

Handling Anger and High Emotion in Mediation

A basic principle underlying interpersonal communication is that **emotions must be dealt with before other matters**. When we experience strong emotions such as anger, sadness or frustration, our priority is not to problem solve, but rather to be heard.

In a resourceful state, there is a balance between feelings and thoughts and we are able to focus on the problem at hand. When emotion is too high, our priority becomes expressing that emotion - fear, excitement, anticipation, anger, joy, annoyance, etc. and our ability and willingness to discuss issues is minimized.

While extreme emotion of any type is problematic in mediation, it is most often parties' angry responses that cause a breakdown in the process and an inability to proceed. The following information is designed to give an overview of anger and some ideas about how to manage this emotion during the process.

Understanding and Managing Anger:

Anger is probably the most **complex feeling** we experience. In order to **control the expression of anger**, we must **understand the true source of our anger** and make **conscious choices** about our responses.

Anger will occur more frequently under **stress**. It is important to help divorcing partners, or those who are seeking solutions about co-parenting conflicts, to recognize and understand that the stress caused by the conflict may escalate their feelings and responses to each other.

Some characteristics of Anger:

- An emotional, affective, antagonistic response to a situation.
- No situation or person, *per se*, can "make" us angry; our anger is directly related to our perceptions of situations, persons and events.
- An individual will typically experience anger when they feel blocked, frustrated, abused or neglected.
- Sometimes anger will mask other feelings [fear].
- Sometimes other emotions mask anger [sadness, staying "in our head", coming to the table in a "happy" state].