Who Are High Conflict People? *Updated for 2019*

© 2019 Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

Who Are High Conflict People? Updated for 2019
by Bill Eddy, LCSW Esq.

High-conflict people (HCPs) have a pattern of high-conflict behavior that increases conflict rather than reducing or resolving it. This pattern usually happens over and over again in many different situations with many different people. The issue that seems in conflict at the time is not what is increasing the conflict. The "issue" is the high-conflict personality and how the person approaches problem-solving. With HCPs, the pattern of behavior includes a lot of:

Blaming others

All-or-nothing thinking

Unmanaged emotions

Extreme behaviors

Blaming others: HCPs stand out, because of the intensity of their blame for others – especially for those close to them or in authority positions over them. For them, it is highly personal and feels like they might not survive if things don't go their way. So, they focus on attacking and blaming someone else and find fault with everything

that person does, even though it may be quite minor or non-existent compared to the high-conflict behavior of the HCP. In contrast to their blame of others, they can see no fault in themselves and see themselves as free of all responsibility for the problem. If you have been someone's *target of blame*, you already know what I'm talking about.

They also blame strangers, because it's easy. On the Internet, they're anonymous and make the most extreme statements. Even if they know you, there is a sense of distance and safety, so they can be extremely blaming.

All-or-nothing thinking: HCPs tend to see conflicts in terms of one simple solution rather than taking time to analyze the situation, hear different points of view and consider several possible solutions. Compromise and flexibility seem impossible to them, as though they could not survive if things did not turn out absolutely their way. They often predict extreme outcomes if others do not handle things the way that they want. And if friends disagree on a minor issue, they may end their friendships on the spot – an *all-or-nothing* solution.

Unmanaged emotions: HCPs tend to become very emotional about their points of view and often catch everyone else by surprise with their intense fear, anger, yelling or disrespect for those nearby or those who receive their comments over the Internet – or anywhere. Their emotions are often way out of proportion to the issue being discussed. This often shocks everyone else. They often seem unable to control their own emotions and may regret them afterwards – or defend them as totally appropriate, and insist that you should too.

On the other hand, there are some HCPs who don't lose control of their emotions, but use emotional manipulation to hurt others. They trigger upset feelings in ways that are not obvious (sometimes while they seem very calm). But these emotional manipulations push people away and don't get them what they want in the long run. They often seem clueless about their devastating and exhausting emotional impact on others.

Extreme behaviors: HCPs frequently engage in extreme behavior, whether it's in writing or in person. This may include shoving or hitting, spreading rumors or outright lies, trying to have obsessive contact and keep track of your every move – or refusing to have any contact at all, even though you may be depending on them to respond. Many of their extreme behaviors are related to losing control over their emotions, such as suddenly throwing things or making very mean statements to those they care about the most. Other behaviors are related to an intense drive to control or dominate those closest to them, such as hiding your personal items, keeping you from leaving a conversation, threatening extreme action if you don't agree, or physically abusing you.

Personality Disorders or Traits

HCPs also seem to have personality disorders or some traits of these disorders. This means that they have long-term patterns of: interpersonal dysfunction, lack of reflection on their own behavior, and lack of change. Mental health professionals have identified ten personality disorders. Five of these have a tendency to become HCPs: those with narcissistic, borderline, antisocial, paranoid, and histrionic personality disorders or traits. This helps us understand why they stay stuck in conflict—namely because they don't reflect on their part of the problem and they don't change. So, the conflict continues or gets worse.

Is High-Conflict Personality a Diagnosis?

No. Medical and mental health professionals diagnose disorders so that they can treat them in their patients. However, high-conflict personality is not a diagnosis and high-conflict people are not looking for treatment and you are not their counselor or doctor. Instead, a high-conflict personality is just a description of conflict behavior—a pattern of repeated behavior in a conflict. It's not listed in the mental health book of disorders and it doesn't have to be interpreted by a mental health professional. Anyone can see the possible four characteristics of a high-conflict personality listed at the start of this article. If you do, remember that you are not treating them. Just

adapt your own behavior toward them and you will usually have more success.

For example, avoid trying to give them insight into their own behavior. That will just blow up and trigger defensiveness. Avoid focusing too much on the past. You will be more effective focusing on the future and looking at what you and/or the other person can do now. Try to steer clear of emotional confrontations with HCPs (such as anger, tears, or saying they are frustrating). When engaged with their emotions, they tend to get overwhelmed and are more likely to attack others, so it's better to stay matter-of-fact and focused on things outside of your relationship. And don't tell them that you think they have a high-conflict personality or personality disorder. If you do, they may turn on you as their next *target of blame*—for months or years!

A Predictable Pattern

Various studies suggest that up to 15% of our society (and growing) has a personality disorder. But not all people with personality disorders are high-conflict people (they aren't preoccupied with blaming others). And not all high-conflict people have personality disorders (they may just have some traits). Though it's a growing problem, it's a ***predictable*** problem—and can be handled in most cases, ***if*** you understand it. Once you know some aspects of their pattern of behavior, you may be able to anticipate other problems that will arise and avoid them or prepare to respond to them.

Perhaps you know someone with this pattern. Someone who insists that you, or someone you know, is *entirely* to blame for a large or small (or non-existent) problem. If so, he or she may be an HCP. However, before you rush to tell that person that he or she is an HCP, remember***: Do not openly label people and don't use this information as a weapon***. It will make your life much more difficult if you do.

HCPs are in every occupation, every culture, and every country. This has nothing to do with intelligence. Some HCPs are very smart, while others are not—like the whole population. They tend to have more

substance abuse, more depression, more anxiety, and other problems. This is often because their ways of interacting don't work, which frustrations them as well as everyone around them. Yet they aren't able to reflect on themselves and you can't make them.

I recommend having a "Private Working Theory" that someone may be an HCP. You don't tell the person and you don't assume you are right. You simply focus on key methods to help in *managing* your relationship, such as paying more attention to the following (as explained in depth in my books ***IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!*** and ***5 TYPES OF PEOPLE WHO CAN RUIN YOUR LIFE***):

1) **Connecting** with the person with empathy, attention and/or respect (unless it's not safe and you just need to stay away from the person).

2) **Analyzing** your realistic options in dealing with the person (write a list of options, then decide which one makes the most realistic sense in dealing with him or her; sometimes it's best to slowly phase the person out of your life).

3) **Responding** to hostility or misinformation: Use responses that are Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm (B.I.F.F.). Avoid advice, admonishments and apologies – they will use these against you later.

4) **Setting Limits** on dangerous or bothersome behavior, by deciding when, where and how you meet to discuss issues. Getting assistance from authorities (such as police), advocates (such as lawyers), and supportive persons (family and friends) to help you decide how to set limits. Avoid harsh statements as an attempt to set limits, as they just increase the HCP's bad behavior.

It's better to learn about the predictable *behavior patterns* of HCPs and ways to respond constructively. If you think someone is an HCP, use this information to focus on ways of changing your own behavior, not theirs. Manage your relationship primarily by managing your own anxiety and your own responses.