

The many challenges of a high conflict case are daunting but the stress and pressure can be reduced with an understanding of the brain interactions of people who may have a high conflict personality and using a few simple skills to manage the case, by managing your relationship with your client, differently. Managing the case is one thing, but how can you tell early on?

Early Identification is Critical

High conflict cases require a different approach because they're rife with one or more parties with unmanaged emotions, extreme behaviors, all-or-nothing thinking, and instant blamers. Ordinary conflict resolution methods don't work with them. They create chaos in the case and repeatedly take one tiny step forward and two huge steps backward. They often don't take advice and seldom stop themselves from sabotaging their own case and themselves.

Clues That You Might Be Dealing with a Potentially High Conflict Case

Identifying high conflict cases early in the process can lead to positive outcomes for the parties while reducing the chaos, stress, and risk for the professionals involved. Here are a few clues that we call the WEB Method®, created by the co-founder and CINO of the High Conflict Institute, Bill Eddy, to watch for during the first consultation or meeting:

- **Their WORDS:** People tell you who they are if you listen closely enough. Are they using language or words that are:
 - all-or-nothing
 - filled with blame at one person or at everyone
 - telling you what they crave, such as: connection, attention, respect, domination
 - telling you what they despise, such as: being disrespected, ignored, uncared for, disconnected, betrayed
- **Your EMOTION:** Human interactions give you feelings, if you pay attention. Do you feel strong emotion that you don't ordinarily feel with other people, such as:
 - attacked
 - repulsed
 - angered
 - quick fondness (like) or quick dislike
 - backing away from the intensity
- **Their BEHAVIOR:** Many people behave badly in divorce, separation and co-parenting, but people with high conflict personalities behave in extreme ways, such as:
 - doing things and taking actions that 90% of other people would never do
 - making lots of excuses for their actions
 - asking you to violate your boundaries or ethics

Why Is It So Hard?

People with high conflict personalities often present with charm, as a vulnerable victim, as a strong advocate for victims everywhere, or on the flip side, with intense anger. Sometimes this is very nuanced but if you're watching for it, you can use it in combination with the WEB Method to get a clearer picture.

Charm

While it's easy to spot obvious *fake charm*, and those who are grinning on the outside but seething on the inside, it's not always easy to spot the high conflict charmer because you may be hooked by their strong emotion or you're simply happy to have someone pleasant in front of you. Beware upon hearing "I heard you're the best _____ in town!"

Charm is a potential red flag. Explore more.

The Vulnerable Victim

People with high conflict personalities live in perpetual victim-land. They don't realize it but you can spot it if you listen. Some potential clients are actual victims; others perceive themselves as victims but really aren't; and others may be actual victims with an exaggerated perception of the severity.

Victim stories are a potential red flag, but more exploration is needed because many are actual victims of domestic violence or other abuses. Don't develop a theory too early on; instead, just pay attention to other factors.

Strong Advocates

Great injustice is often felt, whether real or perceived, by those with high conflict personalities, so they pick up the banner for everyone else and want to win their case in the name of justice for victims everywhere.

Strong advocacy may be a red flag, but it may not. Again, further exploration is warranted.

Intense Stories

People who arrive with a story that just can't wait to blurt out and that has a high level of intensity may have a high conflict personality. They seek people in authority who will agree with them and advocate against perceived enemies.

Most people in divorce are angry and will say things they wouldn't ordinarily say; however, those with high conflict personalities will often want to express their stories at the outset, ask you to agree with them, all with a high level of intensity. The intensity of their stories is often off the charts, causing the listener to physically want to back away or run. This is because they *feel* their emotions and the perceived injustices caused by their ex, the system, and others, so strongly.

Intense stories are red flag that merit further exploration. Pay attention to your feelings during their stories.

Personal Attacks

Most people don't make personal attacks against others, even their ex-spouse. People with high conflict personalities usually do. Listen for attacks about something personal like lack of education or smarts, a physical characteristic, or anything about the *person*.

Personal attacks are a definite red flag, but keep listening.

A Few Quick Clues

- If they don't take your advice, even when they say they will
- Lots of crisis calls and email with demand they you must act *now*
- If they can't summon empathy for anyone

What to Avoid in Early Analysis

- Avoid walking the confirmation bias path by forming an opinion too early and working toward confirming that opinion. Instead, listen for other clues.
- Avoid quick determinations about whether they are high conflict or not. Instead, listen for other clues.
- Avoid telling them they're high conflict. Please.

Megan Hunter, MBA, is the co-founder and CEO of the High Conflict Institute along with author and speaker, Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. who developed the high-conflict personality theory. She provides training and consultation globally.