

Communication Strategies in High Conflict Situations

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide with your hosts, Jody Argentino and Candace de Laona. Thanks for joining us, Jody.

Jody Argentino: Yeah, we'll be had a lot of fun in the last one, talking about some, uh, conflicts in families with, uh, you know, Brittany Spear's family and Michael's family. And so this week we wanted to talk a little bit about.

Jody Argentino: Um, uh, c communication in those high conflicts situations, whether it's work or friends or family. I see it most of the time with co-parents. Um, but uh, but sort of figuring out the best ways to have communication in high conflict situations is something that helps all of us, I think, in everyday life.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I mean, I think, I think, uh, you know, for our listeners, when, when Jodi and I prepare episodes like this, we think of all the different issues that will impact our sandwich generation listeners and the best way to impart information that we have or knowledge that we've sort of acquired along the way, whether it's, um, through clients or through our own lives.

Candace Dellacona: And, uh, one of Jodi's. Amazing suggestions was this exact topic. And so as we were preparing for it, and I, I'd mentioned this to Jody earlier that it felt like a topic that was gonna squarely be in sort of Jody's camp, right? Jody as our family law representative, our matrimonial, um, lawyer. Someone in the family law space and, and really, you know, thinking about it for three seconds more, I realized, you know, this is such a universal topic, right?

Candace Dellacona: Um, communication and effective communication, how we can help the members of the sandwich generation, our own clients can effectively communicate with each other,

Jody Argentino: right? So the one communication method I have seen work best in both, um, mental health and law, right, is, um, a, a concept called b. Which stands for brief, informative, friendly, and firm.

Jody Argentino: I've also heard focused substituted for, um, either the friendly or the firm. And, um, bill Eddie is the, is the brain behind this concept and wrote, uh, quick responses to high conflict people. And he is, um, the president of High Conflict Institute, et cetera. So I wanna give him Duke Reddit, um, because this is a, a concept that we use so often.

Jody Argentino: Parent coordination and, um, any other training for people that we, we need to know how to communicate without escalating a situation. Right. So it's designed to calm a hostile situation.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: Or hostile conversation. And I've used it in my own personal life tons of times.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. So well, let's, before we get into sort of like this amazing methodology, um, that, that is incredibly useful, I think it's important to stop and, and talk about, you know, what is communication, right?

Candace Dellacona: So the communication, right, is transferring ideas, information, or even your feelings between two parties or more. Um, and. Communication can be done in all sorts of ways. Obviously you can send emails, you know, verbal, nonverbal, um, and, and you know, I think breaking it down to think about the ways in which we communicate, um, the methods we choose will really help us implement.

Candace Dellacona: A concept like Biff. So, you know, I think it, it is important to think about how we communicate and, and you know, when it's verbal, are we talking about communication that's respectful? Is it, is it direct enough? Is it vague to the listener? And then, you know, you can get into nonverbal stuff, which is a actually really fascinating because what I've read and what I understand to, to be nonverbal communication is it's intuitive and it's unconscious.

Candace Dellacona: Um, but nonetheless can be really damaging. Right.

Jody Argentino: Right. We come to every situation with our own schema, right? Our own set of sun sunglasses, our own set of eyeglasses, of how we see the world based on how we grew up. We have our own trigger, right? Actually, I heard a word today called glimmers, which is the opposite of triggers.

Jody Argentino: So it's like the things that bring you joy, um, during the day. And so, but we all come to, uh, to every conversation and every situation with our own triggers from our own past, our own culture. So, um, so I think part of the concept of Biff communication is to sort of pull those things out as best you possibly can.

Yeah. And it's

Jody Argentino: designed for written communication, right? Because when we're having verbal communication, as we often show on our podcast, no, not always the right words come out. Right. So, um, so there's not as much of an ability to control, um, your own, um. Your own expression or your own instincts, or your own innate way of, uh, responding to something, your reactions Right, right.

Jody Argentino: Your actions. Thank you. It's, um, it's a lot easier to do that when you can write it down, look at it, double check it, put it away for a few minutes, go back to it. Rather than if you're on the spot in a conversation and having that willpower to say, I don't wanna have this conversation right now, or Let's discuss this in a different format, that that takes a lot of, a lot of self-control.

Jody Argentino: That is, yeah. Especially when you're in like a defensive or being, um. Something where you're being accused that's, that's a lot to ask of anyone.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I mean, I think like the double-edged sword, right, with written communication is the things that you point out. The positives are, it gives you the opportunity to really sort of craft what your thoughts are and take a breath to talk about.

Candace Dellacona: Really what the heart of the matter is in, in the most effective way, or what you perceive to be the most effective way. And the flip side of, of that, the downside of written communication is if you aren't doing a great job at expressing yourself, or perhaps you use the wrong words, um, that are maybe inflammatory or hurtful to someone, you've just memorialized it by putting it in writing.

Candace Dellacona: Um, so I think it's really important that you bring up that, you know, this, this Biff approach is. An approach that we talk about with our clients and our loved ones in writing. I think it's really important to think about too, how we're a lot of us are communicating, which is text messages. Absolute.

Candace Dellacona: Absolutely.

Jody Argentino: Which can be so, it's so hard because if, first of all, it's immediate gratification. Right? Immediate response. Because how many people actually can say, okay, I'm gonna respond to this text. When I am in a good place and I am focused, et cetera, the whole point of attacks is it's totally invasive in your, in your world.

Yes.

Jody Argentino: Um, and in that respect, it's, it's almost worse than oral communication. Right? Verbal communication. Because, because it's so reactive, not even paying attention. Yes. And you're not even necessarily paying attention.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: I did wanna say, I, I jumped up and grabbed a book off my shelf, uh, Candace. While we were chatting, because I have this book called Nonviolent Communication by, uh, Marshall Rosenberg, which is phenomenal.

Jody Argentino: It's not a bi equivalent, completely different strategies, but it, it talks about when you are verbally expressing yourself or in writing, not assigning an intent to the other person's word, and something you had said about, uh, how we say things and sometimes are misinterpret, like misinterpreted or it comes off the wrong way, whatever.

Jody Argentino: I think that is something that, um, it just made sparked my, my, uh, my memory and I was like, oh, let me go grab that book, because that's exactly what we're talking about. And this whole concept is how to, I wanna say how to avoid other people's triggers, but that makes me, um, feel like I'm, I'm saying you should walk on eggshells.

Jody Argentino: And I'm not saying that. Um,

Candace Dellacona: well, I mean, I think, you know, the best way to communicate is, is the way in which you want the listener to hear it. Um, and so I think, you know, when you employ strategies like this, it allows you to really get to the heart of the matter and make sure that the message can be delivered in the best possible way with the best possible.

Candace Dellacona: Chance of the person who needs to hear it receiving it, right? Right.

Jody Argentino: It's about the outcome, right? Like you're trying to, um, you're trying to elicit a particular thing from the other person. Now, um, I'm gonna say this doesn't necessarily apply to someone who's doing it in an evil way, right? Like, if your intention is to hurt the other person, obviously this is not the podcast for you.

Jody Argentino: If the intention is to get across information and or. Um, deescalate a situation. That's what we're talking about.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Let's get into it too. And let's talk about, you know, the best ways that we've found, um, you know, in a professional setting. Certainly, and I think they can easily be employed in your interpersonal life.

Candace Dellacona: Um, you know, my clients, when you're dealing with an aged in loved one, a parent going into a nursing home, and siblings have different ideas about, about how things should go, um, and in your, in your life. Uh, you know, when you're advising clients on ending a relationship and co-parenting with someone who you may not be the biggest fan of anymore and, and, and how to communicate with those people.

Candace Dellacona: Right,

Jody Argentino: right. And I love when people say to me, well, I'm a really good communicator, and I'm like, see, the thing is about that is one person can't be a good communicator because you can only be a good communicator if you are actually adjusting the way you communicate.

For

Jody Argentino: the other person knowing how they receive the information.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: Right. So it takes two to tango on that. So, well, let's talk

Candace Dellacona: about Biff. So you've already told us that it's an acronym and it's BIF like Frank, F like Frank.

Jody Argentino: Yes. And I, I always, for some reason, I always think of, um, back to the future. That, that really aggressive character. Yeah. Dave Biff and that, that's how it sticks in my head for some reason.

Jody Argentino: That's good. Visualize that, right? It's the

Candace Dellacona: opposite,

Jody Argentino: right? Which be anti Biff don't, don't be, don't be him. And the really, I'm gonna say an underlying principle of the entire thing is to avoid blame, right? You don't wanna take blame, you don't wanna place blame because that either puts you in a vulnerable position or that puts the other person in a defensive position.

Candace Dellacona: So that's sort of the jumping off point.

Jody Argentino: I, I think so. That's my own personal, I'm gonna say perspective of a jumping off point. The concept really is right. There's no advice, no admonishments, no apologies. Um, because advice is the trigger, um, to defense or reaction. We don't want to write something to someone that we know is gonna trigger them

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: To defend themselves. It's the same thing with admonishment, right? So advice kind of comes from a, I know better than you please. Right? Admonishment is saying to someone, you did something wrong. Now if Candace, I said, Candace, I can't believe you started this podcast that way, all of a sudden you're gonna be sparked to defend yourself because that's just who we are as people.

Jody Argentino: Sure. Um, so admonishments, um, you were perfectly fine in how you started this podcast, by the way. Oh,

Candace Dellacona: thanks. I.

Jody Argentino: Really you're telling someone they're doing something wrong, they're gonna automatically wanna defend themselves and, but apologies. Now that one seems, that's a little strange, right? Because

Candace Dellacona: counterintuitive, right?

Jody Argentino: Right. Because you would think, well, I'm gonna take accountability, right, for something I did wrong.

Jody Argentino: But if the other side is a high conflict personality, they're just gonna like focus on that failure and it's all gonna become about that rather than resolving the issue and actually talking about the issue. That's a good point. So brief, like,

Candace Dellacona: we'll just go. Yeah. So let's go to the first element of Biff, right?

Candace Dellacona: The first, the first letter. Be like, boy, be like brief. It

Jody Argentino: should be like three to five sentences, period. Yeah,

Candace Dellacona: yeah.

Jody Argentino: Because the less you say, the more you reduce that risk of triggering more hostility or having back and forth, or including something that maybe not you shouldn't include. Um. I am terrible at that.

Jody Argentino: Right. I have a DHD, um, and part of, um, I'm gonna say the manifestation of that for me is trying to explain when my brain goes to a random place. Um, so I'll say, oh, unrelated, or, um, I think I saw a meme the other day where it's like we always have parentheses explaining what we're saying. And so this is, this is a challenge for me.

Jody Argentino: So this is the part where, not the other parts. I'm okay with those, but this one I have to read, reread. Put it aside, come back to it. And even me, like I do this every single day. Right. So, but even talking to clients or anything else, um, I really have to cut down.

Candace Dellacona: I mean, I think the guidelines say in general that you know, when you have a message, you lose people as time ticks on, right?

Candace Dellacona: Right. And the same is true if you're reading a message, right? So if we're talking about Biff, it's in writing. And I think the guidelines basically say you should try to make your point in a paragraph or less. And mostly it leaves a lot less material for the listener or the reader to harp on. So be concise, be precise.

Candace Dellacona: Um, and be brief to the extent that, that you can. Um, and, and you know, in doing so, it maybe will maybe in some ways reduce the listeners or the reader's ability to, to, like you say, harp on or focus on one thing that may have been a slight misstep.

Jody Argentino: Right. I, I would be, um, it's funny 'cause you said harp on and I was like, oh, you know, I have, that's a trigger word for.

Jody Argentino: Um, uh, because that's a, that has a, a connotation of it being a negative, um,

Candace Dellacona: nagging

Jody Argentino: Right, right. Rather than just a, uh, maybe a focus in the wrong place. Sure. And so that's exactly, that's exactly what we're talking about, right? Yeah. Like everyone has their own relationship with words. Totally. And so the less words you have, not in this podcast, but on paper, um, the better, the better you are.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. And so then we're, we're moving on to I, right?

Jody Argentino: Yeah. So I mean, I is informative the, which seems to be like it would be, um, obvious. Sure. The purpose of the kind of communication we're talking about. Is that you're trying to get some point across some information translated from you, transferred from you to the other side of this conversation.

Right.

Jody Argentino: Um, and it's, um, often what I see in this when I'm working with co-parents is the need to point out that somebody else did something wrong. Right. No, you're wrong. It's not 10 o'clock on Friday, the appointment is 10 30 on Friday. You always get that wrong. Right, right. You never can keep an appointment, et cetera.

Jody Argentino: None of that is necessary, right? You can just write back the appointment is at 10:00 AM right? Whatever time I just said it was. Right, right. And the information still gets there, but you don't need to point out all of the other things.

Candace Dellacona: Right. So the other things could be your emotional feeling about certain things, right?

Candace Dellacona: Right. It could be your opinion about how you think something is gonna go. Um, there is a lot sort of in there that you're not supposed to say. You're supposed to forget the emotion. Forget your commentary, forget your POS position, forget defending yourself. Just stay focused and stay on the facts.

Jody Argentino: Right.

Jody Argentino: And that's, that's really hard to do when you are in emotional situation.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: Because you know, even just saying the 10 o'clock appointment, be like, I don't know why you scheduled it so early in the morning, but the appointment's at 10. Right. Obviously I'm not a morning riser. Right. Um, but you don't need all of that information.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Yeah. Um, you know, I think, I think that it, it can be really hard when you're already sort of struggling with, you know, being annoyed with whomever or anticipating what their response is gonna be. So keeping it straight and to the point can only do you a favor. Um, and, you know, after informative, that's sort of like dovetails, which is friendly.

Candace Dellacona: The last thing many of us feel towards the listener, towards the reader. When it's already in the middle of a conflict. Right. And so the advice is to keep it friendly, keep it light,

Jody Argentino: because you want the other person to mirror your emotions. If I come into a situation and I'm stressed out, it's really hard for the other person to be positive.

Jody Argentino: If I come into a situation and I'm positive, then it's, it's harder for the other person to be negative because you just came in positively. The, the, I think the hitch here, and this is what I see a lot with my clients. Over friendly such that it comes off completely insincere and or sarcastic.

Yeah. Um,

Jody Argentino: sarcasm does not translate into writing.

Jody Argentino: Um, unfortunately, 'cause I do it a lot, but it doesn't translate. So it can, it something that you intend to be friendly, um, can come off as really, um. I'm gonna,

Candace Dellacona: yeah.

Jody Argentino: Or like, um, just overdone.

Candace Dellacona: Well, you don't wanna be patronizing, right,

Jody Argentino: right. That, that's it, that's exactly the word I was thinking of. Yeah.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Candace Dellacona: Where it, it's gotta be sincere, um, because you don't want to have it come off as patronizing. You certainly don't want that to then be turned on you, and then it'll just devolve from, from that point. Um, I think maybe the best way to sort of remember how to be friendly is how you'd speak to a stranger, right?

Candace Dellacona: Where you're polite and you're pleasant, um, and there's nothing attached to them. You don't know them, you have no feelings towards them, so why wouldn't you, you know, be polite and be friendly, um, in that way when you're communicating with someone that you have, have, have no feelings toward at all.

Jody Argentino: I know.

Jody Argentino: I, I think that's a great example. And it's, it's like, thank you for sending me this email. Yeah. Right. That's, I mean, or thank you for bringing up this issue. Yeah. Or, um, you know, you can, you don't have to, I have clients that write like, uh, I don't know best when they're ending it. Like, and I'm like, no, you, but you're not offering the person your best.

Jody Argentino: Like, just take that out. But the other thing that people will go too formal. So I'll tell like the Fs that are bad people go too formal.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: I cannot tell you the amount of clients I have that start using Mr. Or Mrs. For their, um, for their co-parent. And I'm like, why are you calling them Mr. Smith? Like, did you call them Mr.

Jody Argentino: Smith during your relationship? Do you call them Mr. Smith to their child? Like no. Yeah, yeah. The person's name is Bob. Call the person Bob. If you had a nickname, no, you're not gonna call them Schnookums anymore. Right. But you don't need to be, um, so formal that it feels completely unnatural. Yeah. That is not.

Candace Dellacona: Well, you know, it's interesting, this sort of came up in all, you know, quick anecdote. Um, I was assisting a client who had feuding children and, um, she had a, a

pretty significant health event. And one of the, the. Her, the daughters lived close by and was a healthcare proxy, and one lived in California and the.

Candace Dellacona: Mother was not in a position to be sort of sharing information with the daughter who lived far away in California. She had a pretty significant medical event and the other daughter was sort of doing her best to keep the text exchange friendly. She does not like her sister. They don't get along. There have been issues.

Candace Dellacona: Stemming from years and years and years of conflict. Um, none of which any of us probably them also could unravel and, and really fix at this point. But it was really important that the daughter who was close by provided concise information and was friendly because she also recognized she was giving pretty bad news to her sister about their mom.

Candace Dellacona: And you know, I think that one of the things that kept. The communication civil and a free flow of information was that they let all of their interpersonal issues, which will continue forever. They let it go during a high, uh, time of high stress, um, in the text communication. And the mother was really relieved when everything, um, thank God, uh, worked out for her.

Candace Dellacona: So, you know, it is true that having that friendly approach can sometimes go a long way. And, and while it won't change people, it could change that particular conversation and, and not have it devolve further.

Jody Argentino: Right, right. And that's, that's what we're talking about. Talking about deescalating, right? Yeah.

Jody Argentino: Just not. Not leaving at the same or not bringing it up a level we wanna deescalate.

Candace Dellacona: Right, exactly. And the, the last, uh, f of the Biff is firm, right?

Jody Argentino: Yes. Which always, um, confuses people 'cause people see firm as a negative

Candace Dellacona: or unfriendly

Jody Argentino: Right. Or unfriendly. And it's not, it just means that you are not leaving a, um.

Jody Argentino: Like a hook for the other person to have to come back to you.

Yeah. Um,

Jody Argentino: it's not, it's not leading, it's not like saying, looking for a detailed response. Yeah. Um, and you might, the other person might still have to answer a question if you're trying to get information rather than tell information. Right. If you need a yes or no.

Jody Argentino: I try to make it a yes or no, right? It's sort of, that's the best advice,

Candace Dellacona: right? So you're, you're framing your questions if you need information with answers that are possible in one word, yes or no. So it's really important how you ask the questions and how you have the conversation, how the conversation is framed so that you are firm in the communication,

Jody Argentino: right?

Jody Argentino: And a lot of examples are like, okay, please let me know by end of day Tuesday. I would take that a step further, um, and say like, I would appreciate if you could let me know by the end of business.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, so boundaries and expectations are, are sort of part of that subcategory of firm where you're really setting expectations for the, the reader, the listener, the person on the other end of the communication to say that you wanna hear back at a certain time and hear the parameters and what I need.

Candace Dellacona: Um, and, and in being firm and, and, you know, providing sort of like a good framework. You're setting the parameters and the tone for the conversation and, and the information that you wanna receive in response.

Jody Argentino: Right. And, you know, I would caution people to say, if you're in a caught conflict, you, you wanna be careful about saying, I need this because the other person doesn't give two hoots about what you need.

Jody Argentino: Right. Okay. That's true. Um, right, like, so if, how would you,

Candace Dellacona: how would you frame it?

Jody Argentino: Uh, I would probably say. I would probably say I would appreciate it or tell the person why, right? Like, it's necessary for me to have this by the end of Thursday because enrollment ends on Friday.

Candace Dellacona: Got it. Right. Like

Jody Argentino: so that it just doesn't sound like you're setting an arbitrary deadline.

Candace Dellacona: Well, that also goes, so you know, that sentence alone is a good example of Biff, right? Because it's brief and it's informative. You've given them factual information. About what you're asking for and it's friendly. You're not saying, you know, give it to me this time because you didn't give it to me in time last time.

Candace Dellacona: Right, right, right. So you really, in that one sentence, you really did sort of hit each, um, sort of sub category of the Biff communication. So, way to go, Jody.

Jody Argentino: Thanks. It's almost like I do this. No, but you know, no matter how many times I do email training with clients or colleagues, et cetera, and I literally just said email training.

Jody Argentino: Because I'm like, send me your email and then I'm gonna tell you what's wrong with it. Which takes a lot of, um, ego setting aside for a lot of clients. Right? Yeah. Like, what was wrong with the way I said it? Like, okay, well let's go through it.

Yeah.

Jody Argentino: Right. Let's look at it. Which is I think the, like summary of everything, right?

Jody Argentino: Because if you, what you really should do. Is if you get a message and you feel like you're, you are having the desire to send back an answer right away, or it has some emotional, um, impact on you, or if you're starting one and you know that it's gonna be a difficult conversation, write it out the way you want to say it in a separate note, in a separate document, not in an email or if it's in an email, not with the person's email address in the two.

Jody Argentino: Erase that person's, uh, thing until you get the message that you actually wanna send. Now, no correction. There's message that you're actually gonna send. Yes. Not when you wanna Yeah. But if you take what you want to say and you write it out, it has come out of you. Right. So from a emotional perspective.

Jody Argentino: You have now gotten that, uh, I'll say satisfaction of it coming out of you, which is perfectly fine. It's sort of like journaling at first and then pull out the necessary sentences. Usually it's about 25% of the information. This is just my experience, not like a survey. About 25% of the information that you started with and 'cause most of what we say to each other, um, is extraneous or hedging, or.

Jody Argentino: It, it, um, or does things to put it into an emotional perspective, which is not what we're looking to do here.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Well, I mean, like, so in, in defense of our clients or, or people who are struggling with this, right? We're all human. And as you point out, we all come to whatever relationship where we're communicating with our own set of baggage.

Candace Dellacona: Um, and our own issues and the way in which we've seen the world, what our life experiences are. So it's really hard to sort of strip down, um, to the purest form to communicate in a way that. Really blocks out the noise of those things, right? Your past experiences, either with yourself or with the person that you're dealing with.

Candace Dellacona: The interpersonal piece, um, you know, you talk about family dynamics on top of it, and I, I mean, I think this sort of communication methodology in writing. Can be a really useful exercise for anyone in, in your professional life, in your personal life, um, and certainly in times of high conflict. So this was a really sort of helpful lesson I think for me for sure.

Candace Dellacona: And hopefully for our listeners.

Jody Argentino: Yeah, absolutely. I agree. And, um, I mean, some of us are gonna have to learn how to, to use text abbreviations in, in order to, uh, do this with our kids. Right. But, um,

Candace Dellacona: I just wanna know why my son keeps calling me bra. I saw a t-shirt

Jody Argentino: that said like, mommy, mom bra. Like bra. Yeah.

Jody Argentino: I don't get that.

Candace Dellacona: I mean, so, you know, Jody, what we're gonna do in our resources is we'll link to, um, to this book and, and certainly to, to the social scientists who came up with this Biff, um, acronym for us to make it easier on the rest of us to communicate more effectively and try to avoid conflict when, when we can.

Candace Dellacona: Right.

Jody Argentino: Yeah, I think it's great and we'll. Uh, reference for the Nonviolent Communication book. Awesome. Also very helpful.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Thanks so much. So

Jody Argentino: much. Use words. They should be good ones.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah. Yeah. No, absolutely. Thanks so much, Joey. It was a great topic.

Jody Argentino: Awesome. Thank you.