

BEFORE YOU CAN MAKE THINGS BETTER, YOU HAVE TO STOP MAKING THEM WORSE.

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Someone has to be first. This means generating the motivation to stop making things worse. It's important to learn how to interrupt your own negative responses. To recognize how your body language, facial expressions, and voice tone impact things. Then learning how to inhibit your urges to do the things that you later realize are contributing to the tension in your joint parenting relationship.

Make a Commitment to Stop Making it Worse

The first step is commitment. By definition, when you are throwing the proverbial fuel on the fire, you are not using logic (or any other helpful process) enough.

Commitment means practicing alternative reactions ahead of time until they become automatic. Then, as you start to become out of control, this new automatic behavior appears. In a way, commitment gives you self-control.

If you wanted to run a marathon, but you had never run more than three kilometers, you couldn't do it. No matter how much you wanted to keep running, you would be unable to merely will your body to perform in that situation. You would have to really want to run the marathon, which would get you out of bed early every day for months to work out, to practice. With enough commitment, you would engage in enough practice so that you could keep on running effectively (despite the pain).

But, even if you have the capacity to do a particular behavior that is effective, you might still lack the motivation.

In situations of high negative emotion, when it is harder to do the new behavior, you are likely to think, "I don't really care about that now". In this emotional state, you fail to see the long term consequences of your actions.

So, you need to get to a balanced place in your mind in which you are broadly aware of your real co-parenting goals and not just your painful emotions of the moment. It is important to practice now, so you can get there in situations of duress.

If you learned to drive on the right-hand side of the street, and you took a vacation in a country where they drive on the left, you would know, on the one hand, that it is very dangerous to drive on the right there. On the other hand, you

would probably have strong urges to pull to the right. How would you get yourself to drive safely? Commitment.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS NOT "RIGHT"

Do you really see how being nasty, invalidating, or critical toward your co-parent, no matter what she or he just did; will only make your arrangement worse?

Or, do you think that when he or she does these kinds of things to you that you have a "right" to respond with similar behavior (that she or he "deserves it")?

Most of us know it is not effective to be nasty. However, if you truly adopt a mindful stance toward your co-parent, you will see that both of you are contributing to the problem.



They think you deserve it. You think the co-parent deserves it. How could this possibly be resolved unless one (and eventually both) of you steps back mindfully and sees that, as Gandhi said, "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind"?

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO HURT THE OTHER PARENT?

Do you want to hurt your child? Hurting the otherparent is hurting the child and continuing the unending agony of reciprocal retribution.

You can stop it.

STEPPING OUT IS NOT SURRENDER

Maybe you now are thinking, "It's surrender to be attacked, and not to attack back!" It is "walking on eggshells" to try to unilaterally "stop making it worse."

Well, refusing to continue to fight to the death and destroying everyone in this way is

hardly surrendering since defeating your co-parent is also harming your child Stopping the fight is both showing the courage to do what is needed to survive and the courage to engage in self- preservation for your family.

You can get yourself out of "win-lose" thinking (which really means "lose-lose") and into recognizing that not attacking is a "win-win" situation. Nobody loses.

If, however, you think that stopping is surrender you will likely feel ashamed, for we are typically taught to "stand up for what is right." But - when you realize that stopping requires courage, conviction, and skills, and will lead to a better life for everyone involved, you will see that shame is not justified.

ANTICIPATE YOUR IMPULSIVENESS

Even if you are highly committed to stop making things worse in conflict situations, you will still need to practice a host of skills before that can happen.

When we are in the middle of enduring a attack from someone else, our own reaction feels impulsive, like an unpredictable and overbearing urge. However, realistically a lot of these situations are quite predictable. How many times have you had that fight? How many times has this co-parent said that particular provocative thing? Look descriptively at previous problems: what did the co-parent do that resulted in your emotions going through the roof to the point where you had urges to retaliate? We will call those things triggers, because they trigger your response.

REHEARSE A NEW EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

Once you have identified the repeating triggers, you can anticipate that the co-parent will do them again. The more aware you are of the triggers, the less potent they will be. In a way, every time you imagine the co-parent flipping a trigger also imagine that

you respond in a kind way (or, at least, not in kind), you are reconditioning the trigger because you are changing the cycle.

Identify as many triggers as you can.

The idea is not that these triggers cause your response, but rather that the cycle has become automatic (she says X, you say Y). It's a learned habit, much like reciting the alphabet. You need to stop saying "Y" and do something else.

What else?

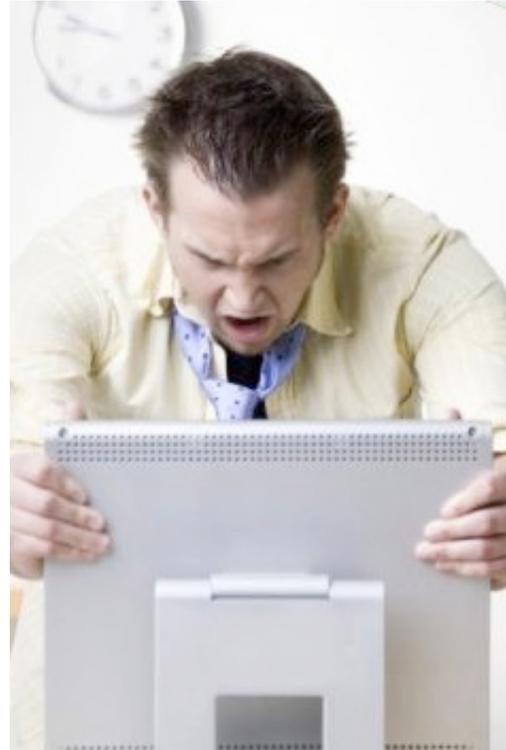
The effective thing to do is anything that brings your arousal down and helps you respond differently.

There are many strategies for tolerating distress in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) that might be helpful in these situations. For example, you can distract yourself away from the argument by doing something else (take a walk, read, engage in other activities that are physically active ones or relaxing ones), look for spiritual soothing (say a little prayer, remember your values), do something soothing to your senses (listen to quiet music, eat comfort food, read a pleasant story or poem), or do something social (call a friend, send an e-mail). Some of these things you can do quickly. Others you will simply have to plan to do after successfully ending the interaction without responding negatively.

Once you have identified the typical triggers and also identified more helpful alternatives, you can put them together.

1. Imagine a trigger
2. Imagine remembering your goal (not to make things worse; that responding in a negative way just keeps the negative cycle going)
3. imagine responding in a self- respecting and respectful way.

Of course, whatever you say needs to be in your own words, but the essence of an effective response is staying reasonably calm and describing something about your mutual goals rather than telling the other person what she or he is doing wrong.



MANAGE DESTRUCTIVE URGES

Commitment and practicing alternative responses are very helpful in achieving self-control. But there are other skills you can use when urges to do harm are running high.

Did you ever have the urge to eat more dessert and not do it? Did you ever have the urge to stay in bed rather than go to work? Have you always given in to these urges, or have you managed them and done what was needed in those situations (at least sometimes) to make your life work?

Whatever you did to resist those kinds of urges are important skills to use when resisting the urge to treat the other parent badly and continue the destructive conflict cycles you sometimes get in.

Here are three common strategies to help you respond without making things worse in a difficult situation:

A. Visualize the Negative Consequences of Giving In to Your Destructive Urges

If the alarm clock goes off and you are tired and comfortable, you may have the urge to turn it off and go back to sleep. But - if you remember that your boss is not too pleased when you simply fail to show up for work and you realize that you will be swamped for the next several days trying to catch up, within a minute or two you are in the shower.

What happened? You remembered the negative consequences of following your urge instead of doing the wise thing. This method can be very effective at motivating us to act in ways that are responsible to our own longer-term goals.

B. Step Out and Observe the Urge

Alternatively, after the alarm clock goes off, you could observe your own behavior. You might then notice that by not taking the urge to stay in bed too seriously (observing it rather than going with it), the urge is already subsiding.

Interestingly, when we observe urges, they often lose their potency.

C. Visualize the Positive Consequences of Giving In to Your Destructive Urges

Go back to the urges to stay in bed. At that point, you could get yourself to think about your day ahead. If you do, you might realize that you have an enjoyable project to work



on and that you are saving money for a down payment on your first house. The difference between this example and visualizing the negative consequences of giving in is that the former uses your motivation to avoid negative consequences, whereas this one uses your motivation to achieve positive ones. Both can work rather well in the moment.

THIS IS NOT SURRENDER

Rather, this is an example of working around a mentally ill co-parent. This isn't going to change everything, it is simply ending the unhealthy cycle as a first step. From there they can look to more substantive work.

These are only some basic tools to stop the bleeding in the co-parenting arrangement.

*This article was adapted from *The High Conflict Couple – A Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, & Validation* by Alan E. Fruzzetti, Ph.D, New Harbinger Publications, ISBN-10: 157224450X.*

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