



ACT OUT NEWS

RELATIONSHIP STATUS – a Forum Theatre Performance by 7 courageous young people in Fremantle, Cockburn and Melville dealing with respect in relationships. They are also filming, editing, marketing and creating their own blog. **You are all invited!**
www.teen2ActOut.actout.com.au (work in progress)

KULCHA 30 June 2011
 6 – 8 pm
 Tickets \$ 10 @ door



CAUTION: HIGH CONFLICT – ENTER THROUGH THE RIGHT

At **Act Out** it is often our goal to facilitate right brain thinking – we want our clients to access kinaesthetic and emotional intelligences, their use of metaphor, improvisation and storytelling; in effect we work towards gaining access to creativity and imagination to compliment left-brain thinking and generate holistic and engaging problem solving.

Generally, the obstacle to creative problem solving is that we are conditioned to rely heavily on our left brain functions and lose our agility in imaginative, creative thinking as we get stuck in ordered, reasonable and logical thinking.

However, as was recently brought up at the **Family Pathways Network Conference on Mental Health and the Family Law System**, being stuck in **right brain emotionally reactive thinking** can be equally unproductive.

Megan Hunter, an expert in conflict resolution from the Arizona-based **Conflict Resolution Institute** in the US, highlighted that often there is a pattern in the behaviours of people who are repeatedly involved in conflict through the courts. She referred to **High Conflict Personalities** - characters that tend to take up a disproportionately higher ratio of time and attention from service providers. You probably know exactly who this refers to but Ms Hunter and Dr George Lipton from the University of Western Australia both outlined a few characteristics.

HIGH CONFLICT PERSONALITY

They may or may not fall under the label of some of the more common personality disorders such as narcissistic, histrionic, antisocial or borderline personality disorder, but they display similar fear-based behaviours as well as a lack of self awareness and lack of flexible adaptation.

These characters have no idea why they are the way they are. They don't actually realise that they are being unreasonable and contributing to their own problem, or that they affect other people – they lack self awareness.



In addition, their thinking is inflexible and rigid, prone to extremes; it's all or nothing, black or white. They jump to conclusions and everything is an attack on them, they project their emotions and fears onto others. They may see you as the best one moment and quickly devalue you the next.

there are several reasons for this behaviour, but most interestingly for us is what is going on in their brains.

STUCK IN THE RIGHT BRAIN

The **corpus callosum** – a bundle of nerves that acts as a bridge between the right and the left brain – is apparently smaller and thinner in the brains of high conflict personalities.

This means that they struggle to move from one way of thinking to another; they effectively remain in a right brain, fast, defensive thinking pattern where they distort and exaggerate situations.

As professionals, we have been trained to respond to problems by attempting to give feedback and elicit a logical and reasonable way of seeing. 'This will not work with this type of personality,' said Ms Hunter.

'They cannot access their logical left brain thinking, they cannot process information back and forth cross the corpus callosum to formulate logical and reasonable thoughts.'

What is more, the **amygdala**, a small mass of tissue inside the brain that is triggered when we go into a crisis situation, can remain constantly turned on in these individuals further hindering their ability for logical and analytical thought processes.

There is also proof, added Ms Hunter, that the mirror neurons, cells that are understood to influence how we learn empathy by mirroring, are also deficient in high conflict personality individuals. They did not learn empathy when it was being modelled to them as children.



This all leads to a need for ways to communicate with high conflict personalities that give us access to the right brain and allow them to cross over into the left brain.

TALK TO THE RIGHT BRAIN

High conflict personalities respond well to E.A.R. statements – statements, suggests Ms Hunter, which let them know that you **E**mpathise, that they have your **A**ttention and that you **R**espect their efforts. This does not mean that you agree, but that you are listening to them.

'When they are really unmanageable ask them to make a list,' laughingly suggests Ms Hunter, who reminds us that these personalities need a lot of structure and making a list can be a quick way to get them into ordered, structured thinking.

Because they are not easily able to reason, to listen to logic, or to assimilate any feedback or insights that you may have for them, they need a different approach. An approach that somehow enables them to access their own problem solving skills so they can stop blaming you and get insights into their emotions and eventually their problems.

For us at **Act Out**, engaging easily angered, emotional clients, dealing with a lot of problems, has been one of our areas of expertise, especially with our work with perpetrators of violence.

While listening to Ms Hunter and Dr Lipton, I thought about the many activities and techniques that we employ in our work at that connect people directly to their right brain.

At the same time, the divergent or listing techniques in creative problem solving take people in and out of free and structured thinking.

I started to see another reason why the aesthetic and right brain activities were so successful, and how they may be used to work in the opposite direction. Instead of enabling people to move from predominantly left brain to right brain thinking, the techniques could be used to facilitate movement across in the opposite direction, towards reason, logic and the structure necessary to analyse and receive insight into difficult situations.

Act Out – Theatre for Transformation

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