



Surviving Post Separation Abuse & YOUR HIGH CONFLICT CO-PARENT

Day 6: Saturday, April 22nd

Co-Parenting Communication Strategies

Bill Eddy, LCSW, JD

[00:00:00]

Welcome everyone. I'm so excited that you've been with us for this online virtual summit on surviving post separation abuse and a high conflict co-parent. Really our goal this week has been to offer you tangible strategies that you can use to help you communicate, parent, regulate, and really mitigate all that comes in the aftermath of an abusive relationship.

I'm Sybil Cummin. I'm a licensed professional counselor, the creator of Rising Beyond Power and Control the Rising Beyond Community and The Rising Beyond Podcast. And today I have Bill Eddy with me, and he is going to talk about all things, communicating with your high conflict co-parent because we know that if you have children, you can't go no contact with your ex-partner.

And so you have to find a way to communicate. So [00:01:00] that's what mostly what we're gonna be talking about today. So if you don't know Bill Eddie, he has done a lot of work in this area. He is the co-founder and chief Innovation officer of the High Conflict Institute in San Diego, California. He pioneered the high conflict personality theory and has become an expert on managing disputes involving people with high conflict personalities.

He was a senior family mediator at the National Conflict Resolution Center for 15 years. A certified family law specialist lawyer representing clients in family court for 15 years, and a licensed clinical social worker therapist with over 12 years of experience. He now serves on the faculty of the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution at the Pepperdine University School of Law in California, and is a conjoint associate professor with the University of New Castle Law School in Australia.

He has been a speaker and trainer in over 35 US states in 13 countries, and how I was introduced to Bill is through his books. So he is [00:02:00] the author or co-author of over 20 books, manuals, and workbooks. All of the things that we're talking about today. He also writes for Psychology Today. Bill, thank thanks for being here with us.

Bill Eddy: Thank you so much, Sybil. Glad to be on.

Sybil: Yeah. So if you, have an abusive partner, you've separated and you have children, you're gonna have to co-parent with this person in some way, shape, or form. One of the things that I really love about your work is that communication piece. Mm-hmm. So I highly recommend getting your co-parenting messenger or communication app, but what are some things that people can do or, or your method of helping people communicate in a way that is not gonna just blow up everywhere.

Bill Eddy: Yeah, so we developed this method called the BIFF Method, and BIFF stands for brief, informative, [00:03:00] friendly, and firm. And the idea is this is a way you can think through what you're writing. And often I tell people, just write what you wanna write in response or to start a conversation. Then go back over it and ask yourself, is this brief?

And when people show me four pages and they say, I think this covers everything. And I said, yeah, but you need a paragraph, not four pages. Usually a paragraph is sufficient. It's informative, just straight information. It's not opinions, defenses, emotions, judgments, all of that other stuff, that it's really about what really needs to be communicated and that it's friendly.

It doesn't have to be super friendly, but you know, thank you for letting me know your concern or thank you for the information about the medication or, whatever it is. Just to set [00:04:00] the tone in a positive way and firm, firm doesn't mean harsh. It means you end the hostile conversation. So if you get an email saying you've done everything wrong and you're a piece of dirt, and all of that, that the way you respond doesn't make them do that even more.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And so you don't get down in the mud. You stay above the mud, but you don't attack them. You just provide information and let go. It sometimes doesn't feel satisfying cuz you didn't, you know, shoot an arrow back. But that actually keeps the fight going. So information is the way to go.

So brief, informative, friendly, and firm.

Sybil: And I think it's so important cuz I hear some of that too from the clients I work with of "friendly?!" This person who used for 20 years, you want to be friendly. [00:05:00]

Bill Eddy: Just a tiny touch, like, thank you for letting me know your concern, or Thank you for that question.

Yeah, something like that. And then you go on, you it, you don't overdo it. And in fact, I discourage people overdoing things like really empathizing with an abusive person. Yeah. Or overdoing the respect those kinds of things that it doesn't hurt to just a couple drops of friendliness and then onto the business.

Because otherwise you're reinforcing them being in this kind of powerful position over you. So it's a narrow balance and BIFF seems to be a good way to do it..

Sybil: Yes. And so if you receive the four page monologue message about how you're a horrible parent and all the things are your fault and you don't know how to handle money, and you know, all those wonderful things that you're gonna probably get or you've already received [00:06:00] in this email.

And then how is it that you can pick through those emails that come your way or messages. To really find what do I actually have to respond to?

Bill Eddy: Well, here's a tip. And when we did the book, cuz we have three BIFF books now, the first one, then one for co-parent communication, which is really what you and I are talking about right now, and one for BIFF at work.

But when I did this, I had two co-authors and one of them, Kevin Chaffin. Came up with the idea that I want to give him credit for is take the email you've received and rewrite it in the BIFF format. And when you do that, you'll see there's like out of 10 sentences, there's one sentence that actually needs a response.

Like there's a question in there, you know, or you shouldn't have done such and such and never do that again. And you wanna explain, the [00:07:00] doctor said we need to do such and such. And that's it. So that's one way to do it. Another is a lot of people say, just put it in a drawer or just, you know, put it in some little storage box on your computer for 24 hours and then look at it and decide how you wanna respond.

But you're absolutely right. There's so much that you don't need to respond to. In the kind of conversations we're seeing these days, especially from an abusive parent who, by the way I wanna mention, doesn't change because there's been a separation or divorce, right? Their personality is still the one they've had for the last 20, 30, 40, 50 years.

So you're managing your communication, not changing the other person's personality.

Sybil: Yeah. And I think there's that hope. I get this question, and I've always feel sad with the answer I have to give, but when is my ex gonna start respecting my [00:08:00] boundaries? Yeah. You know, you're never gonna respect them.

They're never going to respect them. But what I've seen with the BIFF communication model is, through you holding some boundaries with that and not, tit for tatting, anything, their behavior sometimes does shift on the other side. Do you see that?

Bill Eddy: Oh yes. And what's interesting, I'm starting to hear from lawyers at conferences now.

I run into them and I say, Bill my client was using the BIFF method for six months, and her ex was just horrible saying all these things. And then he started writing back the same way as she was and, and he doesn't even know it's a method. Yeah, and, and so it's like with repetition, to me that's one of the key things is repetition.

Sometimes the other person does adapt their behavior, but it's not like you [00:09:00] tell somebody, please respect my boundary. Oh, oh, okay. Sorry, I stepped on your toes. It's like 10 times when you do that, I can't do this for you or when you do that, I have to do this. So like setting boundaries is what I'm going to do.

Not changing what they're going to do. And that's really the way to focus our attention.

Sybil: Yeah. That, that being firm and you kind of having your boundaries through your writing. We again, like you said, we're not gonna change their desire for power and control over you or how they work in their world. The high conflict personalities. This is how they work in their world.

Bill Eddy: Exactly, and, and I think that's so hard for people to accept is that they're treating me badly. And the thing is, have a lot of people in your life who treat you well. Because this person may never treat you well.

And you don't have to have them. You, keep them at [00:10:00] a arms length and know what to do and make it into a matter of fact routine. And that's BIFF communications are like that. Here's my next matter of fact message.

Sybil: Yeah. Do you have any thoughts on ways to go about, we've talked a little bit about like kind of slowing things down, giving it a 24 hour, like hiatus unless it's an emergency right.

But other things that you help clients or you've, you've seen over there that have helped. Right. So many of my clients, they get the ding, the notification, right. And they're like, Oh my gosh. And they're completely dysregulated and so yes, slowing things down is so helpful. Are there some other things that you've seen that, that are really helpful in that?

Bill Eddy: I think one thing that really helps is giving yourself encouraging statements. And I find this like before doing mediation, cuz I, was doing mediation for 15 years, and a lot of it was high [00:11:00] conflict cases. And I remember before going into the mediation room, I would tell myself, Bill remember, it's not about you.

It's about the other person's thinking and way of being, and I'm not responsible for how it turns out, they are, I'm responsible for my part. And I can't change how people think. That's what I call a "forget about it". Just forget about it. Mm-hmm. Also is don't get focused on the past.

Because what happens is when you get focused on the past, you just go down a rabbit hole and you just can't get out of that, cuz they can always argue with you about the past. What people don't realize is high conflict, people are stuck in the past because they don't go through the normal grieving and healing process.

So they don't go through the denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And so [00:12:00] they're rewriting history all the time and trying to get you to agree with them that they were right and you were wrong, and you're going, that's not true. So focusing on the past just gets you into trouble. So the thing is always keep redirecting it to the future.

What can we do now? What are our choices now? Another tip, and actually what I'm telling you is what I call the four. Forget About It's - forget about changing how they think. Forget about the past. Focus on what to do, your choices. Also, forget about opening up emotions. Try to steer clear of emotions because since high conflict, people don't grieve and heal.

Their emotions aren't resolved. And when you focus on emotions, all this stuff comes flooding in and they either get angry or depressed or something that's not really useful. And so just focus on thinking and doing. What do you think about these [00:13:00] choices? Or here's what we can do now. And the last thing is

don't tell them you think they have a personality disorder or they're a high conflict person.

You might be right, but it doesn't help to say it out loud, just say it to yourself and adapt what you do. Don't try to change them, change what you do. Because if they have like a personality disorder, the definition of that is it doesn't change. It's an enduring pattern of interpersonal dysfunction, basically.

So that's the four. Forget about it.

Sybil: The, the third. Forget about it. I'm thinking kinda the way I talk with people when they bring up emotion, right? Because this is, there's a lot of emotional stuff if they're your babies, right? I'm a mama and so when they're my babies, I've got a lot of emotion.

But when someone has abused you, they no longer get that honor of knowing anything about your emotions. They don't get that. Yeah. Yeah. And so, that's a [00:14:00] like a privilege for someone to get to know your stuff and know your vulnerabilities and know those things and they lost it. And so that's why you get to hold it to yourself and just with your safe people.

Bill Eddy: Exactly. You're safe people. That's where you talk about emotions and let your emotions out, but not with someone that's going to turn 'em into ammunition.

Sybil: Right, right. Have they ever taken full accountability for anything? Nope. Have you won an argument? Nope, probably not. So it's not gonna happen now that you've separated and so you can save yourself so much grief and exhaustion, and you actually can help protect yourself and your kids.

Bill Eddy: Right

Sybil: By holding that emotion, and also, yes, not being like you're a narcissist because that's just not helpful. Helpful for you maybe to know like those characteristics so you know how to work around it and mitigate. It doesn't need to be [00:15:00] out there and in those messages or in that communication.

Bill Eddy: Yeah, I call that your private working theory.

It's like, okay, so maybe he is a narcissist, he's arrogant, self-centered demeaning, all those things. Therefore, what do I need to do different? How would I communicate? And in many ways, it's just not making myself

vulnerable, which is the opposite of what you do in equal comfortable relationships. You do that, but with high conflict people, it's not safe to because it makes things worse.

And so you tell yourself, okay, I'm gonna be careful to do this and not that and I'm gonna be arms length, not as close and not as rejecting. Cuz when you're real rejecting. Of abusive people, they become more engaged in your life. So you wanna become boring, you wanna just make it routine. I teach judges a lot nowadays, and [00:16:00] that's one of the things I say, you wanna have a boring courtroom, cuz high conflict people love the drama of the courtroom if they can stir people up and if you start lecturing them and getting really angry, they've succeed. So be boring. And I think in relationships also especially after separation and divorce is just make it so routine that it doesn't energize the person against you.

Sybil: Yes. Cuz I get this question a lot of you know, it could be a GAL, it could be a judge, it could be a case worker, it could be whomever.

It seems incredible, but those with kind of those high conflict personalities are really engaging a lot of time. That's right. And so it's like, how are these people drawn in this way? Don't they see it? And so what are some things you can help people that really, you know, and I work with men and women, but more women, but they seem [00:17:00] so broken down after an abusive relationship.

They struggle to create that relationship with a caseworker, a GAL, whomever. And then they've got this, you know, really loud engaging person. So what are some ways to, I guess, mitigate that?

Bill Eddy: Yeah. If you have a decision maker that you need to talk to or explain your case to, is to try to really focus it down to three or four key patterns of behavior that concern you.

And usually it's about the kids. And so it's about parenting patterns. So if your ex yells a lot and that frightens the kids, frightens you, that may be one of the patterns you'll pick. Let me back up a little and say the reason for this is high conflict people, and I talk about high conflict people with narcissistic traits, borderline traits, antisocial traits, histrionic traits.

You don't have to figure out if it's a disorder or not. It's just that they [00:18:00] tend to push conflict up. Push it higher. So if you're dealing with a high conflict person, they grab people's attention emotionally with simplicity and emotions and also a lot of false statements. Whereas the average person who's separated

or divorcing someone like that, who's reasonable is, well, there's these 10 things this person does, and I want to tell you about all 10, and I'm gonna start in chronological order. And by the time you know, you're getting very far, you're losing the person's attention that you want to persuade. So if you wanna persuade the person, keep it simple. Like that's why really, if you can three themes and repeat the themes, and if you can put at least a mildly emotional word into the theme.

And so you have someone who's uncontrolled emotions, for example, uncontrollable emotions, so, he yells, [00:19:00] he punches the couch. He does this and that, and that's, and that's disturbing to the children. It's this uncontrolled emotions. And, and we often see that belittling of the children narcissists do a lot of belittling. And belittling the children talking down to them, telling them they're stupid, calling them names those kinds of things.

And there's no one single answer to what the theme should be it depends on your situation, but these are some common, and one I see a lot is they're lying or misleading professionals, and so they're lying to them or misleading them, saying things about you that aren't true. All of that. So you might have misleading professionals is one, or I have false statements to the court because there's been a lot of hearings and, and they get the transcript and they can show these statements were false.

So if you keep it focused and repetitive, [00:20:00] I've seen it where the judge starts saying, "Oh, this is the case with the uncontrollable emotions. Or the, the false statements to the court". And by the way, if you say the other party's lying, the judge is like, ho hum. You say the other other party lied to the judge.

Now you got their attention. They're like, Ooh, that's no good. I don't like that.

Sybil: Yeah, I like that too, because you notice if y'all are listening and you're noticing you are describing or observing like you're, you're putting observations. Not the opinion, like it's just, this is how this affects this, this is what I see.

Not just what I think is happening and why I think it's happening and all the things. And then the other piece, especially with those court transcripts or whatever, being able to refute the false narratives with evidence.

Bill Eddy: Yes. With facts like you said.

Sybil: In this transcript he said the opposite. In this transcript, right? So it's like refuting with their words, [00:21:00] evidence. It's not you, not on you, it's just on this paper, right? It's on the transcript and things like that is really helpful.

Bill Eddy: Exactly. That's what people need to do. I talk about that in my book, *Splitting*. It's chapter 14, is how to present your case without saying he's a narcissist or she's a borderline, or whatever. Is the facts. The facts, but organize them. Into a simple framework that has some emotional attention.

Sybil: Yeah, I like that. Just coming up with the themes, cuz there are, there are ways to put all of these behaviors into a category or into a theme.

Bill Eddy: Yeah.

Sybil: And that that will also, when you're, we call it in the Rising Beyond Community, the Trapper keeper 2000. Cuz we're from, I'm an eighties baby, so like trapper keeper, right? They were so cool. But where you keep all of your documentation, I mean some of the doc, right? There's like really thick binders, but that's such a great way to organize this evidence [00:22:00] goes here in the false hearing.

This evidence, it goes here in the, you know, whatever the uncontrolled emotion file or whatever. And it can just give you a framework to organize your stuff.

Bill Eddy: And that's exactly how the judge is organizing it. So if the judge is hearing that and repeating that, and they go, oh, this fits here, this fits here. This is the case of the uncontrollable anger. I remember this case, you know?

Sybil: Yes. Yes. And that's, that's a great, yeah. You, you know, you don't want the judge to come and be like, who are like, what? I don't know. It's like I'm hearing this for the first time kind of thing. But I was gonna ask from your book *Splitting* and I really appreciate it.

You really talk about, there's a difference kind of between being there's like being aggressive. There's not acknowledging things, and then there's being assertive specific to like false allegations. Can you explain like what does assertive actually look like?

Bill Eddy: Assertive, when you think, think of [00:23:00] aggressiveness, where you try to dominate the other person or destroy the other person, passive is when you allow the other person to dominate you or maybe even destroy you.

Assertive is where you're strong, but you're not. Your goal isn't to destroy the other person. Your goal is to provide accurate and useful information to a decision maker. And usually that's the judge. Sometimes it's a psychologist doing an evaluation or a clinical social worker. So you want to be as aggressive.

You wanna be as assertive as they are aggressive. So they say stuff that isn't even true about you and you wanna keep getting your answers out there and saying, actually this is what's true. And I think of when I've been to court and people have just re, you know, there's so much negative that's not accurate, I gotta match all of that.

But just briefly with here's what's [00:24:00] accurate, rather than saying that person is nuts, as I'm saying, actually, here's the accurate information so that the focus is on the information that's accurate. Not that I'm upset about what they said, because if a judge or evaluator hears that you're upset about what someone else said, they don't hear what the accurate information is.

So they say, yesterday you were irresponsible and unhelpful and the kids were so disappointed and blah, blah, blah. And what you say, actually, yesterday my boss had this project and I couldn't get out, I was half an hour late because of this project. That's all you have to say.

You don't have to say, that's not true or this, I mean, if it's not true, you can say that's not true. This is what's true. But don't do the emotional thing about that they're an idiot and here's your accurate information. Just say [00:25:00] you're accurate information.

Sybil: Yeah, I like that language because it takes emotion out. I was talking about as much as possible you're accruing data, like you're just getting data, just accruing your data. And, and it just takes some of that edge, that emotional edge off of things. And so here's the accurate information.

Bill Eddy: Yeah. Yeah.

Sybil: And then you just have it.

Bill Eddy: And so be assertive about information rather than aggressive about emotions and behavior. Which doesn't get information out. And while I'm at it is when I talk about three themes, is to get information facts, like you said. But get the most powerful facts out first.

So if there's like 10 examples of this theme, you wanna get the three worst examples out early while the person's still paying attention. Because sometimes if you go chronologically, by the time you get to the worst thing that happened, [00:26:00] the judge is already ordering lunch in his or her mind. Because, you know, they, they kind of go, okay, I kind of get it. No human being can keep their attention focused as long as a lot of family court declarations and affidavits. So you gotta get stuff out right away. You can say, as I'll explain further, but get the key points in the first page or two, or the first minute or two.

People don't realize it's so much more about communication. Than information. It's the way you communicate the information.

Sybil: Yes. Yeah. And I think that that's so important because I also hear, you know, certain times if it's just a quick status conference or something really quick, they're like, oh, but I didn't even have time to say the thing.

And so it's like, if the judge needed to hear one thing, right? What is that? Then your backup choice, like, what's that one? You know? And if you have more time, great. Then you get to [00:27:00] show more context. But I think that's the tricky part is you really want that to show the context.

You wanna give them the context. Which, which makes sense in a lot of ways. But that's only if you have time to give the context.

Bill Eddy: Yeah, well, think of it as like your first page. Get your three themes onto your first page with some of the worst examples that are factual, not emotional. Just describe what, what's happening.

And a lot of times that really can get through. And I just encourage people to be really assertive because they often think, well, the judge is gonna figure this out, and the judge is gonna figure him out, or her out. And it took me a couple years as a lawyer practicing in court to realize that's not true for most of the judges.

Most of them don't have the back. To really [00:28:00] understand. And so you've gotta lay it out in simple terms and repetitive terms for them.

Sybil: Yeah, and I was thinking when you're gonna read an article or you're on my email list, and you're reading my emails or whatever, or if I get a long email, Right.

I'm like scrolling and I'm like, oh, there's a heading, heading, heading, heading, heading. And so as I was thinking about in articles in those things, we look for

the headings and those are your themes. What is this gonna be about? What is this whole paper gonna be about? Do I wanna read it? Do I have time to read it?

And so yes, you are doing your introduction, your headings, so that I can breeze through. I can like look at it and be like, oh, okay, yeah. I need to know more about this one.

Bill Eddy: Yeah. Yeah. That's how our brains work. We, we organize around headings. Who knew?

Sybil: Right. What I love about this and even just how you're describing is it's doable. [00:29:00] Right, because it seems like you're sitting in court with your abusive person. You just heard all this horrible stuff about you that you may not have known.

There are gonna be some false things. Like before I knew what I know now, I just thought there was this thing called perjury and you couldn't lie on the stand like you'd get in trouble. Apparently that is not the case within the family court system. And it just seems so insurmountable, but what are your headings, what are your themes?

What is your introduction? Like, what is the most important? If you could wrap it up in one paragraph, what do we need the judge to know? And then we get to fill in pieces that feels really doable. And some people might need support to do that and that's what, you know, therapists that understand, cuz some of us in the mental health community don't, but, or a support group or someone in an a, you know, a DV agency or an attorney. And if you can't afford an attorney consulting for a couple hours, like paying for a couple hours,

Bill Eddy: That's one [00:30:00] thing I do. I do consultations and with a lot of people, this is what I do with them.

I help them narrow it down to their three topics. And kind of almost give them that as a task and then they come back a week or two later and say, okay, here's what I wrote. What do you think? And I usually help them trim it down a little bit more and really emphasize the focus. But yeah, that's something that I do a lot of consultation now, so that's one of the things I do plus working with lawyers to help them do that.

Sybil: Yes. Cuz sometimes due to financial abuse, it's a real thing, and they don't have hundreds of thousands of dollars like their partner has to blow in court. And so it's like you can pay for two or three hours with an attorney so that

you know the procedure. And you can go through something like this, so that you have a chance going in there.

Bill Eddy: Right.

Sybil: So it's like, let's think outside of the box. If you can't afford a full-time attorney that you know, you don't have the [00:31:00] \$5,000 retainer, you don't have it, what can you do?

And this is something that you can do.

Bill Eddy: I really like that you're emphasizing this is doable.

Sybil: Yes, yes. That there are ways to figure these things out. There are people that do know. I wish there were more people that knew, but that's why we're here. But that there are ways that you can position yourself to keep you and your, your children safer. There are, so it's doable.

So, yeah. And kind of wrapping up, are there any little extra tips or tidbits that you wanna leave our audience with?

Bill Eddy: Just that people aren't alone. There's a lot of people dealing with this. About 10% of the adult population has a personality disorder. Half or more of those are cluster B, and they have a lot of high conflict traits.

And you're not gonna change the person, but get support from people who understand and you're [00:32:00] not alone.

Sybil: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And we are posting all of Bill's books and, and links and stuff like that in the writing here below the video. And so if you want access or you want to learn more about that, or you want a little bit more of a template, that's where you can go to get that.

So Bill thank you so much for joining us. I think it'll be so helpful for so many people that do feel like it's insurmountable.

Bill Eddy: Well, thank you for having me on and best wishes with your work and your summit.

Sybil: Thank you so much, and thank you all for joining us for this interview and for the summit.

And be looking for more information from me in the future.