often occurs in the case of a high-conflict divorce.

The dream is also closely tied to all the other people, family and friends, that marriage brings into each partner's life. The experiences and times spent together as one family during the marriage are soon lost to the reality that it is now "his" family and "her" family. In high-conflict cases, where family and friends "choose sides," it can keep the divorcing couple from working cooperatively. The loss of the nuclear family is difficult for all involved.

Unfortunately, anger and conflict often times prohibits the nuclear family from adopting new binuclear adjustments. The binuclear family for a child of divorce will include mom's family and dad's family. There may be new people added to each side. For example, step-parents, step-siblings, and half-siblings may be added to a child's family tree. "The point here is that while the nuclear family no longer lives as one unit, divorce has not ended the family but simply restructured (and frequently expanded) it" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 43). Ahrons & Rodgers (1987), describe the binuclear family at its best "when the former marital partners are each caring and committed parents, are able to cooperate, have relatively equal and consistent parenting skills, and are able to work together without continuing old animosities" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002, p. 45).

There is also a mistaken attempt to recover a perceived loss of self esteem. Self esteem is threatened when the love and respect of marriage is replaced with the pain and hurt of divorce. Feelings of loss and hurt are often times so overwhelming that one or both people in a divorce choose, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid those feelings and replace them with anger and hatred. Marriages suffer, and often times end in divorce, when the choice to love is replaced or confused by the good and bad feelings we associate with loving and being loved by another

person. Love is a choice and not a feeling. As a practitioner working with individuals and couples going through or contemplating divorce, the statement “I just don’t feel it anymore,” is an example of how feelings become the barometer for many people on whether or not a marriage will last. The self-esteem trap couples find themselves in comes from relying on how they feel to measure love, love for each other, and for themselves. “If you love and respect me I have self-esteem” and “If you hurt and disrespect me I have no self-esteem” are examples of how feelings impact the cycle of love, respect, anger, and hatred. In a divorce filled with conflict, the anger and hatred are attempts to restore self-esteem.

Grief is experienced psychologically and cognitively through painful feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. The personal intensity and the power of one’s grief is based on his individual meaning of the loss. The experience of grief is individual and requires no recognition or validation from others. In many cases, parents, grandparents, siblings and friends do not know how or do not feel entitled to grieve a divorce within the family. Their avoidance of their own grief and hurt can play a big role in prolonging the conflict. In order to avoid their own feelings, friends and family members may support one person’s views, even if distorted, and align themselves with that person’s position.

Although family and friends’ alignment with a divorcing person may feel supportive to that divorcing person, they may only be providing a foundation for continued conflict. Awareness that friends and family are taking sides can encourage high-conflict and only prolong grieving and hinder healing (Erllich, 2001). Family and friends, along with other third parties such as child specialists, therapists, and lawyers can help reduce conflict when they understand that grieving is important and is in the in the best interest of the divorcing person. Divorce is not an event, but rather a legal and emotional process that a divorcing couple must go through. The

individual or couple who strives for the “best interest” of the family system and the children will likely reduce conflict, allow room for grieving, and look forward with hope. The individuals and couples whose “self interest” or vertical striving, which is discussed later, will likely stay in a conflictual cycle, deny the grief and loss of a broken marriage, and continually seek the “better than the others” status they mistakenly think they need in order to survive.

This is not to suggest that grief in death is less painful than grief with divorce. Most people do not allow for grief and mourning when a marriage dies. There is some evidence that divorce may be even more traumatic than death, since death represents a clear ending to a relationship, whereas divorce represents uncertainty and may feel never ending. In discussing this with individuals going through divorce there are some common themes:

- The divorce will go on forever. Death is final.
- His/Her spouse did not choose to leave, they died. My spouse chose to leave.
- Decisions still need to be made together. If my spouse had died I would be able to make these decisions on my own and not feel like it is out of my control (children, finances, living situation, etc.).
- In death, family and friends encourage empathy, support and understanding. Divorce does not necessarily mean support and understanding, and empathy is often replaced with anger and hostility.
- Feeling alone in grief. Unable to grieve openly and honestly with children, family and friends. Family and friends do not understand that love does not instantly go away when divorce occurs and children are protected from the “adult issues.”

One woman in a divorce support group that I facilitated said this about grieving alone, without her children, when discussing the reality that divorce can be more painful than death, “If their

father had died, we could all crawl under the covers and cry together, share stories about wonderful times together and talk about what a wonderful man he was. I feel so alone. I cannot bear to remember the good times and I don't know what happened to the man I married. He has hurt me so much.”

Divorce is an end to a marriage, but it is not the end of communication, interaction and sharing of children with a former spouse. It may be that society in general typically does not acknowledge loss and allow for mourning when divorce occurs. Unlike death, divorce is not a social process. It is isolated and professionally conducted. Barsky points out one difference between end of life death and death of a marriage:

The funeral rite provides for the affirmation of an end of life. The bereaved comes out of a trancelike state and into a world of intense pain. The death is made public, and the social network of friends and family are witnesses. In divorce, an analogous acknowledgment of the separation may be when meeting for the first time with the mediator or when entering a legal process by consulting an attorney. Plans must be made, and the reality must be faced and encountered. (Barsky, 1999, p. 42)

There really are no cultural or societal rituals marking the death of a marriage in order to share in divorce-related grief. Experiencing grief in death seems natural, expected and comes with a ritual of mourning. Due to the expectation of “marriage as life long,” experiencing grief in divorce brings confusion and the brevity of the legal phase of divorce creates shock. This contraction of time and destruction of meaning force the work of letting go. As people move through grief, they are required to mourn, reminisce, appreciate, regret, feel sad, surrender and give up the lost person (McKay, Rogers, McKay, 1989).

Practitioners should encourage the importance of working through grief from the very beginning of the process and help the divorcing couple find ways to discuss their personal grief with family, friends, and children. They can encourage the divorcing couple to ask for love and support, but to refrain from using words or actions that do not support their own way of grieving and moving forward in the best way possible for all involved. Grief will not look the same for everyone and as will be discussed later, a person's lifestyle has a great deal to do with how she deals with her own grief. "From the Adlerian lifestyle model, the need to process grief emotionally would not be universal. No emotion follows automatically and directly from a particular objective event. The response is from the unique perceptual framework of the individual" (Hartshorne, 2003, p. 147).

Stages of Grief

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has written about the Stages of Grief that one goes through when mourning the death of a loved one. Kübler-Ross and many others agree that divorcing spouses, both the Leaver and the Left will go through the same stages of grief in mourning the death of their marriage. They may go through these stages with a unique sense of timing and with unique personal dynamics. For the divorcing couple, grieving is an important part of the process. With the absence or denial of grief, conflict becomes an on-going issue. It can be argued that the person who leaves the marriage, physically or emotionally is more advanced in his process of grief.

In order to more fully understand grief, whether it be grief with death or divorce, the stages of grief are predictable. Dr. Kübler-Ross said that these stages are not meant to be completed in any given order. A grieving person may bounce around from one stage to another or skip stages of grief. The stages may come and go for an extended period of time or some may

be relived over and over throughout a lifetime. It is how one perceives the emotions resulting from the grief that allows a reduction in conflict in a divorce. Reactions to loss are individual and specific and have a great deal to do with a person's lifestyle. Social interest, purpose of behavior, mistaken beliefs, vertical and horizontal striving, tasks of life, and additional Adlerian concepts discussed in this paper will help layout the specific ways people cope, act, and react to the strain of divorce. Two emotionally charged people who are feeling and experiencing things at different times and for different reasons, can create deeper conflict.

The process of letting go of the person with whom we had such strong attachment to is difficult and requires time. "It is essential to take into account that in adulthood, the primary attachment figure is typically the love partner, whose loss has to be mourned through the divorce process" (Yarnoz, Plazaola, Exteberria, 2008, p. 295). The importance of grieving can be attributed the enormous loss of the person to whom one is most attached. The stages of grief are examined next and examples of how grief feelings over such significant attachment are explored.

Denial

Denial allows one to cushion feelings of the loss of a marriage. It helps to postpone and survive the initial stages of grief when life feels overwhelming and anxiety filled, and the future seems to make little or no sense. Often times, denial can mean being in shock and feeling numb to reality. Reality could be the marriage ending, or it could mean the reality of betrayal, reality of hearing "I don't love you" or "there is someone else." Denial helps a person cope with whatever we he needs to cope with, so he can get through another day. Denial allows a person to pace her feelings and process new information. Denial is a way for a divorcing person to cushion intense feelings this stark reality brings. It allows the person who was "left" to "catch up" with an emerging reality.

When a couple decides to divorce, there is usually one person who can be called “The Leaver.” This is the one who has left the marriage, physically or emotionally, and is usually one step ahead of the other spouse in the grieving process. The person who shows greater feelings of grief, is usually the one who can be called “The Left.” This person, even though some of the signs were there, is shocked, angered, or saddened by the decision to divorce. Regardless of being “The Leaver” or “The Left”, both spouses will practice denial in order to cope.

Unfortunately the divorce process can quickly put the divorcing couple in opposing positions, causing defensive feelings and reactions, which is a form of denial.

Each of the divorcing partners may be in a different stage of the grieving. One may be the initiator, possibly having been in an earlier state of denial in not facing personal feelings, masking needs or sublimating desires elsewhere, and then reaching the turning point of facing reality, with the verbalization of the need for a separation. The other spouse may be the non-initiator who hears the dreaded words of separation and goes into an emotional nosedive. (Barsky, 1993, p. 42)

Denial can show up in many forms and at different stages. It may start during the marriage and continue for years after the divorce is final. Initial denial during the marriage may be in denying that there is a serious breakdown in the marital relationship. Within high-conflict divorce, there are many common themes. Infidelity, addiction, and financial betrayal are a few. Denying the truth to avoid the pain of reality helps postpone the grief. Once the truth is revealed, shock or numbness, “this is not happening to me,” surface as forms of denial. This denial serves as a safeguarding technique to “protect the self-esteem from threats by outside demands and problems of life” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Denial is also a tool to prevent moving into

deeper life consequences, summarized by “I won’t be with this person anymore.” This realization brings very focused pain.

Anger

Anger is a necessary part of the grieving process and is one of the strongest emotions in high-conflict divorces. Divorcing spouses who reach acceptance understand that anger comes from pain, hurt, disappointment, shame, loss and grief. Anger is an important and vital emotion when there is loss. It gives strength when needed and initial acceptance of reality, rather than denial. Staying stuck in anger can be dangerous. Couples who stay angry may be avoiding the pain of loss. Angry spouses, unwilling to accept their grief, often litigate furiously and repeatedly. This may also be a way for them to mistakenly recover the self-esteem taken from them by the other. This blocks the more normative grieving process that eventually would allow them to stop battling (Erlich, 2001). There is a failure to see that the feelings of pain, hurt, and fear are the strong emotions that are driving the anger.

Anger, in divorce, has powerful implications for all involved. It can be contagious and filter into family, friends and society. Anger can get in the way of the grieving process for children of divorce. Anger is a reaction to the divorce and the process, and pain and hurt are the underlying feelings that should be addressed. Divorce triggers angry “fight” responses when a sense of threat in divorce invades a person’s reality. Anger stimulates powerful, often times aggressive feelings and behaviors, allowing a person to defend herself.

Anger occurs when something you don’t want is happening or when something you do want isn’t happening. High-conflict divorce usually promotes a divorcing couple into looping back into the “fight or flight response.” The wanting and not wanting something to occur is a source of personal power. As a professional, it would be important and helpful for the divorcing

couple to understand this concept from the beginning of the process. Divorcing people will hold on tight to the things they desperately want or don't want in order to seek control in a desperate situation. When one person suggests, insists, fights or ignores what the other person wants or doesn't want, the response will likely be one of fighting or fleeing. Examples of this could be:

- “I want a divorce and it is taking forever because of you.”
- “I do not want a divorce and you are not changing your mind.”
- “I want to stay in the house with the kids and include that in my portion of dividing the assets and you insist on selling the house.”
- “I want to have the children every other week and you will not budge beyond every other weekend.”
- “The fight or flight response is the body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to “fight” or “flee” from perceived attack, harm or threat to our survival” (Neimar, 1998).

Originally discovered by the Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon, the “fight or flight response” is a mind/body reaction triggered by excessive stress, internal worry or external circumstance.

Neil F. Neimar describes the response as excessive and exaggerated fear and being stuck in survival mode:

We can begin to see how it is almost impossible to cultivate positive attitudes and beliefs when we are stuck in survival mode. Our heart is not open. Our rational mind is disengaged. Our consciousness is focused on fear, not love. Making clear choices and recognizing the consequences of those choices is unfeasible. We are focused on short-term survival, not the long-term consequences of our beliefs and choices. When we are

overwhelmed with excessive stress, our life becomes a series of short-term emergencies.

(Neimar, 1998, www.thebodysoulconnection.com)

This is also when mistaken beliefs come into play. Major events in life, like divorce, will either confirm what we assume to be true or challenge it. A person who has always believed in marriage as a lifelong promise may become angry and disappointed when faced with a spouse's decision to divorce, and come to believe that promises cannot be kept.

Anger is inevitable and can be useful in high-conflict divorces. Anger can propel the divorcing couple to accomplish specific tasks in stressful situations, like having discussions about finances or children's schedules. Anger can be useful when conveying wants and in negotiating decisions required in a divorce. Anger may also lead to revenge, the ultimate "fight" response, and can be the most destructive emotion surrounding divorcing couples. There is an important distinction to make between rational anger and emotional anger in the divorcing process (Somary & Emery, 2008). Rational anger arises from such realistic fears as becoming separated from one's children or having to cope with a reduced standard of living. Emotional anger, rather than being a reaction to a substantive issue, is rooted in the psychological pain of the failed marriage and the self perceived (misperceived) loss of self esteem or worth (Barsky, 1993). Emotional anger could stem from a mistaken conviction of, "My worth depends on being married."

Anger serves as a way to cope and gather strength to take action rather than deal with overwhelming sadness. Anger that is expressed to a spouse or about the spouse may feel good and in fact, may be a useful push back or self defense. Infidelity, gambling, constant put-downs, and abuse are some obvious examples of behaviors that could coincide with anger. The question is, how one's anger will be useful and help move one toward closure? In high-conflict divorce,

the behaviors that coincide with feelings of anger that grow into a battle, do not allow grieving, and may set up a win-lose situation. Anger can be, and many times should be felt.

Understanding that there is a want within anger could help the couple focus on important issues and move away from loss.

Anger and rage purposefully are not intended to make sense. Anger becomes destructive and may lead to feeling like the person needs to get even or get revenge. Rabbi Perry Netter describes anger like this, “Paradoxically, as unpleasant and as uncomfortable and as ugly as it is, anger is a stage that everyone going through a divorce must endure” (Netter, 2002, p. 85). A divorcing person who is self-interested and keeps distance by staying angry is vertically striving against the other. A divorcing person who has the best interest for the family as a whole, and is open to reconnecting and resolving anger to get closure, is horizontally striving, hoping that the other person will join him. “It is not the anger that needs to come out, but the pain (stress) that underlies the anger. It is not the anger that is legitimate and right, but the human suffering that must be acknowledged and explored” (McKay et al., 1989, p. 56).

Anger is an “intensified movement at which an individual arrives only when he no longer believes that there is any other possibility” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 227). Anger often times points to a feeling of inferiority ending in a superiority complex, and is marked by vertical striving against the other (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). The person’s lifestyle provides many windows into the purpose of her anger. The divorcing person who has the courage to look beyond anger and see it differently, Adler would say, has a developed sense of social interest.

Bargaining

Bargaining is described by Dr. Kubler-Ross as being lost in a maze of “If only’s” or “What if’s.” He will want to go back in time, make something better, change it, or do it over.

She will want his love back and the marriage restored. He may want to recognize problems earlier in order to stop things from happening. Before a divorce is final, one spouse might feel like she will do anything to get their husband back. “I will never do that again” or “If I change this about me will you stay?” Guilt is part of bargaining. The “if only” statements can create finding fault in ourselves, which results in guilt. Adler believed that guilt is the bad feeling we have for the good intention we never had.

Since all forms of behavior are in the service of the goal to be attained, it is indeed possible that guilt may be used for withdrawing or at another time for aggression, or for both purposes simultaneously (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Bargaining by means of “What If’s” and “If only’s” challenges one to understand his part in the break-up of the marriage. It allows room for healing and moves a person forward rather than staying stuck in the past. Ultimately, bargaining is an attempt to postpone or reverse the inevitable grief and loss. It is that holding place between the elevation of anger and the fall of depression.

Depression

When people experiencing divorce are done bargaining and realize postponing and reversing grief and loss are not possible they may move right into the present. Grief usually moves to a deeper level, reality sets in, and the person divorcing can and may wonder, “Will I feel like this forever and will I ever be happy again?” Because grieving is very individual, and every person is different, he or she grieves in his or her own ways. People connected with the one grieving may put an emphasis on fixing the now depressed griever. Extended family and friends applaud the grieving person for leaving a spouse who has betrayed or hurt her. Depression is idiosyncratic. People wanting to be supportive usually will not understand this person’s particular depression at this point.

It is during times of depression that a divorcing person in a high-conflict divorce may turn to alcohol, drugs, sex, or anything that fills the overwhelming feelings or medicates his pain. It is common for children of divorcing parents to experience depression. The reality of the divorce can bring mood swings and children may feel like life is out of order. It is important for divorcing parents to encourage their children to discuss concerns with them, and to let them know that although this is a tough time, that they will all get through it.

Acceptance

Acceptance is coming to terms with the loss. It simply means that one has grieved the loss of what was and what could have been. The harder work, in high-conflict divorces, appears to be in accepting that the person he or she married is still a person who has positive qualities along with the negative. Adler's view of *gemeinschaftsgefühl* - that willingness to "see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" captures the challenge of the divorcing and grieving person. "As mourning progresses, the bonds are undone and emotions are freed for reinvestment in a new and different life" (Barsky, 1993, p. 42).

Acceptance means no longer dwelling in the past. It means looking ahead to the future. In a divorce, when there are children involved, the future will include the ex-spouse. A divorcing spouse who cannot accept a future of cooperation with her ex-spouse may be moving to the useless side of life because she fears defeat or cannot see on the useful side. The useful side, the life of acceptance, would be a life of commitment to the well-being of the children, and would include the acceptance of oneself and ex-spouse. A person lacking this movement would be a person with under developed social interest and a person choosing to stay in the useless side of life. Adler suggests that all problems of life may create a well-developed social interest. If one of the divorcing spouses is lacking a well developed social interest in his lifestyle and

lacking courage to advance to the useful side, it might be very possible that acceptance is not possible. The final stage of the grieving process can be the final step to ending on-going conflict. Without grieving the loss and accepting the future, conflict can become a major focus in the divorce and most likely will continue.

Continuing in a cycle of conflict may serve a real purpose for a divorcing person. It may be a way for one person to stay attached to the other. It may also be a way, for someone who fears being alone, to hang on and avoid dealing with her fear. When the purpose of behavior is focused on the other person and what occurred in the past, acceptance is stalled. Acceptance means moving forward with hope, without anger, and a better understanding of oneself. The purpose of that behavior allows acceptance. The grief process in divorce is messy. Individuals who reach acceptance may, many years later, recycle back to anger, denial, bargaining, or depression when triggered by an event.

High-conflict Divorce

An article in the American Journal of Family Law defined high conflict as, “a situation in which one or both parents involved in the conflict cannot or will not let go of their marriage battle, and because their conflict continues to disrupt the adjustment of family, frequent intervention by the court system is required” (Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 242). In many high-conflict divorce cases, it is not an exaggeration to say that deep personal suffering is frequently encountered among children and their parents (Sparta, 2008). Child custody is one reason that high-conflict cases take up a large percentage of the court’s time. One reason is that conflict does not end when the divorce is final. The divorcing couple and the professionals involved in the divorce would serve the family better if they understood grief and loss and understood the underlying emotions and behaviors that result in on-going conflict. “Lawyers operate on the

expectation that the conflict will be resolved with the firm decision of a court order.

Psychologists operate on the expectation that the cooperation of parents will occur through therapy and education with a promise that more visitation will be given upon their compliance” (Stacer & Stemen, 2000, p. 242).

Another element that intensifies conflict is the “significant other.” Usually, new mates are not aware of their support role “against the enemy.” It is often difficult for them to let go of the conflict because they have only known each other through the conflict (Stacer & Stemen, 2000). The new relationship often has a common goal and is energized by the ongoing conflict.

Fear and anxiety are also components that may drive conflict. In a study (Stacer & Stemen, 2000), conducted with over 700 couples over the past ten years, who have experienced high-conflict because of a break up in the family, fear was the common theme. “Fear of the unknown” and “fear of being alone” are examples of the participants’ hesitating lifestyle. A person’s lifestyle comes into play and can have an enormous impact on how the divorcing person responds to fear. The embedded mistaken conviction about “fear of being alone” may cause a person to feel out of control, but unable to identify exactly what is happening to him. When a couple attaches their sense of security and self-esteem to the other person, the fear of being alone is a mistaken belief that being alone means being unimportant, unwanted, and a loser. “Most couples don’t know that it is fear that drives them and fear that drives the conflict” (Stacer & Semen, 2000, p. 246).

The court system has changed and re-worked divorce laws, looked into children’s best interest and worked hard at creating atmospheres that help to reduce conflict during the divorce, through mediation and mandatory parenting education. Even with parent education, language that promotes co-parenting, and a neutral party legal support system, divorcing parents in

conflict have a hard time communicating. With more players, there are more opinions, more confusion, and more disagreement. There can be a lack of unity and effort to work together within the legal system. One or both parents may experience extreme feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, or betrayal. Given these intense emotions, how can those two people be expected to communicate with each other about the children now and for years to come? Divorce is an injury to the security of an intact family unit. There is a disruption of the family's immediate functioning as well as their plans and hopes for the future. Divorce is the legal end to a marriage, but the co-parental relationship is a lifelong bond that will continue throughout many life-cycle events (Karpf & Shatz, 2000).

Co-Parenting and Adlerian Psychology

The co-parental relationship in high-conflict divorce tends to focus more on the emotionally charged reasons for behavior rather than trying to understand the purpose. Spouses in high-conflict divorces tend to distort reality in their perceptions of family circumstances. It is common for a parent who valued a spouse's role with the children during the marriage to devalue that role at the time of the divorce (Erlich, 2001). The things that were appreciated and admired during the marriage become too painful when the marriage ends, so they must be denied.

Dreikurs suggested that one person does not like or dislike another for his or her virtue or dislike a person for his or her faults. Instead, an emphasis on a person's positive qualities grows out of affection for that person, just as an emphasis on weakness grows out of rejection. This emphasis on the individual's weakness or negative trait provides an excuse for not communicating, negotiating, and resolving conflict (Carlson, Watts & Maniaci, 2006). The qualities that initially attract individuals to each other are basically the same factors that create discord and conflict and lead to divorce. When one partner was viewed mainly in positive terms

or as a mixture of good and bad features, he or she is now cast as all bad, lacking in redeeming features. Any human quality or trait can be perceived in a positive or negative way. What was once perceived as endearing may be perceived as weak during the emotionally charged divorce experience. The denial of the partner's positive features - as breadwinner, parent, lover - is also linked to the divorcing man or woman's often desperate need to maintain self-esteem when a love relationship fails. Feeling inadequate, ashamed, rejected, the divorcing partners often are driven to diminish each other in an attempt to recoup their self-esteem.

The legal system practically insists that parents are awarded joint custody to provide both parents the opportunity and right to remain involved in the major decisions and activities in a child's life. Although some agree that this is what is best for the children, it is more complicated than that. If the courts mandate sharing the parenting role of making decisions on finances, children, schedules, holidays and all of the hot-button topics that bring about conflict, then it is equally important for the couple to understand the underlying reasons for conflict. They need time to work through reasons for conflict, grieve, forgive if necessary, and find mutual respect and understanding for the other parent. Unresolved grief is a major contributing factor in high-conflict divorces. Allowing time for the divorcing couple to work through these factors may allow for improved co-parenting. It would benefit the divorcing couple if they each focused on the question, "How can I cope with this and move forward?" rather than, "How could they do this to me?" Conflict is a normative part of all relationships. One of the most difficult and stressful tasks of divorced parents is to redefine their co-parental relationship. "It is the severe, prolonged, and unresolved conflict between divorcing/divorced parents that is worrisome because of the potential for the co-parenting relationship to be taken over by conflict and lack of mutual support" (Bonach, 2005, p. 80).

Unable to cope with overwhelming feelings of grief, many individuals need to deny their attachment to their spouses. Because feelings of grief are aroused most acutely by an awareness of affection and appreciation for the spouse, such awareness must be denied (Erich, 2001). The grieving process for death or for loss of many kinds, including divorce, is inevitable. It is a process that a person must go through, however painful. It requires the people involved to come to terms with memories and let go of dreams for the future. It requires facing the overwhelming feelings of vulnerability, rejection, guilt, sorrow and pain.

The perceptions impacting co-parenting relationships include: perceived own level of adjustment since the separation/divorce; perception of the former partner's financial status since the separation/divorce; perceived remorsefulness of the former partner for his/her contribution to the separation/divorce; perception as to what extent the former partners blamed their ex-partner and themselves for the cause of the separation/divorce and to what extent they had forgiven their former partner; and perceptions of conflict prior to the separation/divorce (Bonach, 2005).

Perceived control over one's behavioral outcomes has been identified as an important determinant of one's response to stressful life events (Bay & Braver, 1990). Divorce has many issues that deal with control. Control, Superiority, Pleasing, and Comfort are number one priorities described by Bill Pew.

A set of convictions that a person gives precedence to: it is a value that takes precedence over other values. The number one priority follows what a person values most and is what he is likely to commit himself to. This commitment is always mistaken because of an "if only" absurdity. (Pew, 1976, p. 4)

Control, in divorce, helps avoid humiliation. Settlement negotiations with regard to visitation, child support, and spousal maintenance are the most obvious control issues. When

divorcing partners receive an outcome neither wants or chooses and has no control over, their freedom to do as they please is threatened and the process becomes adversarial with each party attempting to control the outcome.

The perceptions about who is at fault, who is adjusting better, who is sad and remorseful, and who has forgiven all are subject to interpretation. Each divorcing spouse, depending on how he or she perceives these outcomes, will experience reluctance and respond according to the meaning they attach to the perceived outcome. The meaning they attach to their perception can trigger convictions and mistaken convictions. For example, if one spouse perceives the divorce as the other spouse's fault, and that spouse is asking for shared custody of the children, the response may be, "No way. I did not choose this, so I will not share equal time with you." The spouse who earns the majority or all of the family's income, who is now responsible for what she perceives as an unfair amount of spousal maintenance, will respond with anger about having to support a person to whom she no longer want to be connected. Mistaken convictions about giving in or losing will leave little, if any, room for cooperation. Cooperation would mean responding such as: "Although I do not want this divorce, I will look at all the options and make decisions that are in the children's best interest."

Regardless of the perception, the interpretation, or any mistaken convictions attached to the perceptions, the divorcing spouse who perceives decisions as threatening or unfair, will add to the conflict by responding to a perceived lack of control over issues that are important to her.

Power inequality is another very important context of post-divorce conflict. The divorcing parent who uses the term "sole physical custody" to keep children from the other parent creates conflict and can damage what is in the children's best interests. The divorcing parent who uses financial security and power over the other parent, who cannot participate as a

financial equal, creates conflict and puts his desire to win or punish above the children's best interest. This can be seen as a vertical move to be "superior" by being "over" and "against" the other parent. When one parent succeeds in getting the other parent to submit or be controlled, the goal is achieved, and no further hostile actions need to be taken (Demby, 2009).

Another factor that contributes to how a person perceives the divorce situation is the initiator status. Research suggests that the initiators and non-initiators may differ on the amount of disturbance associated with the following emotional and psychological factors: pain, depression, anger, loneliness, rejection, blame, guilt, attachment, a sense of personal control, self-esteems, and relief (Buehler, 1987). The initiator and non-initiator will most likely have very different time tables and also different perceptions of events that can explain the difference in how they deal with the factors listed above. The initiator may have completed her grief work before initiating the divorce process.

It is also important to keep in mind that men and women tend to handle many of life's experiences in different ways. Men and women respond to loss, conflict, and divorce in different ways. For purposes of this paper, these findings will not be explored, but for understanding the importance of co-parenting it is helpful for the couples going through divorce, and the professionals working with these couples, to recognize that men and women will mourn their divorce differently (Baum, 2003).

When couples are involved in high-conflict there are usually specific reasons, actions, or beliefs that are keeping one or both partners from forgiving the other. Forgiveness has been defined in many ways. For divorcing parents who must maintain a co-parenting relationship despite all the pain and loss, forgiveness means admitting fault, empathizing with pain and asking for forgiveness. Forgiveness allows former partners' transition to a quality co-parenting

relationship marked by civil interactions, benevolent feelings towards one another, low interparental conflict, and mutual support of the other's parental role. Forgiveness involves freedom from being controlled by negative feelings towards the ex-spouse, a decreased desire to punish or retaliate, and benevolence or good will (Bonach & Sales, 2002).

A Person's Lifestyle

The overwhelming feelings of anger, shame, humiliation, and loss of self-esteem can be overwhelming and uncomfortable. How a person handles those feelings has a great deal to do with his personal lifestyle. "From the Adlerian perspective, differences in reaction to events are attributable to differences in lifestyle. We would therefore expect that individuals would vary in their grief response based on lifestyle" (Hartshorne, 2003, p. 146). The assumptions embedded in lifestyle may be confirmed by loss ("You can't count on people to stay around") or challenged by loss ("The world is a benevolent place"). As long as a person is in a favorable situation, her lifestyle cannot be seen clearly. In new situations, however, where he is confronted with difficulties, the style of life appears clearly and distinctly (Hartshorne, 2003).

Early Recollections

Adler's analysis of early recollections is probably the most direct and useful method of understanding clients' fictional life goals and the laws of movement that govern their attitudes and responses. Early recollections are a person's selected memories that serve as meanings of circumstances. The feelings triggered from those memories develop in ways that help people attain their fictional goal. An early recollection that has a feeling of anger, similar to the present anger involved in grieving a loss, may help a therapist identify mistaken convictions. Past feelings of anger may move a divorcing couple in a high-conflict divorce to cope in "unuseful" ways, which prevents them from overcoming obstacles in a "useful" manner.

Private Logic

Concerning lifestyle, Adler believed that people develop their own private logic. Private logic refers to a way that people interpret experiences and life, and what convictions and mistaken convictions they form, enhancing or handicapping their life. This private logic guides a person through life and through experiences. People are behaving and reacting to life events based on what they believe to be true and the personal meaning they give to an event. Divorce is often thought of as a negative event and, therefore, has negative meaning attached to the event. Divorce as a process of healing, grieving, and moving forward allows people to cope more effectively and avoid the conflict that the negative meaning most certainly brings. It is important to focus on realistic and positive perceptions like the qualities that brought a couple together, grieve the losses that come with divorce, and look ahead with hope of a new, yet very different, way of handling the situation.

When conflict is the center of divorce, so is anger. This means that behavior may not be working toward the better outcome, but working for the unrealistic, mistaken conviction. When one or both persons feel inadequate, then they are unable to see the realistic situation and find healthy ways of coping and working together for everyone involved. Usually the way a divorcing person interprets reality is uniquely different from the way others do. In fact, each spouse will, because of her own private logic, interpret her reality, based on her own perceptions of her soon to be divorced state, and not be able to see that her perceptions and interpretations can be mistaken. He will perceive his interpretation and those of the other in a light that is based on pain, fear and anger, rather than allowing himself to see that a disagreement in a divorce settlement or in rescheduling parenting time is just that, a disagreement. Disagreements that

need to be discussed and worked through together can, instead, trigger a mistaken conviction which alters reality and ignites further conflict.

The three main operations that take place in a person's lifestyle include: 1) biased apperceptions, 2) self-reinforcement, and 3) arrangement.

Biased Apperceptions

Biased apperceptions means that humans are biased in what they perceive. The way people perceive something creates their reality. From perceptions they create and attach meaning to events and they may be unaware of that meaning. When something unexpected occurs, such as divorce, the individuals may come to learn that their perceptions are biased and not facts, and then healing and learning may occur. It is also possible during the time of unexpected change, such as divorce, that not looking into mistaken convictions will prevent them from learning.

Biased apperceptions may create a "blindspot." "Blindspots" make it difficult for individuals to see any behaviors or efforts that correct their assumption. If the mistaken convictions were pointed out, the individuals with the "blindspot" would probably attempt to explain them away in a manner that would allow their biases to remain intact. "Once a specific fiction has become part of the individual's lifestyle, a process of selective attention to further experiences take place: the tendentious apperception. This means that a person, unconsciously but systematically, will direct their attention to what they want to perceive, and neglect aspects they want to ignore" (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 20).

Self-reinforcing

Another function of lifestyle is of being self-reinforcing. This means that people seek out what they already perceive to be true. Simply put, in a divorce situation with conflict, if a wife

feels betrayed by her husband, she may not only perceive that he is not honest about financial situations, but by self-reinforcing, she will look for ways to make that true and possibly even create situations to prove it. She may look at each financial discussion and decision as a betrayal to reinforce her perception that her husband is not ever honest about money. The impact that self-reinforcing has on the divorce process will enhance conflict and keep the cycle of self-reinforcing in constant motion.

When a couple goes through a divorce, one of the major areas of self-reinforcing is in regard to financial agreements. A husband who believes his wife was irresponsible with money during a marriage may be biased, in a function of lifestyle, by thinking that all women are shopaholics and that men should take care of the finances. A self-reinforcing function of lifestyle would then lead him, during divorce proceedings, to look for ways to prove that his wife is a shopaholic. If his wife has a family wedding to attend and she goes out to buy a new dress for the occasion, he may use that as a way to argue that she spends too much money on herself and that the amount of spousal maintenance is too high. Being angry about a dress for a wedding could very well be more about the pain of being separated from children, of having to move out of a home or about changing relationships. When pain is misplaced and misunderstood, anger may be the tool for revenge.

Arrangement

The third lifestyle function is called arrangement. If a self-reinforcing spouse looks for, and possibly even creates ways to prove expectations, they may arrange or prompt other people into behaviors that confirm what the divorcing person already perceives to be true. A wife who has perceived her husband to be a man who chooses work over family and children may plan events for the children, without prior discussion with her husband, and when he says he cannot

attend because of his work schedule, she can then be justified in her belief that once again work comes first over the kids. Arrangers provoke or arrange for events to happen that will give them further evidence to confirm their belief.

Purpose of Behavior

It is also important to take a look at behavior as it relates to lifestyle. Adlerians have rephrased the concept that it is important to look at what a person does, not what he or she says, to “Trust only movement.” If all behavior has a purpose, as Adler suggests, then acting out of grief can have a number of purposes. One purpose suggested by Adler is superiority. If one the husband or wife feels like he or she does not ever deserve to be treated badly, then even when their behavior has been one of dishonesty and betrayal, his or her grief can be overshadowed by an “I’ll show you” attitude. Superiority can be defensive when demanding that “No one can treat me badly, even if my behavior was bad.” The purpose of that behavior might be to avoid being wrong, which means she’s less and a failure. Failure would reduce his or her worth and self esteem and interfere with his or her striving for personal superiority (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Vertical striving, which is striving against the other, moves a person with a goal of personal superiority to participate in uncooperative ways and overlook the greater good to maintain being “better than.”

Life Tasks

The human response to grief in divorce can also be looked at by examining the life tasks: work, friendship, and love. By looking at all the parts of the divorcing couple’s lives that make them whole, insight as to how they respond to grief and high-conflict situations can be gained. This is called holism. Holism also means that activities in a person’s life tasks relate to one

another. The only way to understand a system is to understand that entire system. The whole cannot be understood by examining parts in isolation from the entire system (Strauch, 2003).

The divorcing spouse, whose movement is vertical superiority, is afraid to participate in a solution of life's problems for fear of loss of importance. Unlike vertical superiority, horizontal superiority embodies a well-developed social interest and is associated with viewing work as a contribution, friends as social support, and family as intimacy (Hartshorne, 2003). High-conflict divorce may be a result of underdeveloped life tasks. The three life tasks cannot be separated because a solution for one task affects the other two. Finding solutions for cooperation in one task impacts the others. High-conflict divorce is failure in the love task and can and will filter into families, friends and community, creating instability in one or in all tasks of life.

Social Interest

Gemeinschaftsgefühl is an Adlerian term that defines social interest. It is more than a feeling. It is an attitude toward life. If a person has a *mistaken* idea about achieving a positive state—an idea not aligned with *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*—then the awareness of his or her deficits may induce an “inferiority complex” that influences them to either withdraw completely from societal responsibilities or conversely to seek domination over others. Grief can be used as an expression of injustice. This inferiority probably existed before the marriage and the divorce is the stressor that triggered the inferiority complex. Such a person would not be operating by a true meaning of life according to Adler; his or her lifestyle would be based on what Adler termed a “private intelligence” that cannot be shared with or benefit others because it is not concerned with cooperation or outgoing concern. Given the superiority threatening the environment of marriage, this person's “private map of the world” would be one that exerts a negative influence on perception and reasoning based on mistaken conviction.

Reactions to grief always have a purpose, and understanding the purpose helps the therapist to understand the way the individual is managing his or her grief. Adlerians look at all symptomatology as having a purpose. It could be to maintain ambivalence, or affiliation, or dependence. Lifestyle reflects movement, and grief should be viewed in this context. How the individual perceives loss is related to lifestyle and social interest. Grief must be understood in terms of the expectations of society and the private logic and mistaken convictions that individuals bring to their experience (Hartshorne, 2003).

The Adlerian principle of understanding social interest, its impact on lifestyle, and the way an individual responds to reality and conflict can be valuable to the divorcing couple as they struggle through the pain and frustration of divorce. Social interest also greatly impacts the co-parenting relationship. “The term social interest denotes the innate aptitude through which the individual becomes responsive to reality, which is primarily a social situation” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 133). The reality of divorce for both parents can be daunting. Child custody, financial decisions, and post divorce communication are common factors that contribute to high conflict and result in difficult adjustment for children and parents. Empathy, sympathy and understanding, all of which are components of social interest, can and ideally could be the attitude that one parent can take into the high-conflict divorce, regardless of the co-parenting partner.

Consider the fact that high-conflict divorce may be a result of a husband’s developed social interest and a wife’s underdeveloped social interest, or vice versa, where he or she lacks the empathy to see, hear and feel things that the ex-spouse or children may see, hear, and feel. When one or both of the divorcing partners feel threatened, safeguarding will take place in order to protect their self-esteem. A person may withdraw from family to avoid the problem that exists

and avoid feelings of failure. Another way of safe guarding is to continue to diminish the quality of the past relationship in order to reduce feelings of loss in the divorce process. This does not allow for proper grieving and may promote higher levels of on-going conflict.

Social Interest will also affect a person's appraisal of the divorce. Hope for the future, even in the midst of pain and hurt, can come from a place of belonging and feeling closely tied to a community. Those who are unsure of their degree of acceptance by a group may express their grief in either a highly conventional or an unconventional manner. In this way they express the desire to belong or the desire to get even or show their disdain for the group (Hartshorne, 2003). Social Interest is also a barometer for empathy. High-conflict divorce challenges each participant "to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another," which defines the social feeling of social interest (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 135).

Resolving Grief and Conflict

Resolving grief is an important part of the the divorce process. How a person responds to the loss of the original family system will have an enormous impact on the divorcing couple and their children. Unresolved grief prolongs and promotes conflict. On going conflict does not allow for productive and cooperative co-parenting. Working through the stages of grief and understanding how a person's lifestyle impacts the amount of conflict a family experiences are important components for legal professionals and mental health professionals to understand when working with the high-conflict divorcing couples.

While families of divorce can benefit from early intervention to reduce levels of parental conflict and potential litigation, the ability to help divorcing parents co-parent in a civil and cooperative manner requires greater understanding of factors that impact their post-divorce

parenting (Banach & Sales, 2002). Resolving conflict and grief will provide an environment of hope over hostility, cooperation over control, and acceptance over animosity.

Often times one partner may not want to, or be able to, move out of the cycle of conflict and unresolved grief. Even though one person's lifestyle may not allow for it, it is important for the other person to continue on a path of resolving conflict and grief. Professionals should encourage individuals to take those steps for the sake of their children and for their own hope for a new future.

“It takes two to tango” may not be a true statement in all cases of high-conflict divorce. This concept encourages the belief that one person cannot drive a post-divorce conflict, and that such conflict is more or less equally the responsibility of both parties (Friedman, 2004). It is important for lawyers, mediators, custody evaluators and the court to understand that it is possible for one divorcing person to be operating in a way that promotes conflict and then the other person must respond.

In the article, *The So-Called High-Conflict Couple: A Closer Look*, Friedman describes the familiar story of conflict between two children on a playground. One child repeatedly provokes or even physically attacks another and a fight starts. Teachers and parents intervene, asking questions, trying to figure out who started it. But because they are not able to know for sure, both are punished. For the one who was provoked and who finally responded, being punished as an equal participant in the conflict is a miscarriage of justice (Friedman, 2004).

High-conflict post-divorce is generally assumed to be a shared interaction between two angry, culpable parents. Participants in clinical, mediation, and arbitration in high-conflict divorce cases, indicate that it is not uncommon to find one enraged or defiant parent and a second parent who no longer harbors anger, has emotionally disengaged, and attempts to avoid

or mute conflict that involves a child (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Usually the calmness on the part of the second parent can trigger further anger for the first parent. Life moves us toward overcoming, toward perfection, toward superiority, toward success. Unresolved grief is uniquely expressed and the uniqueness of what an individual thinks or feels with regard to success (as an acceptable life goal) may impact the calmness or anger brought out in individuals. Whether a person is attempting to recoup self-esteem or is avoiding solutions to the problems by side-stepping them to avoid defeat, the inability to cooperate and contribute continues the cycle of high-conflict.

It is possible for one spouse to have the courage to grieve the loss experienced in divorce and reduce conflict for himself or herself, and for the children. By applying Adlerian techniques to the healing and legal process, the divorcing spouse, with or without the cooperation of the other, can reduce the amount of conflict allowed into his or her own life and into the lives of their children.

There is a legal and emotional process of divorce and each person enters into the legal and emotional process with his or her own goal, his or her own beliefs, and purpose for behavior. The reasons a person reacts and acts a certain way tells a great deal about his or her social context and what that divorcing person's priorities are. An Adlerian approach to reducing conflict allows helping professionals the opportunity to educate couples on grief in divorce. It encourages cooperative communication that allows opportunities for building trust, which leads to positive co-parenting. An Adlerian approach will emphasize the goal of seeking decisions that serve the best interest of the divorcing partners and their children.

Adlerian Approach to Reducing Conflict in Mediation or Litigation

Mediation has become the trend for couples who are divorcing. The definitions included in many divorce mediation articles, like many articles written about Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, include the terms "choice," "cooperation," "equality," "respect," "best interest," and "encouragement." And, although mediation has the capacity to help couples move through a difficult process defined by the terms just listed, mediation is not for everyone. The pitfalls of mediation are most apparent when there is a lack of equal 'bargaining capacity' of the parties. This creates a high risk of one or both not having full information regarding their legal rights. Whether the Adlerian approach to working through the divorce process occurs with the divorcing couple, or with only one of the individuals, the process focuses on the key elements that embody Adlerian therapy.

The psychology and the process of mediation both deal with the social context, and the social embeddedness of people. The Adlerian mental health professional and mediators both recognize the purposiveness of behavior, and although his or her reactions for doing so differ, both share the central philosophical attitudes of mutual respect and social equality. Couples or individuals who take responsibility for their own actions and see beyond the settlement issues also take ownership of the feelings and actions that get in the way of mediating or settling their divorce. By learning to self-regulate the divorced individuals have the tools to help with any hot-button issues that may arise in the future.

There are many similarities in the the mediation process and Adlerian therapy. An Adlerian approach to mediation would be to emphasize purpose, not cause. The cause of the hatred one divorcing spouse may feel toward another is not important. The purpose that the

hatred serves that is key to approaching how mediation or therapy can help the angry couple or individual move forward.

An Adlerian mediator, like a therapist, would emphasize movement, not description, by encouraging the divorcing person or couple to become aware of their own actions, not focusing on the actions of other. Brenda Even writes about Divorce Mediation and states that the single most important element of mediation and Adlerian therapy is the belief in social interest and striving toward the mutually agreed upon goal of resolution (Even, 1989).

Experts from both the legal and mental health fields have written that the goal of the family law system should be to provide parents the tools to: “reduce conflict, assure physical security, provide adequate support services to reduce harm to children, and to enable the family to manage its own affairs” (Deutsch, 2008, p. 43).

Adlerian counselors working with couples or individuals in high conflict divorce would help their clients a great deal by explaining Dreikurs’ four principles of conflict resolution pertaining to divorce mediation (Huber, 1983).

- Create mutual respect. Mutual respect involves acknowledging that the first step in resolving conflict lies in understanding and accepting each other’s point of view and the value of mutual, not individual, “winning.”
- Pinpoint the issue. Behind more serious conflict there will be a perceived threat to personal status or prestige, a concern with who is right, who might be treated unfairly, or who is winning or losing. Constant refocus on “the goal” and “the issue” to be resolved is necessary.

- Seek areas of agreement. Fighting is an agreement to fight. Divorcing partners can learn rational procedures which will continue between them after the mediation and divorce are completed.
- Mutually participate in decision making. Partners do not give up the power to make decisions, but instead, under the guidance of an impartial mediator, decide for themselves.

Added to Dreikurs' insight on the process it is important to review the objectives of resolving grief. William Worden (1982) outlined four primary objectives common to grief resolution. These objectives can allow a family the opportunity to work through the grief process together. One or both parents can work through grief with the children.

1. Acknowledge the reality of the loss with clear, open communication. Parent(s) sit down with the children and present the information about the separation and divorce. Parents need to help the children process the information not only in present time, but for the days, weeks, months and years ahead.
2. Share experiences of the pain of grief. Talk about pain, express mutual understanding of feelings and show acceptance of a range of emotions, such as disappointment, helplessness, relief, guilt and anger.
3. Discuss ways that the family system will be reorganized and how new relationships will look. Delegate new roles and discuss functions and ability to cope with new disorganization. Create a "no-rules" atmosphere as you work through the reorganization of family.

4. Family goals and relationships should be reinvented and redirected with the need for understanding that it may take one full year for adaptation, openness and flexibility of the family system.

The decisions, reactions and behaviors associated with grief and high-conflict divorce can have lasting effects on the individuals and the children involved. The legal and emotional support a divorcing couple receives in the divorce process can influence the outcome of their future. Couples need to understand that grief is a part of divorce and that there are multiple losses associated with the break-up of a marriage. Unresolved grief will keep the cycle of conflict going and will not allow the divorcing couple to focus on the positive attributes of their parenting qualities. The unresolved grief will not allow them to focus on the family as a whole, but rather keeps them focused on the negativity of their relationship.

Couples who are involved in high-conflict divorce situations should ask themselves the question, "How would my life be different if I did not have this problem? What would I be able to do differently?" Grief is not the problem. Understanding and working through grief is necessary to deal with the problem. The problem is conflict. Imagine life after divorce without high-conflict. Imagine a life that focuses on working for the betterment of the family as a whole, improved co-parenting skills, understanding the feelings associated with pain and loss and accepting a new life after divorce. Understanding grief and the impact that high-conflict divorce can have on a person and a family is crucial for all involved in the process. When parents work together without rehashing old animosities, when they cooperate, show care and commitment to the co-parenting relationship, and they take responsibility for their own feelings, reactions and behaviors, they demonstrate how divorce can be achieved with less conflict and potential growth.

All divorcing couples have opportunities to make choices that can diminish the level of conflict and provide groundwork for a positive future.

Conclusion and Learning

Divorce can be a painful and highly conflictual journey. There are purposeful choices and effective ways to navigate through the process. It is important to choose to work with professionals who encourage ways of reaching decisions that do not ignite further animosity, and reduce the emotional difficulties that are present when people are deciding to divorce. This is the groundwork for a productive and respectful dissolution of a marriage.

I started attending classes at Adler a few weeks after I had signed my own divorce papers. Being at Adler during that difficult time in my life was incredibly rewarding, emotional, and life changing. I learned things about myself through the training and learning experience at Adler. The Adlerian tools and techniques gave me insight into, and understanding of, my own lifestyle and my own way of dealing with my divorce and my grief. I realized that my pleasing personality, although it feels normal, was also the reason I denied problems in my marriage and forgave behaviors that I knew were unacceptable.

My experience at Adler, writing this paper, the mediation, parenting consulting, early neutral evaluation training, as well as my experience working with others going through divorce, has given me the foundation to start working in this field.

The divorce rate is high and families are suffering and hurting. My goal is to help people find the courage to grieve and understand their part in the divorce. And through counseling and education, mediation, and social early neutral evaluations, I will help them find ways to move forward, legally and emotionally, keeping the children's best interest at heart. My hypothesis is personally and professionally evident. If individuals allow time to grieve the losses of divorce,

then conflict will be reduced, and that will allow them to move forward into a new life filled with opportunities for hope and growth.

Positive cooperation, which leads to positive co-parenting, requires two people working toward a common goal. When the goal is to “win” or to “get the children” or to “keep the money,” it puts one person against the other. When a marriage ends legally, the emotional divorce, which includes conflict, often times continues. In order for couples to achieve the goal of positive cooperation they will each need to grieve the losses in divorce, and they will each need to understand that change begins with oneself and not with one’s partner. Their beliefs, behaviors, and ways of responding to each other can create the conflictual divorce. Understanding their beliefs, behaviors, and finding better ways to respond to each other can create a cooperative divorce. The common goal of “children’s best interest, grieving the losses of divorce, and reducing conflict” would allow cooperation, empathy, understanding, and the original family system would move toward cooperation and healing.

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