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## **Mediators are Human too: Managing your Emotions as a Mediator**

By Lars Watson

When parties express strong emotions in mediation, the process can feel chaotic – these situations can be challenging for mediators as they struggle to help resolve disputes. Mediators must manage not only the emotions of the parties, but also their own emotions. Mediation trainers generally focus on techniques the mediator can use to help the *parties* manage their emotions. While trainings often include discussion of how a mediator's emotional response can create biases which undermine neutrality, there has been too little focus on how mediators can manage their own emotional response during the course of a mediation.

Learning to manage my emotions is one of the most important skills I gained as a mediator. I have sometimes, especially in my early years of mediating, feared that my own emotional reactions in the mediation setting would harm the process. All mediators have their own reactions to emotions -- our family-of-origin experience often shapes that reaction in ways that could detract from our effectiveness as mediators. My own challenge was becoming more comfortable with expressions of anger.

In western thinking emotions are often seen as interfering or detracting from rational thought. This view emphasizes how emotions detract from good decision making. Recent research from neuroscience, however, suggests that emotions, rather than detracting, play a central role in enabling decision-making. Neuroscientists are now learning that the portion of the brain active during emotional experience (the mid brain) is the same part of the brain active when we get feedback on our decisions.

Emotions and decision making seem to be deeply linked in our thinking process and in both cases, our brains are active long before we can verbalize what is going on. Our emotions occur before our rational brain can describe that state. Similarly, we may arrive at a decision before we can articulate why we have made that decision.

Two things are vital here. One is that there are

times when we should follow hunches and take a risk even if when we cannot fully explain our choice. Following hunches and taking risks may seem dangerous, but the mediation process is robust enough that you can make some mistakes and the process will still work. The other is to get as much practice mediating as possible. The more exercise our brains have in making decisions about mediator interventions, the better this deep level of mental process will work.

Emotions are crucial to a mediator's ability to make decisions about how to intervene, yet they can also overwhelm us to the point that they impede our ability to function as mediators. The rush of adrenalin can make us react in ways that don't help the parties. As mediators, we should be aware of these physiological responses and how we can keep our emotional states at a level that does not interfere with our ability to mediate.

I have found a number of strategies useful to maintain emotional equilibrium. For these strategies to work, mediators must first recognize our own internal signals of emotional arousal. For me it is an increased heart rate, a flushed feeling in my face, and tightness in my chest. For others, it may include a feeling in their gut or light-headedness. I would encourage mediators to recognize when you are experiencing these signals.

Prior to beginning a mediation, a few things can be helpful. First, remind yourself that these emotions are not about you, your life, your family of origin. These emotions are about the parties. Remind yourself of this just prior to the mediation and then again as needed throughout the process. Second, try meditating before your mediation session (you will need to get there early) - I have found this very useful. The literature on meditation and emotional reactivity shows that this activity assists individuals to remain calm and to have compassion for others. Short of meditation, use the ritual of setting up the room to allow for a brief quiet time to calm yourself.

Third, talk with your co-mediator about any challenges, including any fears of strong emotions, either of you fear may impact your ability to facilitate a neutral process. If this is done, you and your co-mediator are prepared to support one another.

During the mediation session additional tools can help. Ask questions that engage logical, rational thought. Asking these questions can contain the experience of strong emotions by the mediator and help the parties balance their emotional experience with more rational thinking. These questions include:

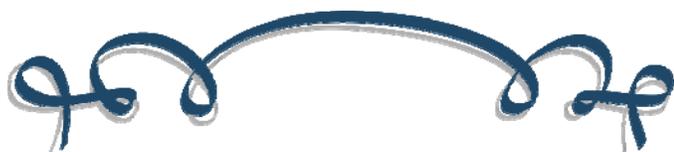
- **Sequencing — Think about restating in a chronological order**
- **Listing — Think agenda building**
- **Ordering — Think counting something**
- **Perception of stimuli — Think of reframing to offer a new view**
- **Sorting — Think of putting things in categories**
- **Problem solving — Think about asking questions that generate alternative, brainstorming**

These sorts of questions are particularly useful when you, as a mediator, experience strong emotions that could lead to mediator bias. Asking these questions may help maintain a neutral process and help the parties with their emotional levels.

You might also want to take a break and caucus with your co-mediator and observers. These discussions can help you refocus on your mediator role. Finally, if the strong emotions are such that you cannot continue, stop the mediation. Explain to the parties that something has come up that interferes with your ability to act as the mediator, and that the session needs to be rescheduled. This will be extremely rare.

The debrief at the end of a mediation is an excellent opportunity to gather information from observers about the emotions that they observed from you and their effect on the mediation process. You may have experienced very strong emotions and yet find that your observers saw no effect on the mediation. This post session debrief along with continued practice will aid you to better manage the strong emotions that come up for us as mediators. Emotions assist us every day and are what makes us human. With experience we can continue to better serve our clients through better emotional preparation as mediators.

*If you would like to look further into what we have learned about decision making, emotions and thinking, let the BNMP know and we'll send you a bibliography.*



## BNMP is doing OUTREACH

So far this year, the staff and volunteers have been active in making presentations, giving trainings and doing outreach to the community. Some of the activities have included:

**Parent Teen outreach events:** Interlake High School, Newport High School, Sammamish High School, Youth Eastside Services, Jewish Day School, "Eastside Conversations" event at Sammamish HS, KUFR radio interview, Bellevue Reporter newspaper article, Newport High School newsletter

**Neighborhood outreach events:** Area Agency on Aging, Lake Hills Neighborhood Association Meeting, Somerset Community Association Annual Meeting, Presentation to COB Planning and Community Development staff meeting, Presentation to COB Police Dept. Diversity Focus Group, St. Thomas Church staff, Area Agency on Aging, COB Neighborhood Liaisons, Circle of Friends, Newspaper articles on mediation training

**Trainings have included:**

Community Neighborhood Outreach Workshop on "Got Conflict?"  
Conflict resolution training to COB Fire Department  
Basic Mediation Training  
Conciliation Workshop  
Life Skills Classes at Newport High School

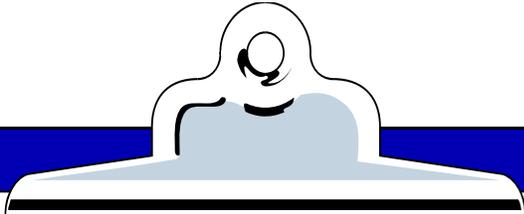
**Thank you to Pam Womack, Jack Mahler, Rhonda Younker, Joann Bromberg, Henry Smilowicz, Julie Ellenhorn, Ben Trnka, Andy Chung, Evan Loshin, Weina Chen, Sara Espinoza**

### *Upcoming In-Service Training:*

## **Landlord/Tenant — Rights and Obligations**

Every year the Bellevue Neighborhood Mediation Program sees many cases involving landlord/tenant issues. Our upcoming In-Service Training will be a great opportunity to learn more about these issues. Kerry Robinson, Supervising Attorney with the Housing Justice Project, will give a presentation on landlord/tenant rights and obligations, and share her knowledge of housing law. Please join us on Tuesday, June 16th, from 6-8 PM at Bellevue City Hall in Room 1E-120 (6:00 refreshments, 6:30-8:00 program).

Please RSVP by calling 425-452-4091 or by emailing: [gjones@bellevuewa.gov](mailto:gjones@bellevuewa.gov)



## Parent—Teen Update

By

The program is going well. I had the pleasure of observing a mediation a week ago. I watched the family struggle over some deep emotional issues. The mediators were skilled at creating a safe environment for them to openly discuss those issues and make some mutual agreements that they could take home and implement immediately. It was a joy to watch our process in action! It was also a joy to watch the mediators use their skills so masterfully.



I'm very excited about our next two in-service trainings. On May 13th at 6 pm Meiko Blosser, a King County DRC mediator and trainer, will present on "Cultural Differences and Mediation." Last Fall I attended a presentation led by Meiko and she is very skilled and experienced in cultural diversity issues. On June 10th, at 6 pm at Bellevue City Hall, we will focus on applying the information we learned to parent-teen cases.

I look forward to seeing you all at these informative events.

## **BNMP Training Opportunities For Mediators and Conciliators**

### *Joint Neighborhood and Parent-Teen In-Service:*

#### **Cultural Differences and Mediation**

Meiko Blosser, King County DRC

Wed. May 13th, from 6-8 PM in Room 1E-112

### *Parent-Teen In-Service Training:*

#### **Cultural Conflict in Families**

Cathy Goldman and Ilana Vayman

Wed. June 10th, from 6-8 PM in Room 1E-112

### *Neighborhood In-Service Training:*

#### **Landlord/Tenant Rights and Obligations**

Kerry Robinson, Housing Justice Project

Tues. June 16th, from 6-8 PM in Room 1E-120  
6:00 refreshments, 6:30-8:00 program

### *Training:*

#### **Conciliation Training Fall 2009**

Dates: TBD

## **VOLUNTEER NEWS**

### *Welcome new conciliators :*

Anne Marie Reger  
Celia Sekijima  
John Farver  
Lynn Terpstra  
Perlas Sapida  
Sandra Wallace

### **Program Staff:**

Program Co-Manager:	Cheryl Cohen	-	452-5222
Program Co-Manager:	Andrew Kidde	-	452-5288
Program Assistant	Gwen Jones	-	452-2897
Parent-Teen Coordinator:	Cathy Goldman	-	452-4091

City of Bellevue website: <http://www.bellevuewa.gov>  
(Look for the Mediation Program under "Neighborhood Information")

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*Volunteer Profile:*

**Jacob Parikh**



Jacob, a long-time resident of the Puget Sound area, is currently a senior at Bellevue High School. He started volunteering with the Parent-Teen Mediation Program in the summer following his sophomore year after working at his school as a peer mediator. The knowledge gained from taking the training and participating in mediation have given him a unique perspective on everyday life. He is waiting to hear back on his college applications and is looking forward to a career in dentistry or biochemical engineering, but will always have a strong passion for community service through mediation.



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