

Resolution Reflections: On Helplessness

by Jay Uhler

It is important to distinguish between a helpless situation where there are no options and feelings of helplessness. They are easily confused because feeling helpless can be very convincing. The emotion of helplessness can be paralyzing. Helplessness is experienced when a person is stuck, does not know how to change a situation and sees no way out. Most people, when they are involved in a conflict, feel helpless.

Feelings of helplessness can be especially devastating in family conflicts because the conflict is ever present in the lives of those who are touched by it. Family conflicts have a ripple effect. They can create feelings of helplessness in family members who are forced to take sides. Others feel helpless to do anything to reduce the pain they perceive in the disputing family members. Family conflicts can affect people outside of the family and cause them to feel helpless to alter the situation. Children are especially vulnerable to family conflict, especially if the conflict is between divorcing parents.

A significant service a mediator can provide for all those who experience the effects of a family conflict is to alleviate the sense of helplessness that prevails. Often, it is when people feel stuck that they seek mediation. Mediation is a safe place to explore options that the disputants could not see on their own or those that they cannot believe could be possible. Recognizing options reduces helplessness.

People sometimes take positions for which they are prepared to "die", yet with the assistance of a skilled, caring mediator they can find options and create solutions that are better than the disputants have discovered on their own. When the parties to the conflict are encouraged to share and listen to each others needs and suggestions about ways that they can all get their needs satisfied, they can

cooperatively build on each other's ideas for resolution. That has the potential for everyone's needs to be met.

Mediators do much to alleviate disputant's feelings of helplessness when they assist them to see solutions they cannot discover without guidance. For them to use their creativity to develop their own options is preferable, however, it can also be useful to offer suggestions when family members in the mediation are getting nowhere. Timing is crucial when the mediator offers options, but they may be greatly appreciated by those who are stuck.

It is wonderful to know that we as mediators can reduce a person's, a couple's or a family's pain by helping them to get unstuck—by guiding them beyond their helpless feelings to a new experience of community.

Jay Uhler is an Organizational and Clinical Psychologist, Ordained Minister, the Facilitator for the Dispute Resolution Forum Case Conference in the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, lecturer on negotiation and mediation at DRF at HLS, Boston University and Suffolk Law Schools, and the author of *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*.

Jay assists to resolve conflicts in corporations, small businesses, families with issues relating to trusts and multi-party, multi-cultural, multi-gender conflicts. He may be reached at 978-685-8550. See more at JayUhler.com.