

# Is High Conflict Divorce Addictive?<sup>1</sup>

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

Ken and Allan have written this booklet and are making it available at no charge to address the question of what drives high conflict divorce cases, to date for which we find only unsatisfying answers. Psychologists, including Ken, tell us that personality disorders dominate high conflict divorces. Is the presence of personality disorders the answer? Worse yet, if it is the answer, does that mean the situation is hopeless?

Most of the research on personality disorders informs us that the structure of people's personalities are not likely 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. 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. Imagine where we would be if we defined cancer as the will of God.

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>2</sup> In that regard, we

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<sup>1</sup> This booklet is the fourth of a series of booklets offered at no charge in electronic form. The first three are: ***Falling in Hate***, a paradoxical look at high conflict divorce; ***The Convergence of Expectations***, a Game Theory principle that provides guidance on negotiation methods, and ***What's Wrong with this Picture***, a Game Theory analysis of how the traditional family law system tricks people into engaging in conflict with one another. To request any or all of these booklets, write [Kenneth.waldron13@gmail.com](mailto:Kenneth.waldron13@gmail.com).

<sup>2</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 approaches to better serve divorcing spouses and separated parents.

professionals, and your authors include themselves, might inadvertently have played a harmful role in people's lives, all the while trying to help. Most mental health professionals and attorneys are sincere people, genuinely attempting to help, but perhaps have been operating in a system with rules and procedures that actually make matters worse.

**A Game Theory analysis might unlock answers  
in 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.

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 it is the case. Why would people spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars in legal fees arguing over Christmas ornaments or getting one more overnight?

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, for example, asserted that people will often cooperate with others, rather than compete, in order to maximize the benefits to themselves.<sup>3</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

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<sup>3</sup> This premise is the subject of our booklet, *The Convergence of Expectations*.

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. 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. 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?

### **One insight led to another: addiction**

Then Ken had an insight. He began his career, in part, working with substance abuse programs. However, 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 high conflict divorce is 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**, and 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 the study of approximately 100 years of research. However, only as investigative tools became more technologically sophisticated 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>4</sup> of the brain, which plays a central role in learning, survival and reproduction, so 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 a 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, we can increase the chances of 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. 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*. 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

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<sup>4</sup> We could designate the three "parts" of the brain as "partners."

family 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 "man" 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; and  
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.

### **Chemical Addiction**

Chemical<sup>5</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 system very differently from nicotine. The pleasure center makes structural changes that

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<sup>5</sup> Here we speak to all psychoactive drugs, including alcohol, cocaine, heroin, caffeine, nicotine and so on.

numb the pleasure center; the VTA either over stimulates or is blocked, and the beginnings of 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. Third, the now addict begins to organize life around sating 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, and ironically even forced abstinence. 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 unless it can get 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!

### **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? A good deal of research, including sophisticated functional MRI’s, 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. Neurological research found the same process was occurring in the reward center, even though no externally introduced chemicals were involved.

To give an 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. 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>6</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. While that does not predict addiction, it does affect the probability of addiction.

## **Gambling**

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

**The behavior patterns in process additions  
hijack the reward center of the brain.**

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<sup>6</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.

**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, tolerance, 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.

### **Is High Conflict Divorce Addictive?**

This leads us to our fundamental question: is high conflict divorce addictive? 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, usually by speaking to the Guardian *ad litem* or building a case with his and her attorney. 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.

### **Enabling**

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. 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 showed up one day for a staff meeting, Diane was gone. Staff reported to him that she used 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>7</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, or least the threat of it, in lieu of enabling?

### **Possible Solutions**

If the high conflict hypothesis 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.

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<sup>7</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.

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?

### **Medical Marijuana**

This next section is likely to be controversial. Please be aware that we are not advocating any particular action, but only reporting on an interesting idea and a finding from the addiction research on marijuana. Marijuana is potentially addictive and poses its own problems, but neurologically, it poses what might be an interesting solution to process addictions, such as gambling or perhaps high conflict divorce.

In the brain, marijuana acts very differently from other addictive chemicals on neurotransmitters and neural receptors. Marijuana acts on the cannabinoid receptors in cells.<sup>8</sup> What these receptors do is help the brain forget what it has learned. This frees up the brain to learn anew. For example, one experiment had rats swimming in a tank, and there was an unseen platform just under the surface of the water in one location. If a rat found it, the rat could stand on the platform and stop swimming. This stimulated the pleasure center and the VTA fired off dopamine and the rats learned where the platform was located. When put in the tank a second time, the rats had learned where to swim to get to the platform. The researchers then chemically disabled the cannabinoid receptors in some rats and not in others. They moved the platform to a different location in the tank and put both groups of rats in the tank. The rats with their cannabinoid receptors disabled, kept swimming to where the old platform was located and never found the new location because they kept going to the old location. The rats with their cannabinoid receptors intact reacted with surprise when the platform was no longer where it had been and searched and located the new platform, forgetting about the old one.

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<sup>8</sup> Scientists assumed that cannabinoid receptors did not evolve for marijuana, but found the receptors before they found the natural neurotransmitters that bonded to those receptors, such as anandamide. But they named the receptors after marijuana before they discovered anandamide.

Humans have the same ability to forget old paths to success. In a simple example, if a person finds a parking spot in a crowded area of a city, and on a second attempt, finds another parking spot in the same area, the reward system back learns where to drive when needing a parking spot in that area. However, if on the third, fourth and fifth attempts, no parking is to be found there and another area shows better promise, we “forget” to go to the old location and have back learned how to go to the new location.

**Might it not be beneficial to parents  
in a high conflict relationship to “forget” the triggers  
for conflictual responses?**

**Might this make their reward center  
help to learn new behaviors that work better.**

Excessive use of marijuana clearly affects memory in this way, but also has another interesting effect on people. Research indicates that heavy marijuana users get poorer grades in school and are less ambitious in careers.<sup>9</sup> Now it could be that poor students and indifferent workers are simply not only more prone to use marijuana, but also marijuana might also cause a certain amount of indifference and apathy. Might not parents locked into a high conflict relationship benefit from being a little more apathetic – that is, “chill out” a little?

We won’t speculate, but does this mean that marijuana might be useful in the treatment of high conflict divorce? Could high conflict divorce lead to the prescribing of medical marijuana for the parents? Low doses of medical marijuana have a calming effect on most people. Could the approach to high conflict divorce be treatment of a process addiction with the chemical assistance of marijuana? Oddly, in some countries, treatment for heroin addiction is medically prescribed heroin at safer levels. The idea of marijuana as a treatment for high conflict divorce, in combination with Cognitive Behavior Therapy might not be as farfetched as it might first sound.

We wrote earlier that there are no known medicinal treatments for process addictions, and while that is true, we should mention that there has been some success with naltrexone in treating gambling addiction, or at least it might assist other forms of behavior therapy. However, not enough work has been done with naltrexone to know for sure.

**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

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<sup>9</sup> This is called the “amotivational syndrome.” For the science behind this, see Earlywine, M., (2002) *Understanding Marijuana A New Look at the Scientific Evidence*, Oxford University Press.

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. However, 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 craving and avoiding the withdrawal. High conflict divorce becomes a way of life. In one case in which Ken was involved, the father and step mother spent most of their free time assembling “evidence” against the mother, submitting to Ken numerous binders filled with irrelevant documents.

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.

Think of smoking. Almost everyone who smokes wishes that they did not, and many have tried to quit. However, they continue, even when it clearly affects their health, increases the chance of death and hurts those around them. The neurological payoff makes it worth it. In an odd way, the neurological payoff trumps the other sources of pleasure in an addict’s world, even, sadly, love of family, friends and children.

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.

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

In retrospect, Ken now realizes that the approach to parental conflict in his coparenting training programs, which was undergirded with Cognitive Behavior Therapy principles, should have had a stronger element of Cognitive Behavior Therapy.<sup>10</sup>

Ken now also realizes the approach to parental conflict should involve: (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. We mentioned earlier that the work of Bill Eddy is undergirded by cognitive behavior principles and might in part explain the successes of his approach.

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.

**If we develop a family law system  
that does not enable people vulnerable to high conflict addiction,  
we will have taken a big step.**

Making people coming into the family law system aware that divorce conflict can become addictive might also help, particularly if parties beginning to be addicted are aware of it and want to escape the toxic dance that can last the rest of their lives. Having treatment available for high conflict divorce as an addiction might also help. Perhaps there might even be a 12-Step Program for high conflict divorce addiction.

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, their payoffs, but note that people can be tricked and misled as to which choices those might be. Some of those occur in the traditional legal system but perhaps some people are also tricked into becoming addicted to high conflict.

Our other books and booklets focus on those tricks and how to help vulnerable people going through a challenging time in their lives make choices that maximize outcomes for them and for their children. When we apply those same Game Theory principles to high conflict divorces, we are challenged. Where is the upside, the payoffs, that make a life of emotional and financial bankruptcy and suffering worth the conflict? Whether it is true or not, asking if a high conflict divorce is addictive is the correct question to pose. We need to push for the right solution. Your authors hope this booklet will move the needle.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the coparenting training model being referenced here, Coparenting Training Workbooks are available from Unhooked Books, our publisher.

