

# Reconceptualizing High-Conflict Divorce as a Maladaptive Adult Attachment Response

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Attachment theory has recently been used as a framework for exploring specific processes in couple relationships. This conceptual article explores assessment and treatment options for high-conflict parents that are consistent with adult attachment theory. Divorce affects a significant number of families, but only a small portion of divorces are considered "high conflict." For these parents, fear of abandonment, fear of loss, and fear of being devalued increases both boundary ambiguity and maladaptive emotional responses post divorce. Implications for practice are proposed, including the early identification of high-conflict tactics as attachment behaviors and more emotionally focused collaboration between mental health professionals and lawyers to help recognize and respond to unresolved emotional issues when dealing with high-conflict families.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Adult attachment theory provides a framework for considering the emotional commotion that parents bring into family law matters.
- Clinical practice should focus on helping parents achieve attachment reparation and new attachment scripts so parents are no longer tied to the wrongs of the past.

Contemporary couples entering into marriage or an intimate adult partnership consider romantic love sacrosanct to their union. Coontz (2006) suggests that in Western societies, the era of marrying strategically for economic or sociopolitical advancement has long been supplanted by the ideal that marriages are primarily related to emotional bonding. Despite the fact that romantic love and marriage are inextricably linked within modern society, only recently have theorists and researchers applied attachment theory to the study of romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). By conceptualizing marriage and adult partnering as an emotional enterprise, logic prevails that the dissolution of adult romantic relationships should also be conceptualized as an emotionally laden exercise. Viewing separation through the lens of attachment theory may be particularly helpful to understand the challenges faced by separating parents who become embroiled in high conflict, and cannot completely "uncouple" due to their shared parenting responsibilities. With an attachment framework, this article will consider the boundary ambiguity that lingers between parents and the influence this has on keeping the parents involved in conflict.

### **Separation and Conflict**

Separation and divorce are realities of North American society. Each year in Canada and the United States, a

significant number of marriages, common-law relationships, and committed intimate adult partnerships end in separation or divorce. In Canada, more than 70,000 couples divorced in 2003 (Statistics Canada, 2005). In America, over 1 million couples divorced during the same period of time (Munson & Sutton, 2006). National divorce rates have remained static for several years, but should be considered conservative estimates that may not represent the true scope of the issue. Actual separation rates may be higher than those reported in national statistics because divorce rates do not account for relationships not legally recognized as marriages, nor do they enumerate partners who separate but never formally register for a divorce.

Most separating parents are able to work through their conflicts and successfully transition from an adult love relationship with their ex-partner to an amicable coparenting relationship that focuses on the well-being of their shared children (Ahrons, 2004; Kelly, 2000). However, adjusting to the changing relationship context is more difficult for others. Approximately 20–25% of couples display negative behaviors toward their ex-spouse, engage in interparental conflict, and/or make attempts to undermine the other parent's relationship with the children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Interparental conflict is typical in the majority of divorces that involve children (Kelly, 2000) due largely to the fact that couples cannot simply cease contact. Conflict can be an anticipated outcome of the stressors ex-spouses face when establishing their new way of relating to each other, while determining or implementing child custody and access arrangements and finances. Even harmonious separations where couples have managed to negotiate workable, civilized, and even friendly post couple relations generally pass through an initial phase of hostility and conflict between the ex-partners (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hopper, 2001).

At first blush, issues associated with high-conflict cases may simply appear to be an extension (or extreme form)

of the conflict that typically arises in most divorces. However, newly emerging evidence suggests that this type of intense and intractable conflict may be qualitatively different from other conflictive separations (Kelly, 2000; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Saini, 2007). Approximately 10% of all separations falls into the category of high conflict, characterized by severe anger and distrust of the ex-partner, protracted litigation, and higher than usual rates of nonpayment of child support (Kelly, 2000). The occurrence of interparental conflict is of the utmost importance as it is the single best predictor of child and parent maladjustment following separation (Amato & Keith, 1991). Emerging research suggests that high conflict can be demarcated from other conflictive divorces, not only by the intensity and duration of the conflict, but also by the underlying factors that likely precipitate and perpetuate the conflict between ex-partners, including factors pertaining to attachment (Kelly, 2000; Sandler et al., 2008; Saini, 2007).

## Underlying Factors of Ex-Spouse Conflict

### **Adult Attachment**

Building on the substantive body of theory and research from the field of childhood attachment, several theorists (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver & Hazan, 1988) have postulated that adult romantic relationships develop and are maintained according to many of the same principles that shape the nature of the early parent-child attachment relationship. In 1987, Hazan and Shaver shored up this hypothesis with research showing that major attachment patterns described by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978; e.g., secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent) were conceptually similar to typologies of love proposed to explain the observed variability in the way adults approached love relationships. This, along with other findings (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), have lead theorists to opine that adult romantic relationships such as marriages are not only consonant with attachment relationships, but are indeed attachment relationships. This view is consistent with Bowlby's (1994) assertion that the need for attachment is an essential component of the human experience "from the cradle to the grave" (p. 129) and marriage (adult partnering) is an affectional bond in which the influence of attachment history is most likely to be manifested.

Forming an attachment bond within an adult love relationship likely occurs over time and is contingent on many factors including the proximity to the other person, the relative level of emotional dependability and security within interactions, and the shared meaning created by the partners about the relationship (Eckstein, Leventhal, Bentley, & Kelley, 1999). These interpersonal factors are also believed to be greatly influenced by the early attachment experiences and internal working model of both

partners. When people form new relationships, they rely partly on previous expectations about how others are likely to behave and feel toward them. In effect, attachment styles can be seen as "building blocks of interpersonal relationships" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1989, p. 792).

Overall, the process of developing an adult attachment relationship is believed to closely approximate the sequence of formative steps involved in infant attachment and can result in similar individual differences in the attachment responses (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Adult attachment is even believed to be governed by the same neurobiological systems integral to the early parent-child attachment relationship (Fralely & Shaver, 2000), including the fear system of the brain, at the heart of which sits the amygdala (LeDoux, 1996). The fear system detects danger, such as threats of abandonment or loss, and produces a rapid response that maximizes the probability of surviving the dangerous situation in the most beneficial way (LeDoux, 1996). LeDoux suggests that today's adults have traded fears of the jungle for contemporary fears, such as loss of a key relationship and loneliness. These fears of being alone may be especially weighty if they recapitulate emotional experiences from childhood attachment experiences.

The adult romantic relationship is hypothesized to function as a base for emotional security in a manner consistent with the early parent-child attachment relationship. For example, just as children turn to their parents in times of distress and monitor their parents' availability in meeting their needs, adults have similar responses with their romantic partners (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Adult *attachment behaviors*, the near automated, largely unconscious actions stemming from attachment threats or injuries, will likely differ from those presented in childhood, but remain consistent to the fight, flight, or freeze phenomenon (Marks, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

There are key differences between childhood and adult attachment relationships and there are a variety of features that make adult attachment relationships unique from other adult relationships (Weiss, 1991). Adult attachment relationships differ from child-caregiver attachments primarily in that the adult relationship thrives on mutual emotional dependence and reciprocal caregiving where spouses take turns responding to the distress or fear of their partner (Fralely & Shaver, 2000). Secure parent-child attachment relationships are typified by the caregiver unilaterally attending to the needs of the child. Fralely and Shaver (2000) distinguish adult attachment relationships from other adult relations on three grounds. First, an attachment bond in adulthood is marked by the tendency of an individual to remain in close contact with the attachment figure and to use the figure as a target of proximity maintenance. When separation from the other occurs, the individual is temporarily met with some degree of distress and protest. Second, an attachment figure

is used as a safe haven during times of distress, such as illness, danger, or threat. Third, an attachment figure is relied upon as a source base for exploration. Therefore, the presence of the attachment figure promotes feelings of security and confidence, thereby facilitating unconstrained exploration. These three features, according to Fraley and Shaver (2000), are transferred from one attachment figure to another, with proximity maintenance being transferred first, followed by safe haven, and, finally, a secure base is developed. This pattern of transfer corresponds to the stages of attachment development suggested by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978), which includes *pre-attachment*, *attachment in the making*, and *clear-cut attachment*. Fraley and Davis (1997) suggest that this process of forming an adult attachment with a romantic partner has shown to take approximately two years, on average, to fully develop.

### **Attachment, Separation, and Divorce**

Recently, interest has developed in studying the link between adult attachment and issues related to separation and divorce (Barron, 2000; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Many couples who dissolve their romantic relationships through separation or divorce continue to experience a sense of being tied to their ex-spouse, as well as a “profound sense of sadness and confusion at the loss of the relationship regardless of what existed objectively” (Berman, 1988, p. 496). Weiss (1991) explains the phenomenon by stating that once individuals have been significantly bonded, love may erode but attachment persists and occasionally resists dissolution, even in the face of hurt and anger. Attachment to an ex-partner can persist long after the divorce (Kitson, 1982; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) regardless of who initiated the separation, the level of happiness and unhappiness within the previous union, or the availability of alternative romantic relationships in the post-separation context (Weiss, 1991). Once attachment has formed, this bond may even outlive the commitment to the relationship (Weiss, 1991).

Because most people experience only a few significant attachments throughout their lives and feel intense distress when those attachments are lost (Berman, 1988), it is understandable that attachment bonds do not immediately dissipate for both ex-partners upon the enactment of a separation agreement or divorce decree. For some couples, the process of separation can evoke strong emotions such as sadness, hurt, humiliation, and fear of abandonment. When under threat of abandonment, the fear centre of the brain, the amygdala and HPA axis, is activated. These faculties are emotionally driven, involving little or no cognitive reflection in producing feelings and emotional memories with an atemporal quality. Thus, the feelings from years past will feel as pronounced and overwhelming in present day, as ever they did. This emotionally laden process can trigger attachment needs and

highly automated attachment behaviors, such as proximity seeking or frightening angry outbursts that precipitate and perpetuate conflict between ex-spouses (Hopper, 2001), in some cases leading to high conflict. When fear-evoking stimuli are registered by the amygdala, an emotional reaction will be triggered and an individual can easily find themselves in “the throes of an emotional state that exists for reasons that [they] do not quite understand” (LeDoux, 1996, p. 203).

### **Attachment and High Conflict**

As the context of the adult romantic relationship changes during the separation process and ex-spouses forge a new manner of interacting as coparents, behavior patterns considered highly adaptive while married, such as proximity seeking and relying on a partner for emotional stability, become highly maladaptive following the separation or divorce (Bowlby, 1969; Johnson & Whiffen, 1999). Navigating the changing emotional landscape of a relationship with an ex-partner during the process of separation may be greatly influenced by the ability of each ex-spouse to emotionally cope with the perceived or real loss of an attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1969). Individuals with a fearful/disorganized attachment style may be less able—relative to securely attached individuals—to cope with or recognize their attachment needs during this difficult transitional period.

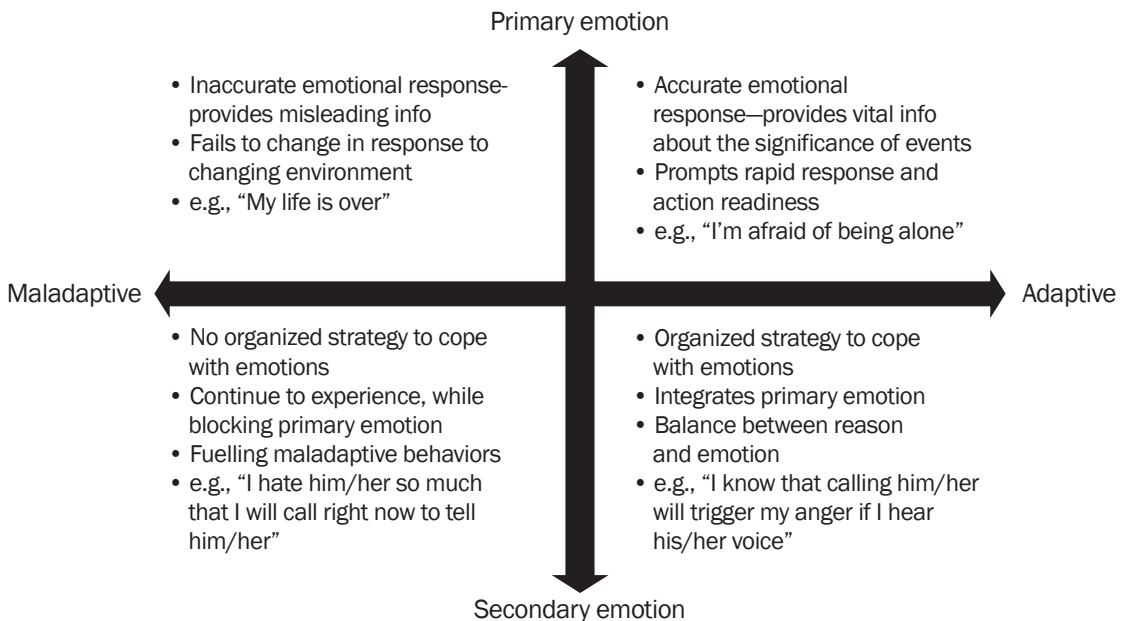
Smouldering relations between ex-spouses, common to divorce, often become raging infernos in high conflict due to the poor emotional coping resources associated with fearful/disorganized attachment of one or both spouses (Saini, 2007). Lazarus (1966, 1991) defines emotional coping as the ability of an individual to consciously and rationally apply voluntary actions to remediate their situation once they become aware that they are in the midst of an involuntarily elicited emotional reaction. In high conflict, one or both ex-spouses may have little awareness that their attachment history and attachment needs are contributing to being “stuck” in negative emotional and behavioral patterns (Ahrons, 2004; Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006) underpinning the conflict with their ex-spouse. It is highly possible that one or both parties have taken for granted that their ex-spouse is an attachment figure and therefore fails to recognize separation has given rise to deep rooted fears triggering attachment behaviors. Weiss (1991) states that once the reciprocity of the partner’s attachment is developed, it is often taken for granted. When an attachment figure is available and responsive, couples feel secure but remain relatively unaware of the complex emotional and psychological operations taking place in the bonding. With the loss of such an attachment figure, each individual in the couple relationship “will likely feel torn apart, as though the emotional threads have been unravelled” (Josselson, 1992, p. 57).

The process of divorce evokes numerous conflicting and confusing emotions due to the disruption and loss of strong emotional bonds established within the marriage (Johnston, Roseby, & Keunhle, 2009). Emotions are especially relevant for attachment as they play a key role in organizing attachment behaviors and determining how the self and others are experienced in an intimate relationship (Johnson & Whiffen, 1999). On the surface of high-conflict cases, the most apparent emotion is anger. Closer inspection often reveals that the anger experienced by one or both ex-partners may be fuelled by powerful fears closely associated with the individual’s attachment experiences. Emotions, generally viewed as fundamental adaptive resources (Frijda, 1986; Oatley & Jenkins, 1992), can also become maladaptive when they cease to provide meaningful information or help an individual effectively problem solve (Pos & Greenberg, 2007). Along these lines, emotions are often categorized as primary (also termed “basic”) or secondary, and adaptive or maladaptive.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although the terms *emotions* and *feelings* are commonly used interchangeably, the current discussion views them as distinct phenomena. Emotions are viewed as having a biological basis (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996) operating principally at an unconscious level and involving multiple brain systems (LeDoux, 1996). Feelings are the symbolic representation in the working memory of subsymbolic emotional counterparts and are highly similar to conscious thought (LeDoux, 1996). Thus, experiencing the emotion of fear and feeling scared are related but importantly different constructs. The interest in the current article focuses on individuals involved in high conflict who experience deep-rooted fears.

**Primary emotions.** These emotions are typically defined as the person’s most fundamental, direct, initial, and immediate reaction to a situation (LeDoux, 1996). Although several lists of basic emotions exist (Izzard, 1977; Johnson-Laird & Oakly, 1992), LeDoux (1996) suggests distilling the list to four basic emotions: fear, anger, disgust, and joy. Primary emotions are adaptive when they act to motivate the individual, prompt changes of action readiness, and provide vital information about the significance of situations leading to rapid response (Frijda, 1986; Izard, 1991; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). Primary emotions can be experienced as maladaptive when they arise directly in response to the environment, but inaccurately reflect the true nature of the individual’s encounter with their environment (Elliott & Greenberg, 2007) or fail to change in response to the changing environmental circumstances (Greenberg, 2006; Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006). Fear appears to be the core facet of maladaptive emotional experience, often developing from early traumatic experiences (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2006). Primary maladaptive emotional responses such as fear typically involve over-learned responses (Pos & Greenberg, 2007) consistent with attachment experiences. Emotional coping procedures, typically triggered by primary emotions (Lazarus, 1999) such as proximity seeking, which seemed adaptive in the past, become maladaptive when the context changes (Pos & Greenberg, 2007), a process exemplified during conflictive separation or divorce (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.** Conflict and coping in context: Relationship between primary and secondary emotions with maladaptive and adaptive responses.



Note. Figure rendering based on material in “The Essence of Process-Experiential/Emotion-Focused Therapy,” by R. Elliott & L. S. Greenberg, 2007, *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 61, pp. 241–254.

An ex-partner with a fearful/disorganized attachment style may experience ongoing fears of abandonment that persist despite changes in their relationships and interpersonal exchanges (Greenburg, 2006). In a sense, their emotional responses, likely guided by their internal working model and fear system, are hyper vigilant to rejection, leading to chronic fears and relational stress. When faced with the actual abandonment associated with the separation process, these individuals often cope poorly with their fear-based emotions, more often experiencing this primary emotion in a secondary manner as anger (see Figure 2).

**Secondary emotions.** Defined as emotional responses to the presence of primary emotions (Elliott & Greenberg, 2007; Pos & Greenberg, 2007), secondary emotions are the emotional responses an individual has to thoughts or feelings about the primary emotion, rather than a response to the environment (Greenberg, 2006). For example, in high-conflict cases, the ex-partner with fearful/disorganized attachment patterns frequently becomes consumed by anger, displaying minimal awareness that the origin of this feeling lies deep in fears of abandonment and was triggered by the separation proceedings. This anger typically persists, as these individuals have historically wielded no organized strategy to cope with these emotions. These individuals cope in a maladaptive manner by inappropriately continuing to seek the proximity of their ex-partner via the family court system or engaging their ex-partners in anger-fueled encounters that are often abusive in a futile attempt to process their emotions. With constant exposure to abusive interactions, the other ex-partner typically experiences anger as a primary adaptive emotion (Elliott & Greenberg, 2007), thus continuing the maladaptive cycle of high conflict.

## Limitations of the Conceptual Framework

The attachment system may not activate in all relationships where separation occurs, especially if the couple separated during pre-attachment formation. External variables may also influence ongoing conflict between parents. For example, conflict may arise from the battle for resources propagated by gendered power differentials (Hopper, 2001). Women often experience a sharp decline in income compared to men after divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Thus, attachment realignment alone may not create positive divorce adjustment if one ex-partner is faced with economic disadvantages and challenges shaped within a broader patriarchal sociopolitical context.

Conflict can also be exacerbated by the adversarial nature of the family court system used to resolve parental disputes (Hopper, 2001). Rather than resolving conflict, parents can use court procedures (e.g., writing affidavits, delaying court appearances, hiring an aggressive lawyer, etc.) to further prolong the resolution of parenting plans and to maintain conflict-based behaviors. Family courts are not set up to address underlying attachment needs, but instead are structured with vigilant policing required to keep emotions from creeping into the application of the law (Maroney, 2006). When family court systems do respond to high-conflict cases, there is a tendency to educate parents about their behaviors (e.g. parent information sessions) rather than address the underlying emotional needs of each parent, keeping them stuck in maladaptive conflict behaviors.

Separation seldom involves merely the ex-partners and their children. Johnston, Roseby, and Keunhle (2009) remark that child custody disputes can quickly spread and encompass the social networks of the couple, result-

**FIGURE 2.** *Emotional iceberg: Overview of high-conflict behaviors, surface (visible) emotions, and deeper (hidden) emotions.*



ing in “tribal warfare” where extended family members, new partners, mental health professionals, attorneys, and even judges become overly aligned with a parent, further entrenching the conflict. A parent can also feel so obligated to their relatives’ views of the separation that any attempt to realign interactional cycles with their former partner is sabotaged in order to “save face” in the eyes of family members and friends.

Perhaps no one theory is adequately comprehensive to address all variables that influence high-conflict separation, so it is imperative that mental health professionals embrace models that draw on multiple theories (Heise, 1998). Given the complexity of high-conflict separation, attachment theory provides an important framework for understanding the emotional commotion experienced by high-conflict families.

## Implications for Practice

### *Clinical Interventions*

Without a clear conceptual model to guide clinical practice with high-conflict families, custody evaluators, mediators, parenting coordinators, mental health professionals, and the legal community are not adequately equipped to assess and respond to the ongoing sabotaging, badmouthing, arguing, blaming, and litigating between high-conflict parents (Maroney, 2006; Saini, 2007). In attempts to resolve conflict between parents struggling to adjust to the breakdown of the adult relationship, clinical interventions have historically included notions of *uncoupling*, which involves a complete dissolution of the emotional relationship between the former partners (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Because emotions are an omnipresent human capacity used to inform people of their surroundings and needs (Frijda, 1986), and because many separated couples face the practical need to interact for effective coparenting, it is unrealistic to seek an absolute emotional dissolution between separated partners.

Attachment theory provides a framework for mental health professionals to conceptualize high conflict in terms of adult attachment behaviors or responses to feared or actual loss or separation from an adult attachment figure (e.g., ex-partner). Behavioral and emotional patterns consistent with high-conflict separation are represented in an attachment-based model that is highly influenced by contextual factors. Within this approach, emotional and behavioral patterns deemed adaptive during the couple relationship, such as proximity seeking, can be understood as maladaptive in the post-divorce context (Greenberg, 2006). High-conflict separation is indicative of emotional and psychological responses to feelings of hurt, shame, or humiliation attributed to the actions of the ex-partner or to the separation process itself (Hopper, 2001); a concept closely aligned to what Johnson, Makinen, and Millikin (2001) refer to as at-

tachment injury. Perceiving post separation discord as an attachment-related response yields particular insight into understanding the nature of the conflict associated with high-conflict cases.

Individuals involved in high-conflict separation are not so much angry at their ex-spouses as they are angry at feeling strong fear-based emotions and/or angry at encountering the hostile, abusive *actions* of their ex-partners. Although abusive acts should not be minimized and ex-partners should always be held accountable to deal with their emotions and actions in a responsible manner (Jenkins, 1990), it is vital to remember that these individuals are not monsters. These individuals require support to access primary emotions, such as their fears, while helping them to regulate and transform their secondary maladaptive emotions (Greenberg, 2006).

Clinical interventions with high-conflict families should focus on assisting parents to be better equipped to gain conscious insight into emotional patterns when “triggered” into attachment behaviors. Ultimately the goal is to help high-conflict parents find the balance between emotion and reason by integrating “head with hearts” (Greenberg, 2006) and to achieve attachment reparation and new attachment scripts so parents are no longer tied to the wrongs of the past.

### *Family Law*

Ex-partners who are able to adapt to the changing context of separation may benefit from education and information about the process of the family courts and the various alternatives to litigation. But emotion-based interventions (e.g., therapeutic mediation, emotionally-focused parent education, specialized coordination) may be better suited to help high-conflict parents resolve ongoing disruptions post separation. For these parents, intellectual understanding of the separation process itself may not be enough to change emotions. Interventions for high-conflict parents should be tailored to help parents improve emotional clarity, normalize the process of separation, and identify when further services are needed to help work through feelings of anger, disappointment, and loss in a timely manner to re-establish healthy relationships with their ex-partners and their children. By working through interpersonal problems, clinical practice with parents should focus on building sensitivity, creating a greater sense of attunement and clarity of feelings, and helping parents develop healthy problem solving and conflict-management skills so that they are provided the needed tools to cope, manage, and grow from the separation experience.

Mental health practitioners and legal professionals should work collaboratively to provide a comprehensive assessment of the emotional needs of separating parents within the context of family law. Mental health professionals can bring an emotional lens to family law

matters, help move beyond conflict behaviors, and focus on the feelings that contribute to the conflict. A collaborative effort can also assist in developing a more comprehensive assessment for violence, maltreatment, mental health disorders, and substance abuse by considering a variety of risk factors that may be present, including the presence of an attachment injury by one or both parents.

The first step in emotional regulation is emotional awareness. Mental health professionals working from an emotionally focused approach can assist lawyers in helping to uncover maladaptive emotional patterns and unaddressed attachment needs experienced by the parents involved in litigation. Rather than upholding the adversarial context of family law, emotionally focused collaborative efforts should provide a safe haven for parents to build emotional awareness of their reactions and responses related to the litigation process (e.g., strategies for coping with receiving a hurtful affidavit from the other parent). By framing reactions within an attachment framework, mental health professionals can help clients reorganize their beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and expectations toward their former partners, their children, and themselves to facilitate adaptive responses to this complex life transition.

The frequency of high-conflict parents involved in litigation requires the courts to search for new and innovative solutions to protect children from enduring parental conflict. Developing legal solutions that focus on interpersonal problems, emotions, and attachment responses would help decrease the strain on the court system and improve the health and well-being of children and parents caught in high-conflict disputes.

### Future Research

Research currently lacks the necessary information to guide mental health professionals on the assessment and role of adult attachment responses post separation. Future research should focus on developing, implementing, and evaluating emotionally focused strategies to reduce high conflict and minimize its impact for both children and parents. Future research is also needed to help build collaborative teams among mental health professionals and the legal profession to find new and creative ways to buffer the children from the negative consequences of interparental conflict by findings ways to help parents get unstuck from the maladaptive emotional commotion typically observed in high-conflict families.

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