

# Divorce Conflict Information Series

## Understanding the Problem and Planning the Solution

---

### Booklet IV

## Is Divorce Conflict Addictive?

By Kenneth R. Waldron, PhD and Allan R. Koritzinsky, JD.<sup>1</sup>

**The most challenging cases facing family law professionals are those that have high levels of conflict between divorcing or divorced parents.**

The purpose of this Booklet to address the complicated question of what drives high conflict divorce cases, to date for which we find only unsatisfying answers. What complicates the question is that parents persist in behaviors that even they would describe as at least unpleasant and at times quite painful. Psychologists, including Ken, tell us that personality disorders dominate high conflict divorces. Dr. Gregory Lester, with a specialty focused on personality disorders, has asserted that 99% of high conflict divorces have at least one party with a personality disorder.<sup>2</sup> This might be an overstatement, but is the presence of personality disorders the answer? Worse yet, if this is the answer, does that mean the situation is hopeless, because personality disorders are notoriously hard to treat and rarely improve? Most of the research on personality disorders informs us that the structure of people's personalities is unlikely to change much, even with intervention. Therefore, will we always be faced with high conflict divorce and watch it destroy lives?

We sometimes forget that the concept of a personality disorder is a hypothetical construct in the medical disease model and might not even be the best explanation for the patterns of behavior that we observe. The diagnosis of a personality disorder is simply a way of looking at a person and their behavior patterns, but it is not the only way and might even be an incorrect way. As we wrote in Booklet I, perhaps a better way to look at people

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the subject, you are encouraged to read the following two books written by your authors: "**Game Theory and the Transformation of Family Law: Change the Rules- Change the Game. A New Bargaining Model for Attorneys and Mediators to Optimize Outcomes for Divorcing Parties.**" Unhooked Books. Scottsdale, AZ 2015 and "**Winning Strategies in Divorce: The Art and Science of Using Game Theory Principles and Skills in Negotiation and Mediation.**" The latter is an online book only. See [www.unhookedmedia.com](http://www.unhookedmedia.com).

<sup>2</sup> WIPCOD presentation, Wisconsin, (2019).

in high conflict divorces is to see them as lagging skills and the knowledge undergirding those skills.

**The biggest problem with viewing high conflict divorce as an inevitable outcome, when one or both of the parties have personality disorders, is that the problem is defined such that it has no solution.**

## **Game Theory Principles Might Provide Answers and Solutions**

Imagine where medicine would be if we defined cancer as “the will of God,” a problem with no solution. Progress is made when problems are posed in a way that can lead to solutions. The explanation that divorce and co-parenting conflict reflect personality disorders does not stand up to research. With about 20 percent of the population demonstrating personality disorder types of symptoms, close to 80 percent of co-parenting relationships demonstrate moderate to severe difficulties. That means that about 60 percent of co-parenting conflict cannot be explained by personality disorders. To say that divorce conflict, and therefore co-parenting conflict, are inevitable, how to explain that about 20 percent of co-parenting relationships are low conflict and high cooperation.

**Defining the problem as lagging skills points to a solution- teach the skills.**

Ken and Allan have shown, using Game Theory principles, that the traditional legal system is also a factor fomenting conflict and battle to the death strategies that appear on the surface to be self-defeating, self-destructive and harmful to children.<sup>3</sup> In that regard, we professionals, and your authors include themselves, might inadvertently have played a harmful role in people’s lives, all the while trying to help. Perhaps we have been operating in a system with rules and procedures that actually make matters worse.

**A Game Theory analysis might unlock answers in moderate to high conflict cases- answers that lead to solutions.**

Having worked with Game Theory approaches to divorce for some years, Ken and Allan wanted to see if a Game Theory analysis might unlock answers in high conflict cases, answers that lead to solutions, not hopelessness. If Game Theory provides a correct description of how people make choices, then parties engaged in emotionally and financially bankrupting conflict must have subjective, though hard to discern, payoffs for their behavior.

---

<sup>3</sup> In our books, *Game Theory and the Transformation of Family Law* and *Winning Negotiation and Mediation Strategies in Divorce*, we explore in depth how the traditional family law system contributes to divorce conflict and provide different and better approaches to serve divorcing spouses and separated parents.

The very premise of Game Theory is that, if we understand the choices available to people and the payoffs for those choices, people will behave in a rational manner and maximize the outcome for themselves. In our books, we explore this concept in depth and show that because many of the payoffs people seek are subjective, not objective, the assumption that people are rational holds up well under most circumstances. However, when Bernie Meyer reviewed our first book, in addition to praise, he pointed out that the premise that people are rational, at least as it applies to high conflict divorce, might not be always true. He asserted that some people are not rational, at least around the time of a divorce. But is that the case? Most experienced attorneys and mental health professionals reading this might be nodding their heads – of course this is the case. Why would people spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in legal fees arguing over Christmas ornaments or getting one more overnight if they were rational?

However, millions of years of selection pressure did not select for irrational self-destructive people. Additionally, after having waded through the deep waters of Game Theory research and mathematics, repeatedly people are found to make rational choices, even when at first glance they appeared to be irrational. A wealthy person will give away money (which objectively is irrational) for the subjective payoffs associated with generosity, which makes the behavior quite rational. In that case, the subjective payoff of being generous, and the inference that the money will make other lives better, has more value than the money given.

A famous Game Theory mathematician, John Nash asserted that people will often cooperate with others, rather than compete, in order to maximize the benefits to themselves.<sup>4</sup> On its surface, helping others to achieve their goals, rather than competing with them to achieve one's own goals seems irrational, but by cooperating first, people grow the value of the payoffs for everyone involved. In business, this is called cooperation: cooperate to grow the pie, then compete for pieces. Everyone is better off.

### **Game Theory generates questions that lead to solutions.**

How can we view the self-destructive strategies and choices of high conflict parents as rational? What payoffs could compensate for the perpetual suffering that we witness in those cases? Is getting a “win” in court, or the hope of getting a “win,” worth the financial costs, the emotional turmoil, damage and suffering, particularly when the probability of getting a real “win” is so slim?

Many of the parties to a high conflict divorce know how dissatisfying it is engaging in litigation based on prior efforts at litigation, and yet they keep escalating and relitigating.

---

<sup>4</sup> This premise is the subject of our Booklet in this series, *Creating a Convergence of Expectations on Solutions*.

As one attorney put it, they become “frequent flyers.” In a case where Ken was involved, when he met with one parent, the man said that he just wants to move on and stop the conflict, and when meeting with the other parent, she said the same thing. And yet they continued with their conflict and litigation. So, what is the payoff? Are some people simply not rational? Are they stuck in a pattern of dishonesty, manipulation, anger and blame and repeated litigation, even when they see the harm to themselves, each other and their children? Are they simply irrational?

## **Do We Have an Addiction Here That Needs Treatment (Addiction 101)?**

Ken began his career, in part, working with substance abuse programs. In one particular divorce case, the behavior of the separated parents rang some old bells. He realized that divorce was not the only arena in which people persist in patterns of behavior that perpetuate and escalate suffering, those who set aside people they love (including their children) in order to persist in self-destructive and even lethal behavior, those who are manipulative, dishonest and use other people (including their children) to achieve personal goals, and those who wish they could stop it. Voila: Addiction!

### **Addiction 101**

Is it reasonable to suggest that divorce conflict can be addictive? If true, the beauty of this hypothesis is that not only the principles of Game Theory apply, but also the payoffs run even deeper than the subjective experience of the parties. To understand this, we must first examine what we know about addiction. Addiction comes in two flavors:

- Chemical addiction and
- Process addiction

Science tells us that both forms operate in much the same way. The scientific analysis of addiction began with chemical addiction, and so that is where we will start- with a summary of approximately 100 years of research. However, only as investigative tools became more technologically sophisticated (e.g., functional MRI) are we learning what is really going on today.

**A good way to view addiction is that there are predictable behavior patterns involved that work in concert with the brain to achieve neurological rewards.**

Let’s start with the brain. It is a well-established fact that animals, including humans, have a pleasure center in the brain, called the **nucleus accumbens**. This is the first part<sup>5</sup> of the brain, which plays a central role in learning, survival and reproduction, so

---

<sup>5</sup> We could designate the three “parts” of the brain as “partners.”

it has the force of millions of years of evolution behind it. However, the nucleus accumbens does not operate on its own; there are two other parts of the brain that play central roles in learning and a fourth part of the brain that is in an important but supportive role.

The second of the three parts of the brain is the **ventral tegmental area (VTA)**, that produces dopamine, which travels the short distance to the nucleus accumbens, but does not stimulate the pleasure center directly. It fires things up and gets things started. There are several complicated concepts involved, but the release of dopamine tells the nucleus accumbens that an unexpected source of pleasure, or a reward, has just “arrived.” If we learn what led up to that pleasure, we can learn how to obtain similar rewards in the future.

We will not go into the history of this, but in brief, the operant conditioning of Pavlov seemed to explain learning, but had problems that could not be explained. As a quick reminder, Pavlov was a biologist studying salivation. He noticed that his walking through the lab door triggered salivation in his canine subjects; long before food in the mouth triggered salivation. He tried a little experiment, ringing a bell just before providing food and after a brief period, dogs would salivate to the sound of the bell. In his theory, dogs associated a stimulus with a reward, that is, they learned in this way. We will not describe the details, but later research challenged this model of learning. It was only later that the Rescorla-Wagner Model was put forward and revolutionized learning theory, which is now believed to be the accurate model. This is called *prediction error learning*.

When an unexpected pleasurable experience occurs, the VTA fires, and the brain begins back-learning, meaning under what conditions a reward is to be expected. A hunter that finds game experiences a surprise that was waited for, but not predicted. The VTA goes to work to learn how the game was found, to increase the predictability of finding game again. This can include not only the location, but also the time of day, the path to the location and so on. In modern times, we might experience this a little differently. For example, we might get directions to a party in a place where we have never been. We follow the directions and experience a burst of pleasure when we find the location. Our VTA shoots out a burst of dopamine, and our mind immediately records the triggers (past signals) for that success.

The VTA is connected to the supporting role part of our brain- which is our *memory center* (chiefly the hippocampus). Now we have learned how to get to that location. The next time we go there, we might have a little burst of pleasure and a little dopamine, but quickly, we no longer have the surprise of finding the place, and our VTA no longer produces the dopamine, because we already remember where to turn, what streets to take and so on. As can be seen, the purpose of this neurological function is not to experience pleasure; it is to learn.

Let's discuss an example. A cave man is wandering around and unexpectedly discovers a good source of water. He feels pleasure because he can now quench his thirst. He also knows that other animals will come to the water and might provide him and his family with meat for dinner. It behooves him to remember how to get there, and that is

where the VTA comes into play. It stimulates the brain with dopamine, which focuses the cave man's attention and memory. If he returns the next day and finds the water, he will experience a little less pleasure, and his VTA will not fire because he has already back-learned how to find water. The path to the water is strongly paired with pleasure. The next time he is thirsty, his VTA will send out a little dopamine, and he will want/crave going to get water. If other animals are there, and he discovers that by grabbing a branch and hitting an animal on the head, he will get a rush of pleasure in having defeated an animal that was undoubtedly faster and stronger than he was. Boom! He will experience pleasure, a firing of the VTA, learning that using a club is good.

The third of the three parts of the brain involved in this learning process is the **pre-frontal cortex**, which is connected to both systems and does the *deliberation*. If the pre-frontal cortex senses danger on the path to the water, it will inhibit the urge to find water and postpone the pleasure of drinking and hunting, until the danger can be dealt with successfully. This is the part of the brain that uses deliberation in order to achieve success. It does this mostly through inhibiting the partners in the reward system, delaying short-term rewards for long-term success.

This system has served human beings well for many millions of years: we make a prediction error and experience pleasure; we back-learn how we got there, and we exercise deliberation in order to be successful in our seeking pleasure.

**The nucleus accumbens is the liking.  
The VTA is the wanting (craving) and back-learning.  
The pre-frontal cortex is the how to be successful.**

These three parts or partners in the brain are often called the *reward center* of the brain. It all works on the basis of complicated neuro-transmitters between the cells – that is how the neurons communicate. Now we come to addiction, but first, remember that Game Theory is about choosing behaviors that are rational, that is, that lead to objective and subjective payoffs.

## **Chemical Addiction**

Chemical<sup>6</sup> addiction is well understood in terms of how the introduction of various chemicals into this system affects the reward system. The first time the chemical is introduced, it stimulates, often over stimulates, the nucleus accumbens. We get high. While initially there is some pleasure involved, perhaps a great deal of pleasure, very quickly the body begins to compensate for the addition of those artificial chemicals in a complicated neurological process, depending on the exact effect of the chemical. Heroin affects the

---

<sup>6</sup> Here we speak to all psychoactive drugs, including alcohol, cocaine, heroin, caffeine, nicotine and so on.

system very differently from nicotine. The pleasure center makes structural changes that numb the pleasure center; the VTA either over stimulates or is blocked, and the wanting, turning to craving, begins. Drugs inhibit the pre-frontal cortex and deliberation becomes weaker and weaker, and the ability to deliberate and inhibit the wants and urges of the VTA and nucleus accumbens diminishes. Because of the numbing of the nucleus accumbens, called “tolerance,” it takes more and more of the chemical to achieve a “high” and eventually just to feel normal.

### **Predictable behavioral changes**

All this leads to predictable behavioral changes. First, because the nucleus accumbens numbs, tolerance sets in, and it takes more and more of the drug to get any pleasure, and after a while, just to feel normal. Second, the VTA fires every time a trigger occurs; wanting escalates into craving. Satisfying the craving becomes a reward by itself, even if there is little or no pleasure involved; craving is a negative feeling and taking the drug stops the craving – thus, the reward is relief, not pleasure. Third, the now addict begins to organize life around satiating the craving, usually developing what we might call problematic personality traits, such as dishonesty, manipulation, projection of blame, bullying and so on. For many addicts, that includes criminal behavior, disregarding “rules,” even though that can lead to incarceration. On the surface, ignoring the consequences seems irrational, but in terms of igniting the reward system in the brain, it is completely rational. Almost every smoker understands they are destroying their health, and might even be killing themselves, and wishes he/she could quit. However, the drive in the neurological reward system, and the disabling of the pre-frontal cortex, keeps the cigarettes coming.

## **Withdrawal**

Not only is sating the craving a reward, the avoidance of withdrawal (which with some addictions can be very severe) is a negative reward. Withdrawal occurs because of the many adjustments that the brain makes to accommodate the externally introduced chemicals. This might mean reducing the neurotransmitters available, increasing or eliminating certain receptors in the neurons and so on. When the chemicals stop coming, the brain is dysfunctional for a while until it can get back up to speed. This period is very unpleasant for the person, and is called withdrawal. So, without the drug, the person experiences craving because of the VTA and the beginnings of withdrawal, which the person would like to avoid. The brain's reward system has been hijacked! Craving and withdrawal avoidance drive addictive behavior, not pleasure, and lead to self-destructive behavior patterns. Because of the back learning involved, the addict has "triggers" that get the VTA to start firing dopamine. If the addict did the drugs with certain people, just seeing those people will ignite the VTA. If the addict took drugs at a certain time of day, in a particular place or following a certain activity, those will trigger feelings of craving. In a case in which Ken was involved, a man had been sober for over four years and was an active participant in Alcoholics Anonymous. On his way home one evening after a brief argument with his ex-wife, he stopped for gas, picked up a case of beer and soon was pulled over for a DUI. The argument was a trigger and his craving overwhelmed him.

## **Process Addiction**

With all this in mind, let us take a look at process addiction. Gambling first struck researchers as very similar in behavior patterns to chemical addictions, but how could behavior, not chemicals, hijack the brain? Curiosity spurred a good deal of research, including sophisticated functional MRI's, and found that a gambler can become addicted: the craving can reach uncontrollable levels, tolerance develops for the pleasure of gambling, even winning, and the inhibiting value of the pre-frontal cortex diminishes. Stopping gambling even includes withdrawal symptoms. Also, gamblers develop behavior patterns to hide and facilitate their behavior, similar to drug addicts. Neurological research found the same process was occurring in the reward center, even though no externally introduced chemicals were involved.

To give a famous example of a real case, an attorney had never gambled before she went to a casino with some friends and put a nickel into a slot machine. She won \$25.00. We can see the prediction error at work; she did not predict that she would be rewarded by



500% when she put the nickel in the machine. Her pleasure center went wild and she whooped and hollered like a teenager. She back-learned how to get that pleasure. She began to go to casinos, and before long, was gambling away her salary. She borrowed money from friends, lying about the reasons, and even stole from family. She quickly lost everything, including her house, friends and family. This appears to be irrational, as does smoking or using methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. But is it?

Remember, that the process involved is the reward system of the brain, and it is no longer the pleasure that is sought. It is the craving to stop and the unrealistic hope for the pleasure of a first time high. The pre-frontal cortex, meaning deliberation, has been disabled. When Ken was working with drug addiction programs, drug addicts described this process as “chasing the first high,”<sup>7</sup> even when they knew that was no longer possible. In other words, there is a payoff.

**Scientists now know that behavior patterns  
can become as addictive as chemicals,  
by stimulating the same neurological processes  
in the reward system.**

Genetic studies have been done involving addiction, both with animals and in famous twin studies, and there appears to be some genetic patterns that make addiction more likely than not. Some people are simply more vulnerable to become addicted than other people. That is, there is an addictive personality, or more likely a vulnerable reward mechanism in some people’s brains. While that does not predict addiction, it does affect the probability of addiction.

After gambling, the study of process addiction began in earnest. To date, behavior patterns such as video game playing, pornography viewing, overeating and shopping/hoarding have also been studied. It turns out that the same patterns are found.

**The behavior patterns in process addictions  
hijack the reward center of the brain.  
This leads to changes in the character and personality of the addict,  
who engages in self-destructive behaviors  
over which he/she no longer seems to have any control.**

The payoff is neurological, not objective gain or subjective experience. Remember, the pleasure center becomes numb when tolerance sets in, so the payoff is not pleasure. It is to try to sate the craving and avoid withdrawal. There is always a little hope for the pleasure, but most of the time, the addict just suffers. The choice to continue with these problematic behavior patterns is rational, but only in the sense of their effect on the brain.

---

<sup>7</sup> The first high of most psychoactive drugs is a very high level of pleasure and the craving for that pleasure is a driving force behind repeated use and the complete takeover of the reward center of the brain.

## **Is Divorce Conflict Addictive?**

This leads us to our fundamental question: is divorce conflict addictive, at least for vulnerable people? Is the perpetual self-destructive behavior in many high conflict divorces another process addiction? We do not know if anyone has studied or will study the neurology involved. Functional MRI's are very expensive, and one cannot study divorce reactions in laboratory animals, as they have for other addictions. We know that behavior patterns, without chemical introduction, by themselves can become addictive. We know that certain behavior patterns are likely to develop, once addiction has hijacked the brain's reward center.

This is actually what got Ken to begin thinking about this. In the case in question, interviewed separately, both parties claimed to want to "move on" and not be stuck in their highly interactive conflict with one another, and yet they each described and even justified their engaging in the same old conflicts by blaming the other party for making it impossible to stop. Their ability to deliberate and reflect objectively on their own behavior was limited, suggesting that their pre-frontal cortex might be disabled. The "cravings" were in the form of being unable to resist reacting to the behavior of the other party, that is, to the triggers. They write nasty emails, call their attorney and demand action, demean one another to friends, family and even their children, and so on. They had become dishonest, or at least able to spin situations to rationalize their position, and they had become indifferent to the effect of their painful patterns on themselves, but even on their children whom they genuinely loved. Like with gambling addiction, children come second.

If this hypothesis has merit, then we professionals in the family law system need to reflect on our role in this drama. Like with chemical addictions and other process addictions, one often finds "enablers." An enabler is a person who plays a role in supporting the addiction. It is the parent who yells at their child for a gambling addiction and swears that this is the last time he or she will pay off their child's debts, but pays them off nevertheless. It is the spouse who keeps their alcoholic partner's secrets.

Are we, and your authors include ourselves in this reflection, enablers of high conflict divorce addiction? Does the family law legal system actually seduce people into high conflict addictions? When an attorney accepts a case in which parties are addicted to high conflict, or at least in the early stages of addiction, and advocates for those artificial "wins," is the attorney "enabling" the addiction? When a psychologist accepts a referral to perform a custody study, and then writes a report exposing weaknesses and problematic personality traits, "enabling" the addiction? These are important questions to think about if our genuine goal is to help the people who come into our professional spheres.

One of the early shocks Ken had when he was consulting with a particular residential drug abuse program occurred with a woman we shall call Diane. Diane had

been in the program for nearly a year and was beloved by other residents and staff. The staff in the program were prior residents who had successfully remained clean and sober, and Diane had already been elevated to a staff position. She was charming, but more importantly, had that refreshing rigorous honest appearance of someone breaking free of the drug lifestyle. When Ken arrived one day for a staff meeting, Diane was gone. Staff reported to him that she used drugs again, and no one in the program knew, or wanted to know, where she was. To Ken, who was naïve at the time, this seemed like a betrayal of a friend, not to seek Diane out and help her.

The director introduced Ken to “principle before personality.”<sup>8</sup> In this case, no one would reach out to someone who was using, but if she came back to the program and was willing to start over on her quest for sobriety, they would do everything they could to help. This might sound “cold” and uncaring, but it is a form of caring that in the end is much more helpful than enabling an addiction.

Do we/should we professionals in the family law arena have a rule like “principle before personality?” Do we/should we behave in a way which makes clear that engaging in high conflict to the point of getting addicted will not be tolerated? Should professionals consider withdrawal from a case, or least the threat of it, in lieu of enabling?

## **Cognitive Behavior Therapy is a Successful Treatment Approach for Process Addictions**

If the hypothesis that divorce conflict can become addictive has merit, does it lead to solutions? The short answer is yes. It does for many high conflict cases, but not all. Success rates in the treatment of other addictions vary, depending on the addiction, but in no chemical addiction is the success rate 100% or even close.

The treatment for process addictions that has the highest level of success is Cognitive Behavior Therapy. Perhaps this is why programs implementing Bill Eddy’s work have seen such good success. His approach is based on Cognitive Behavior Therapy. One could argue that combining cognitive behavior therapy with emotion focused therapy increases the chances of success even further. Successful treatment programs have behavior prescriptions, such as a twelve-step program, and various forms of emotional support, such as sponsors and groups. These treatment approaches might work well with divorce conflict addiction? Even warning parties that divorce conflict can be addictive might help.

---

<sup>8</sup> This refers to what is called the “Big Book,” which includes the principles undergirding the Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous approach to recovery.

Returning to our neurological viewpoint, Cognitive Behavior Therapy teaches learning what the triggers are for cravings, that is, igniting the VTA and the release of dopamine (e.g., the ex-spouse making an allegation), and practices alternative behaviors to break the addiction pattern. In addition, Cognitive Behavior Therapy focuses on coping mechanisms for the cravings, rather than engaging in addictive behavior, and fortifying the pre-frontal cortex with deliberation. As these skills are learned, the pre-frontal cortex appears to become abled again and is able to inhibit the impulsive responses of the VTA and nucleus accumbens. Emotion focused therapy helps identify the emotional roots of the secondary anger that dominates divorce conflict and helps people process their primary emotions, such as sadness, insecurity and fear.

With chemical addictions, the most successful treatments include a combination of prescribed chemical treatment and Cognitive Behavior Therapy. However, there is no known chemical treatment for process addictions. Or is there?

**Summary.** There is good reason to think that high conflict divorce cases may involve addiction. Without definitive research on the neurology involved, we cannot know for certain. However, the behavior patterns involved suggest that this hypothesis might have merit. From a Game Theory perspective, this affirms that people, even people who are engaged in what appear to be self-defeating, self-destructive behavior patterns, are rational in that there is a payoff for their choices. The payoff is not objective, that is, there is no real objective gain. In fact, there are real objective losses. The payoff is not internally subjective either.

Game Theory research has shown that the subjective experience of fairness will often be more important than the objective gain of money. However, the subjective experience of a process addiction is suffering, not pleasure. In a process addiction, the inability to exercise deliberation and to inhibit the triggers and cravings (such as the “need” to respond to an ex-spouse’s provocative behavior and the numbing of the pleasure center) can lead to the behavior patterns we see in high conflict divorces. The payoffs are satiating the triggered craving and avoiding the withdrawal. High conflict divorce becomes a way of life.

We accept the reality of “compulsive gambling.” Is it farfetched to accept the reality “compulsive divorce conflict?”

In our books, *Game Theory and the Transformation of Family Law* and *Winning Negotiation and Mediation Strategies*, Ken and Allan explore the application of Game Theory principles to divorces in which the objective and subjective payoffs are in play, especially the long-term payoffs of reaching life goals, which is applicable to most divorces. However, viewing some high conflict cases as an addiction might lead to other, hopefully effective, approaches.

This raises questions about what role professionals play, perhaps enabling the addiction, or at least not recognizing and treating the real problem. Appeals to parents' love of their children, who are told to stop what they are doing, is likely to have as much effect as telling an alcoholic they are hurting their children and should quit. This simplistic approach ignores the neurological factor, where the drive to continue with the addictive behavior outweighs the desire to stop.

## **There May be a Different and Better Treatment Approach for Couples Addicted to High Conflict: Cognitive Behavior Therapy with the Support of Emotion Focused Therapy.**

If it is true, that people become addicted to high conflict divorce relationships with their prior spouse, who might be the other parent of their children, this suggests a different approach to treatment.

Most coparenting training programs are undergirded with Cognitive Behavior Therapy principles, but could be augmented by treatment for process addiction to conflict.

1. Desensitizing to cues and triggers for high conflict behavior,
2. Focusing on developing alternative approaches to the "cravings,"
3. Training parents to have different self-talk that leads to better outcomes and
4. Enabling the pre-frontal cortex to exercise better inhibition over the urges to engage in conflictual behavior.

Rather than viewing the problem as one of personality disorders or inevitability, perhaps we can develop a treatment approach that helps some divorced parents overcome their high conflict relationship.

Making people coming into the family law system aware that divorce conflict can be addictive might also help, particularly if parties beginning to be addicted are aware of it and want to escape the toxic dance that otherwise can last the rest of their lives. This would be like catching people just after their first use of heroin. Having treatment available for high conflict divorce as an addiction might also help. Perhaps there might even be a Twelve-Step Program for high conflict divorce addiction. Support groups and sponsors (perhaps called coaches) might be helpful.

Your authors thank you for your patience and interest if you have read this far. Our goal has not been to convince you that high conflict divorce is addictive, but to facilitate reflection on the nut we (in the family law system) wish we could crack – the high conflict divorce. Our Game Theory approach assumes that people are rational, that they will make choices that are intended to maximize their gains (meaning their payoffs), but recognize that people can be trapped and misled as to which choices those might be.

Our other books and booklets focus on how to help vulnerable people going through a challenging time in their lives make choices that maximize outcomes for them and for their children. Whether it is true or not, asking if a high conflict divorce is addictive is the correct question to pose. Now we need to push for the right solution. Your authors hope this Booklet will move the needle in the direction of a solution.