FIGHT OR FLIGHT: THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING OUR DEFENCE SYSTEM

Barbara McCulloch, [*] ***Jeremy Scuse*** [**] ***and Cathy Stinear*** [***]

> Our relations to one another grew more and more hostile and at last reached a stage where it was not disagreement that caused hostility but hostility that caused disagreement. Whatever she might say, I disagreed with beforehand, and it was just the same with her.....We no longer tried to bring any dispute to a conclusion. We invariably kept to our own opinions even about the most trivial questions.....As I now recall them the views I maintained were not at all so dear to me that I could not have given them up; but she was of the opposite opinion and to yield meant yielding to her, and that I could not do. (Leo Tolstoy)

Why do we fight? What motivates us to engage in conflict or even combat with another?

If I think of the times that I have been in conflict with another person, it can be hard to articulate what we were in conflict about without sounding and feeling really stupid. Why did I argue with my partner about what to save and what to delete on the My Sky recorder last week? It wasn't even full and there's not that much that we want to record? So, why did we engage in the conflict?

---

[*] AAMINZ. Director of Around the Table Solutionz.

[**] Accredited Mediator with CEDR.

[***] Clinical Neuroscientist, School of Medicine, University of Auckland.

Neuroscience tells us that it is because each of us, my partner and I, felt threatened in some way. Here we were, two middle class, middle aged, educated professionals arguing about something trivial. Where was the threat?

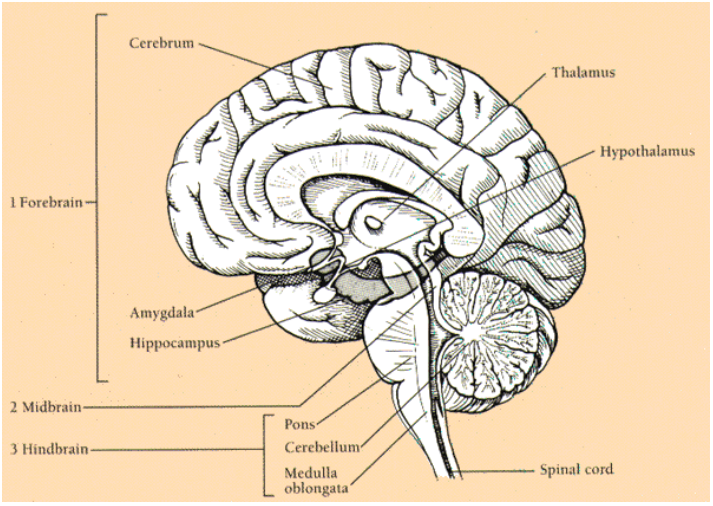
One way of understanding this is to consider meeting your brain!

Your brain is the most precious organ in your body. It cannot be replaced, there are no transplants, and if part of it becomes damaged or dies, it cannot repair itself or grow back. Everything you know, everything you remember, everything you know how to do, and everything that makes you, you is stored in your brain. So, now we are going to learn some basic things about how your brain responds to danger, where emotions and feelings come from, and how your brain can and will change, depending on how you use it.

I THE FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE

The outer surface of the brain is called the cerebral cortex. It is grey and wrinkly, and contains millions of neurons. The cortex is responsible for the things you're conscious of – what you see, hear, think, say, do and remember. Each region of the cortex communicates with the others, and also with other areas located deep within the brain. These deep areas are responsible for the things you do not consciously control – your temperature, heart rate, hormones, sleep and digestion. So how do the conscious and unconscious processes in your brain interact?

Your conscious perceptions affect the unconscious control of your body. When you perceive that you're safe, the deep areas of your brain respond by helping your muscles relax, your heart rate is slow and steady, your digestion is good and you sleep well. When you perceive a threat, whether it's stepping on broken glass or seeing someone with whom you're in conflict, the fight or flight response is triggered in the deep areas of the brain. This unconscious response prepares your body for survival, by focusing your attention, increasing your heart rate, dilating your pupils, and diverting blood flow away from digestion and towards your muscles.



An important deep area of the brain is called the amygdala, which plays a critical role in regulating fear. Sensory information about your body and your environment is sent to the amygdala

and the cortex at the same time. This means that the amygdala can respond to a threat and initiate a fight or flight response even before you consciously experience fear. The amygdala also helps you to link events with rewards, promoting positive emotions.

The amygdala has numerous connections to the cortex, particularly the forebrain. Communication between the forebrain and the amygdala occurs in both directions. During an emotional response, the amygdala influences the cortex and what you pay attention to, which memories you retrieve, and your decision-making strategy. Conversely, remembering previous traumas, or imagining future ones, can trigger the amygdala to initiate a fight or flight response. It's the partnership between the amygdala and the frontal areas of cortex that give us our emotions and feelings.

Dr Laura Crawshaw uses the term "TAD Dynamic" to explain the impact of threat in our relationships; her theory has its roots in neurological, anthropological, psychological and sociological thinking.

Laura asks us to consider a mouse: mice have fairly small lives in the scheme of things. They spend their time collecting food and exploring their environment (or at least the edges of their environment) and breeding baby mice and smelling like mice. Some would say that they do no harm.

Now consider a cat and more importantly consider a cat in relation to a mouse. Cats pose a threat to mice; when a mouse sees a cat it feels anxiety and its only defence to that feeling of anxiety is flight. If mice were different (and if they had access to Tasers or flame throwers) they might have an alternative defence: to fight the cat. Possibly it is good that this defence does not exist for mice or they would simply join us in the fight or flight dichotomy.

So we have the brilliantly simple and effective TAD response:

A sense of Threat creates a reaction of Anxiety and our response to anxiety is to use our Fight or flight Defence.

Charles Darwin (1859) contributed to this theory of conflict with his research on the survival of the fittest. The theory was further advanced by Walter Cannon who coined the phrase "fight or flight" in 1928. Sigmund Freud (1894 and 1936) made further contributions when he established that the fight or flight response was activated not just by physical threats but also by the psychological perception of threat.

II THE ROLE OF PERCEPTION

A perception of threat is primarily internal and individual rather than external and able to be assessed as factually existing. But perception is important: think about what makes you feel anxious or afraid and then analyse the level of threat contained: how many of us are afraid of spiders? Of singing out loud in public? Of walking across a transparent platform in a floor high up in a building? Typically we drown spiders in the shower (fight) and avoid karaoke bars and glass floors high up in buildings (flight).

Freud's contribution to this theory of conflict was expanded when he stated that humans are mostly anxious about loss; annihilation was the loss of life and abandonment was the loss of love. Thus, anxiety could be provoked and *the perception of threat could be created* if a person felt such a possibility of loss and that person would react with one of the fight or flight defences.

Returning to my argument with my partner about the My Sky box: what was our perception of loss and how did that provoke anxiety and why did we engage in our argument? I ask because many of our day to day interactions are fuelled by this same kind of provocation and we tend to engage with those who are closest to us: our family members and co-workers and flatmates and partners and friends. If we can reflect on and understand what fuels our own conflicts, even our own squabbles, we may in turn develop a better understanding not just of another's conflicts but of how best to assist them when they approach us for help.

It has been both my experience and observation that we learn our conflict responses in childhood and that our fight or flight preferences can be established before we can even articulate the "why" of our choices. What did you fight about with your siblings? How were those disputes resolved? Did you develop a well-practised response whenever you felt crossed? Was your preference for fight or flight?

III EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS

Aren't these the same thing? We tend to use the words 'emotion' and 'feeling' interchangeably, but in neuroscience they're thought to be two different things.

Emotions are the physiological responses that occur more or less unconsciously when the brain detects threats or opportunities. The pounding heart and tense muscles when you're in danger, the tears and sobs when you're experiencing loss, and the gasps and giggles when you have a wonderful surprise, are emotional responses that you don't have much control over. Emotions serve as important cues, which shape our behaviour to our advantage. The initial processing of emotions occurs unconsciously in the deep areas of the brain, including the

amygdala. This unconscious processing leads to feelings, which are the conscious perceptions of your emotional responses.

What's the advantage of becoming consciously aware of physiological emotional responses? How are feelings adaptive? One answer might be that if we had emotional responses, but did not consciously experience feelings, we'd be less able to anticipate and plan behaviour. Feelings help us to learn about the people, things and situations that cause our emotional responses, and understand their significance so we can plan appropriately our future actions when we encounter these people, things and situations again. In summary, our unconscious emotional responses are automatic signals of threat and opportunity. In contrast, conscious feelings engage our thinking skills and let us modify and adapt our behaviour to avoid or cope with threat and take advantage of opportunities. How does this adaptation of behaviour happen, and can we control it?

Jeremy Scuse, Catalyst Mediation UK says to make use of our combined emotions, feelings and thoughts we need to be motivated. "Motivations are the end result of 'e-motions'. They act to make us do things – so our muscles tense or relax, our blood vessels dilate or contract. When we feel emotionally, we also feel physically. Our emotions can thus make us feel uncomfortable or comfortable, sending us signals to do something urgently or to stay in our comfortable state.

We make many decisions, and sometimes we are more or less logical about them. And it is arguable that all decisions are, ultimately emotional. When we say that we use logic to make decisions, we are seeking to exclude emotions, using only rational methods, and perhaps even mathematical tools. The foundation of such decisions is the principle of utility, whereby the value of each option is assessed by assigning criteria (often weighted). However, there is a whole range of decision-making that uses emotion, depending on the degree of logic that is included in the process.

A totally emotional decision is typically very fast. This is because it takes time (at least 0.1 seconds) for the rational cortex to get going. This is the reactive (and largely subconscious) decision-making that you encounter in heated arguments or when faced with immediate danger.

Common emotional decisions may use some logic, but the main driving force is emotion, which either overrides logic or uses pseudo-logic to support emotional choices (this is extremely common). Another common use of emotion in decision is to start with logic and then use emotion in the final choice.

IV BRAIN RESEARCH

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio studied people with brain injuries that had damaged the part of the brain where emotions are generated. In all other respects they seemed normal - they just lost the ability to feel emotions. He found their ability to make decisions was seriously impaired. They could logically describe what they should be doing, but in practice they found it very difficult to make decisions about where to live, what to eat, etc.

In particular, many decisions have pros and cons on both sides. Shall I have the fish or the beef? With no rational way to decide, they were unable to make the decision.

So rationality and emotions are involved in all decisions, to one degree or another.

V YOUR CHANGING BRAIN

If you spent time on a farm as a child, you quickly learned to treat electric fences with a great deal of respect. The memory of receiving a painful shock, and the fear of receiving another, quickly modified your thinking and behaviour so that you made safer decisions around electric fences. This type of learning depends on the adaptability of the connections between the amygdala and the cortex, and is essential for your survival. It is also a quite simple type of learning. The types of situations for which people seek mediation are far more complex than electric fences, and sometimes more painful, but the basic principles of learning in the brain are the same.

Your brain learns and remembers by changing the number and strength of connections between neurons. This process is ongoing throughout your life, and is called neural plasticity. A famous example comes from a study by Woollett and Maguire (2011), who scanned the brains of taxi drivers before and after they trained to sit "The Knowledge". This exam tests drivers' knowledge of central London, in a 6 mile radius around Charing Cross Station. The training requires learning around 25,000 streets and locations, and takes 3–4 years! Woollett and Maguire showed that the hippocampus, which is an area of cortex responsible for spatial memories, grew significantly larger during training. But only in the drivers who passed the exam. This study, and others like it, clearly shows that the structure of the brain can change, with repeatedly used areas getting physically larger.

On numerous occasions I have been briefed by an HR professional or a manager and asked to mediate between two people engaged in a workplace conflict and the briefing includes the assessment that "they'll never get on; they have a personality conflict". So, we might also ask if we also have "a conflict personality".

In order to consider this question we first need to define the terms "personality" and "conflict".

Roget's Thesaurus talks about personal make up, character, traits, attributes, self being the id-ego, individuality, idiosyncratic, personal, typical, the self being the psyche, the unconscious qualities, instincts, passions, disposition, temperament.

The *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* talks about personality types being "idealised descriptions derived either by statistical procedures or by theoretical postulation or by some more or less skilful combination of the two ... based upon differences in physiological and hormonal functioning that reflects itself in temperament."

Jung used the terms Introversion and Extroversion and talks of differences of orientation towards the world; he divides personalities into thought -orientated, feeling -orientated and instinct -orientated. (If you think about it, it is possible to join the dots between the emotional and instinct oriented personalities and the TAD dynamic).

> Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals
>
> (William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker *Interpersonal Conflict* (2001) 41)

> We say that conflict is natural, inevitable, necessary and normal and that the problem is not the existence of conflict but how we handle it.
>
> (Bernard Mayer *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution* (2000) 3)

> No man can think clearly when his fists are clenched.
>
> (George Jean Nathan (1882-1958) was the leading American drama critic of his time)

A clear difficulty with this analysis is that we tend to consider that personality traits are fixed and so not subject to change. Paulo Freire suggests that this can lead us into fatalism and the belief that nothing can or should change. He calls this a lack of "temporality"; an inability to differentiate between past, present and future. Lack of temporality is indicated by the use of language: "it's always….you never…." The fatalistic approach undermines the power we have as humans to choose and to learn and to behave differently on another occasion.

The brain can change very rapidly, in response to short term increases or decreases in use. For example, Pascual-Leone and colleagues (1995) studied the activity of the brain area controlling the index finger in people who proof-read

Braille for a living. They found that the activity was higher at the end of the work day than at the beginning, and this was specific to the index finger, as no changes in activity were found for the area of brain controlling the little finger on the same hand. In a separate study, they also showed that the activity of the area controlling the index finger was higher in regular Braille readers than infrequent Braille readers, or in people who do not read Braille. This tells us that there are short-term effects of practice on brain activity, and these can accumulate into long term effects with ongoing practice.

It may be useful then for us as conflict resolvers to think about behaviours rather than personality because behaviours are learned and therefore they are subject to change and influence. Instead of describing people as being engaged in a "personality conflict" or analysing their "conflict personality" we might think about it as a clash between one person's behaviour and another person's interpretation of that behaviour. For example, if someone at work is regularly late: late for work, late for meetings, we might interpret that behaviour of lateness as rudeness or disrespectful or cavalier or unreliable. The interpretation is subjective and in narrative terms it privileges one kind of behaviour over another without sufficient evidence of superiority. While it may be possible to persuade someone to change their behaviour and become more punctual, it is much less possible to persuade the unpunctual person to accept the interpretation of their lack of punctuality as "rude, disrespectful, cavalier or unreliable".

Conflict occurs because person A behaves in a way that is unacceptable to person B because of their interpretation about what that behaviour means and often voicing their interpretation as factual.

Jeremy Scuse from Catalyst mediation, UK says

If another's behaviour is not what we expect, our trust bleeds away and their motivations are increasingly seen as deliberate, damaging, and possibly even evil. To move from this negative interpretation to something more positive requires us to trust each other, and trust is like a stalagmite – it builds up slowly each time we interact with someone and they respond positively, so we come to expect or "trust" in their response.

But trust is brittle – one or two adverse interactions and the stalagmite snaps and has to be rebuilt, drop by interaction by drop.

In terms of us as conflict resolvers assisting our parties to build trust, one of our roles might be to open up the possibility of another way of interpreting behaviour. We do this by asking questions:

"How else might we interpret lack of punctuality? Can we just as accurately say, flexible, engaged in what they are doing, passionately involved, concentrating hard?"

"Are you aware that when you are late to work or to a meeting that others feel aggrieved?"

"Are there ways that we could arrange hours of work or meeting times that would mean that you could comply with others' expectations of starting and finishing times?"

"Are there reasons why you seem to struggle with complying with time constraints?"

"What does time mean to each of us and how can we do things so that everyone's needs are met?"

If we practise this technique of opening, then it is less likely that conflict will occur as a result of our initially different interpretations of certain behaviours like punctuality. We do, of course, need to be aware of our own interpretations and not allow these to show or we risk becoming partial and failing in our role as conflict resolvers.

An often quoted statement in addiction counselling is "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got". In other words, try something different and see what happens. When we coach someone to consider a behaviour change, it does not have to be permanent; it works better initially if we consider that we are "just trying" something. (Actually the reason that this works better is that we are often anxious about failing and so changing behaviour, trying something new can in itself be perceived as a threat. Not being willing to try something new is an indicator of the TAD dynamic in practice - not trying is flight behaviour).

If we are willing to practise the new behaviour until it becomes familiar and then practise enough to form a new habit, we also have used our brain's plasticity.

My suggestion is that in the first instance we reflect on an experience we have had ourselves of learning something new. How did we achieve the new activity?

As an example, in 2011 I made a decision to learn how to swim with my face in the water. As a child I did not ever have swimming lessons other than those we all received in the almost freezing water of a primary school pool in the late 1960s.

My family had emigrated from Scotland to New Zealand and neither of my parents could swim. Going to the beach, boating, water activities ... none of these were part of my experience growing up. My mother gets sea sick on the Devonport ferry; she considers that voluntarily getting into undomesticated water is a dangerous activity. Somehow I learned to swim sufficiently well to not be considered a freak but I never learned to swim with my face in the water and I always experienced a sense of terrible panic when I tried to do so. (This was possibly a result of nearly drowning at Karekare beach one year; further proof of my early learning that water was a dangerous environment).

In order to learn to swim with my face in the water I had to have these things: desire to drive me forward and discomfort with the old way to prevent me from returning to that. My desire was about wanting to be fit and flexible and mobile after an accident that broke my ankle very badly and so having fewer options for fitness activities. Going swimming in a pool and discovering that I enjoyed being in the water, wanting to be "normal" in a family of in-laws who (almost literally) grew up sailing and my discomfort was about having neck and back problems which swimming with my face out of the water exacerbated.

Learning to swim with my face in the water was a long slow process of practice and being kind enough to reassure myself that I was making progress. Basically I can now do it; I swim 40 lengths 3 or 4 times a week and feel very proud of myself. However I still have barriers and boundaries: I can swim properly in a pool with goggles on but not in the sea without goggles. I tried snorkelling this summer and felt all of the old panic returning. I count my breath when I swim face in the water (because this helps me to manage my ongoing feeling that panic is still there on the edge of my consciousness). I have a planned escape route so that if the panic returns, I can turn over onto my back and float myself out of trouble. I gave myself permission to try something different and to succeed in my own way and my own time and to not have to be perfect at the new skill. I also gave myself permission to acknowledge that I had a "problem" and that I could try changing. And I gave myself permission to risk failure. In other words I exhibited kindness towards myself in order to learn a new behaviour in a conscious manner.

In narrative terms, my dominant story was "I can't change". In neurological terms the response driven by my amygdala was "water is dangerous!" So, I had to create a new chapter in the story of my life and I had to create a new message for my brain ("water can be fun") so that the process of learning a new skill could happen. My personality traits don't really include bravery especially about physical things and I have a real fear of seeming to be stupid or clumsy. Creating a new story meant dealing with those messages.

So, do we regularly engage in "personality conflicts" which are unresolvable or do we have "conflict personalities" which need accurate analysis before we can engage with each other? One conclusion is to consider that we probably do have a conflict personality AND that means that we have a tendency to being seduced into behaving in particular ways AND that the behaviours are learned and become normalised through repeated practice AND that these practised behaviours are subject to influence and change even if initially they feel awkward and we have to practise them consciously. We can teach ourselves new habits by using the power of our conscious brain.

One way of considering the realm of conflict personalities is this: we can fall into one of three different conflict personality types: the pacifist, the interventionist and the hero. Pacifists are good at keeping things in perspective. Interventionists are good at being helpful and competent. Heroes can stand up for others even when there is little or no benefit to them personally. However, we all have bad days and on a bad day, pacifists avoid dealing with people and issues and deny that problems exist. Interventionists become control freaks and heroes suffer from a permanent state of road rage; they are angry at everyone. It is of course just as useful to consider that these descriptions are of common behaviours and default positions. A default position is a position you take on something before you think too much about it.

Bad days (or as they sing in the theme song to "Friends" bad weeks and months and even bad years), can be caused by too much stress, too much bad luck, too little resilience, too much anxiety and too little assistance to reflect and decide to do something differently. People who have too many bad days don't necessarily become bad people; they can still be well intentioned but their behaviour drives people away and creates perceptions that can be damaging. Assisting people to manage their bad days and change the behaviours that create the damaging perceptions is one of the ways that we can contribute to the process of conflict resolution. The skills of conflict resolution: empathy, acceptance, reflective listening, summarising and questioning are all useful contributions which can be shared with others. It is of particular interest to me that learning such "soft skills" can be achieved very early in life.

Narrative philosophy calls having too many bad days, having a dominant story. It suggests that our stories are created to make meaning and understanding of what has happened. As conflict resolvers we understand that new stories or new chapters in a story are always possible. If Alex Fergusson's team Manchester United accepted his story, they never lost a game; they never failed. Sometimes they just did not have enough time before the final whistle to score the winning goal.

In conflict resolution terminology, working with behaviour is more productive than working with personality. Because behaviour is much more subject to change, and because as conflict resolvers we are engaging ourselves and encouraging others to engage in the practice of hopefulness focussing on behaviour provides more opportunities for success.

When someone approaches us about a conflict they are involved in, it is likely that they have either recently experienced a TAD response or that they are still experiencing it and in particular that they are still (often highly) anxious. Dr Sandra Fenton (La Trobe University) has done research on working with people who regularly exhibit high conflict behaviour and she describes the process of being stuck in the following way: the stuck person has a MAD (Mistaken Assessment of Danger [Threat]) response followed by a BAD (Behaviour that is Aggressively Defensive) response to their perception. Dr Fenton says that if you stay stuck in your "MAD-BAD" response then that can become a generalised pattern of behaviour and it becomes easy in that mind-set to perceive everything and everyone as a threat.

How does this relate to the brains and behaviour of people experiencing conflict? When the fight or flight emotional response is repeatedly triggered by a person or situation, this may strengthen the connections in the brain so that fear and anxiety become the default conscious perception each time that person or situation is encountered. These feelings, and the underpinning physiological response, have a powerful influence on behaviour, which becomes aggressive defensive (BAD). It can be very difficult for people to modify this behaviour, because they're working against their brain's default responses. They simply get stuck in a state of anxiety that has a persistent effect on thoughts on behaviour. What are the signs that someone has had or is having a MAD or BAD response? We might observe some or all of the following: (Wilmot and Hocker, p.250)

raised blood pressure

sweating

fast breathing

flushed face

muscle tightness

loud or high voice

We might also hear one person engaging in these types of behaviours, described as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Wilmot and Hocker again, p.49)

criticising

stonewalling

defensiveness

contempt

In mediation we might observe each person engaging in these behaviours against the other. Communication of course, suffers – participants to the conflict will increasingly respond more to the emotional content they perceive (threatening, talking down to us, belittling our contributions etc.) and less to the information content. So we have a downward spiral - a specific problem or issue arises and damages trust, which is followed by:

- Personal antagonism
- Allegations being exchanged
- The "Other" is seen as the problem
- Labelling and stereotyping
- Push and push back (tit for tat)
- Mutual Defensiveness
- Other issues raised to justify stance
- More problems arise
- Understanding decreases
- Spiralling Mistrust
- Insult followed by insult
- Antagonism
- Becoming more and more entrenched
- Polarisation
- Seeking allies
- No backing down
- Belief that nothing can ever be the same again

So how do we, as conflict resolvers "manage" these behaviours? What works when someone is in a state of anxiety, perceives that there is a looming threat and is engaging in fight or flight defensive behaviours? How do we encourage either ourselves or others to try something different?

> Simply letting it out is no solution – expressing anger has been shown to make people angrier.

(Tavris, C *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989)

My suggestion is that the first step for conflict resolvers is to be comfortable with the participants' high emotion and to assist their participants to become less anxious. How do we achieve that?

Giving people suggestions about strategies to manage their thinking, so that their conscious mind can quell the unconscious emotional response, equips them to behave in a way that breaks the cycle of threat, anxiety and defence that occurs between people in conflict. Consciously practising alternative and more appropriate thoughts and behaviours can help the brain change again. It is our everyday habits that determine who we become, and it's never too late to change, to try new approaches to old problems.

Jane Schaverian, another New Zealand conflict resolution specialist and trainer suggests the following: "Whenever you have a choice to be either clever or kind, be kind" she says. "There are lots of clever people and there is likely to be someone who is cleverer than you but kindness is in short supply".

In narrative philosophy we consider that to be healthy, our life story is mostly drama and that we are the heroes in our own life stories. Good drama is about overcoming obstacles and challenges. We can use these analogies in conflict coaching and mediation; our clients have conflict stories which can seem insurmountable and our task as a coach or mediator is to assist the client to create a new story. The story, remember, is the way we make meaning of the things that happen and the choices we make. The fact that we may have made choices in the past (fight or flight choices) does not mean that we cannot make a different choice in the future. Robert Benjamin, a mediator and academic in Portland, Oregon says that "...we have no neurological imperative to resolve our conflicts - our neurological imperatives are to fight or flight....we are pre-programmed to this ... to engage in resolution we must overcome this programming and make conscious decisions....we must engage with the process of conflict cognitively as well as emotionally..." (AMINZ Conference, 2012, Wellington, NZ)

Sometimes people disclose (either accidentally or purposefully) that they behave as they do because that is all they know. They are not aware of other behaviour choices because the other choices may be so foreign to them or so unpractised or so attached to a negative judgement. I asked a young man once why he hit people so often and his reply was that they needed to respect him and if he did not hit them they would disrespect him. (I'm paraphrasing here; his own language was much more colourful but less printable).

So, you are approached by another person who presents in a state of high anxiety. How best can we, as conflict resolvers, deal with the problem? By being welcoming, by reassuring them, by offering tea or coffee or water or tissues, by showing empathy, being non-judgemental, being attentive and not being distracted (turning off phones, shutting the door, not continuing to work on your

computer....), by practising high quality listening and reflecting, by going at their pace... .

For some clients this is enough of an intervention; they overcome their anxiety and once they feel calm, they can access their own resources and deal with whatever conflict they were engaged in.

Sometimes lowering anxiety can take quite a long time, whether it is our own anxiety or that of others. People can be stuck in their anxious response and therefore stuck in their fight or flight response.

There is a great deal of research to support what some might regard as ordinary human common sense and kindness. Dr Fenton's research led her to conclude that reflective listening works best; Bill Eddy (High Conflict Personality Institute) reaches a similar conclusion. He says that using your EAR (empathy, attention, and respect) followed by BIFFFing the person (providing brief information in a firm, friendly and fair manner) works best.

Please note that you have to lend your EAR before you BIFFF anyone, because of course when you are feeling high levels of anxiety there is insufficient capacity in your brain to hear and process and consider new information, however useful and correct that new information might be.

Dr Crawshaw's research led her to conclude that coaching works best to deal with aggressive and abrasive behaviour patterns, even with high flying executives.

One of our roles as conflict resolvers is to allow, encourage and coach our parties to engage their cognitive abilities. It is to encourage the skills and practice of self-reflection and to accept that while our personality traits may predispose us to either fighting or flight, that we still have choice and by exercising our right to choose, we can consider which behaviour we might try today and what we are hoping to achieve and how we want to regard ourselves after the surge of adrenalin has passed. It is also to remember that we can make other choices if the first thing we try doesn't work as well as we'd hoped.

To engage successfully in mediation both parties must be able to control their behaviour to at least some degree otherwise we are unable to meet our first requirement of providing safety. This does not suggest that people in mediation are on their best behaviour; they are not! However they do need to demonstrate that they can be respectful and follow behavioural and procedural guidelines if they choose the option of mediation. The role of the mediator is to provide a safe process for all parties and to coach them to make best use of the mediation intervention. Getting participants to trust you as the mediator and to trust the

process of mediation is often more important than any other task you may have as the person who facilitates the resolution of conflict.

As mediators we need to demonstrate that we can be comfortable with other people's (high) emotion. Few of us have conflict about things that we don't care about and, remembering Freud's theory, we can feel anxiety about loss without literally fearing death or abandonment.

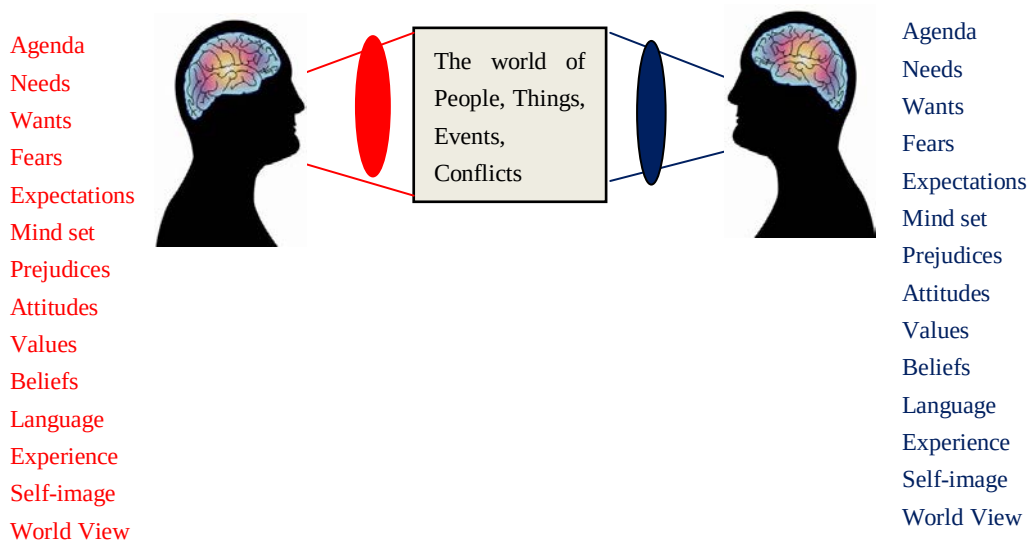
Often people come to mediation because they fear loss of reputation, loss of status, loss of belonging, loss of place. That fear of loss dominating the person's thinking-feeling processes will need you, the conflict resolver, to provide assistance and management of the process. It won't require you to represent or agree with or like the people who engage with you.

As conflict resolvers we can first develop our own self-awareness, practise our own reflective learning and use the support resources available to us so that when we engage with our clients, we can encourage and ask the good questions that we have some experience of asking ourselves because that is an intervention that is likely to help when it all seems overwhelming for the parties. As Jane Schaverian says, we should practise kindness more often because it works.

VI NEUROLOGY, EMOTIONS AND DECISION MAKING

If we consider that one purpose of conflict coaching or mediation is to support a party or parties to make better/more mutually acceptable decisions, then one stage of any conflict resolution process is to "try out the possible outcomes or offers or decisions that are possible".

And would some Power the small gift give us,
To see ourselves as others see us,
It would from many a blunder free us.
(Robert Burns 1786)



The problem is that content of a person's communication is shaped by aspects of their persona we will never know and it matters little what they meant by their communication, it is our perception, also shaped by elements of our persona, which creates a response that can be unexpected or conflictual.

For team leaders and mediators, the perception of Person 1 is their reality, whether it is also yours or that of Person 2 doesn't matter – Person 1 is sure that what was done or said is "real" and "true" and that is what you have to work with.

This is why two people in conflict can have very different views of what the conflict is about:

> There are multiple unique views of conflict, yet each looks 'real' to the one seeing it. (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001, p 27)

VII ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Even normal interaction may involve faulty communication, but conflict seems to worsen the problem. When two people are in conflict, they often attribute negative motivations to "the other."

Consequently, a statement that might have seemed innocuous when two parties were friends might seem hostile or threatening when the same parties are in conflict.

Research shows that we make different attributions about ourselves than about others. This is known as 'fundamental attribution error'.

This means that we tend to attribute other people's behaviour

- more to disposition
- less to circumstances

To compound this, we tend attribute our own behaviour

- less to disposition and
- more to circumstances

We are most prone to fundamental attribution error when we are under stress or in conflict. All of this seems to apply just as forcefully to groups: we tend to attribute the behaviour of 'out-group' members to their internal disposition rather than circumstances.

(*Attribution Theory* Bernard Weiner, 1992)

VIII IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Disentangling skewed attributions can be constructive because research has shown that attribution is closely linked to emotional response.

Behaviour
You didn't turn up for my meeting**.**
Perception
You have no respect for me**.**
Attribution
Your actions undermine me**.**

- If I think you harmed me deliberately, or because you couldn't care less, I am likely to feel angry. Once emotionally aroused I am more likely to retaliate, perpetuating a cycle of conflict and hostility.

- However, if I find out that your actions were affected by circumstances beyond your control, my response is likely to change from anger to sympathy.

Behaviour
You didn't turn up for my meeting
Understanding
You rushed your partner to hospital.

IX RELATED IDEAS

- **Accuser bias** – the tendency for an observer who is harmed by someone else's behaviour to attribute it to causes under the other person's control
- **Bias of the accused** –tendency to attribute my bad behaviour to circumstances beyond my control.
- **Actor/observer bias** - tendency to see our own behaviour as the product of the situation BUT other people's behaviour as the product of their internal state

- **Status quo bias**- if change is perceived to be "too hard" or the other person is perceived to be "too untrustworthy" then the status quo, however uncomfortable that may be, will tend to seem more attractive in comparison to any change. Certain conditions, especially in long mediation sessions can add to that. People feel forced into making or not making decisions when they are hungry (including dehydrated), angry, lonely or tired.

These biases combine and then work together to render conflict not only insoluble but incomprehensible to those involved. The external circumstances driving my actions are painted out of your picture, while they become the headlines in my own story ('I had to respond because of what you did').

X USEFUL STRATEGIES IN MEDIATION

- Educate people about attribution bias so they become less prone to it
- Help people to take the other person's perspective – to gain an appreciation for the factors beyond their control. Even the simple strategy of "checking my understanding" can limit the negative potential of attribution error. Eg 'Do you mind saying what you meant by that?' or 'I notice you use the word 'disrespect': can you say what respect means to you?'
- Mediators can use the technique of "circular questions" if they consider that educating causes them to compromise their impartiality.
- Help people reflect on their own attributions and emotions – 'mediators may need to do more than bring the emotion to the surface; they need to help parties appraise and reappraise the emotion' (Jameson et al, 2010, p 44). We can help people to re-tell their initial story so as to arrive at a different emotion and subsequent actions and significantly, open up the possibility of a different ending to the conflict story. Jameson et al suggest that we can adapt standard mediator practices such as 'paraphrasing and perspective taking' to include discussion of emotion.

XI INTEGRATING OUR RESPONSES TO CONFLICT INTO DECISION MAKING

When confronted, our first decision is between engaging and withdrawing.

Our fight or flight response is useful, ingrained and automatic. Its purpose is our survival. However, it makes mistakes, sometimes about "the amount of danger" that we face. (MAD). We fight or flee when we feel threatened, and, as Freud discovered, this occurs just as much at a psychological level especially when others respond to us in an unexpected manner, as it does when we are confronted by actual physical danger.

We expect certain situations to be threatening – racing car driving or abseiling down a cliff – so we prepare for it. But when someone we know - a friend or partner or colleague – behaves in an unexpectedly negative way, we have no warning, so stress hormones pour into our body diverting blood into our arms and legs.

If we consider that a constructive way to respond to conflict is with the full capacity of our minds being rational and thoughtful and our emotions being fully managed, we might understand why conflict is described sometimes as "inevitable" – when we are challenged, we mostly respond at the exact time blood is leaving our brain.

So we might conclude that an initial decision is as likely to be irrational as rational. In narrative terms, these two terms are a part of the conflict dichotomy because one word, "rational" is often understood as "a better response" than the other word, "irrational". I would encourage you to consider that rational and irrational are simply subjective judgements, usually made by one person about another with whom they are in disagreement. The judgement "rational" implies a degree of agreement and shared priorities whilst the judgement "irrational" implies a degree of disagreement and different priorities. The act of judging in itself is likely to escalate the conflict and make a shared decision harder to achieve.

The things we have conflict about can be considered as a combination of practicalities, principles and power. Think, for example of how decisions are made whenever two or more people share a living space, about doing domestic chores. If we consider a cliché situation: if one person works outside the home and earns a salary and another works unpaid and inside the home to raise children then discussions about how to share the domestic work would include practicalities: time and other resources that are available; principles: fairness and equity of contributions and power: how the different contributions are valued. Once the conversation becomes defined by "rational versus irrational" then it escalates and becomes much less manageable or resolvable.

The key, then, is to consider decision making as an exercise which includes all three factors to everyone's satisfaction, and that value judgements are identified as such and discussed in that context.

XII FAMILY LIFE EXAMPLE

Person One: "In my value system, my expectation is that the person whose primary role is to provide a home environment for the children we have, should also do the housework."

Person Two: "I understand that and in my value system, my expectation is that each of us works the same number of hours at our primary role: you earning an income to support our family priorities and me engaging with the children and the domestic work of cooking, cleaning, shopping and ground maintenance is shared between us."

This is a different conversation than:

Person One: "You are so lucky to be able to stay home and play with the kids all day. You spend most of the time with your friends. It's irrational and impractical to expect me to come home from working all day and help around the house."

Person Two: "You don't understand how stressful it is to be with young children all day; I never even get to finish my sentences and then you come home and expect a tidy house and clean children and a gourmet dinner. It's not fair."

Person One: "You're being emotional!"

Decision making is at its best (and usually most sustainable) when our thoughts and emotions and values are aligned. Each person's values are respected. Fairness and trust in each other are considered as much as any practicalities are addressed. Each person's need for "the right amount of time for me" is included.

When parties come to us as dispute resolvers, and are at the decision making stage, we also need to take these concepts into account. How might we do this?

Other than our professional requirement to "stay in the mediator role" (ie not be tempted to bang heads or make the decisions ourselves or give up and create an agreement that is meaningless but ticks the boxes) we have some possible strategies available to us as coaches or mediators including:

- Being able to acknowledge when there is a problem and suggest a 15 minute "cooling off" period, after which you will happily discuss the issues the other may have. This allows for the fight or flight reaction (the amygdala) to exert less control over the thinking brain (the pre-frontal cortex) and for the participants to reassert their ability to "think and feel in parallel."
- Asking questions about the tensions between practicalities, principles and power and how these tensions might be more balanced.
- Assisting the parties to understand more about their preferred method of responding to conflict may help them to re-direct their behaviour and self-regulate.
- Talk about the power of language and whether the parties' use of language is inviting resolution or inviting further conflict escalation.

- Being compassionate; conflict is something we all struggle with and parties come to a professional and ask for help because they are stuck. In the dark. Blind. Our role is to cast light, open up possibilities, stay with the conflict story at its most difficult time.

Given that we have chosen this profession, our skills and self-care processes are open to scrutiny. Hopefully sharing our stories of successful conflict resolution will help us to maintain our own dignity and self-awareness and sense of humour.