

**The  
Beneficent Overall  
Structure of  
Mediation Therapy**

The background of the cover is a dark charcoal grey. In the lower-left quadrant, there is a large, solid cyan circle. To its right and slightly overlapping it is a large, solid tan rounded rectangle. The text is centered in the upper half of the cover.

*Janet Miller Wiseman*

# **The Beneficent Overall Structure of Mediation Therapy**

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# The Beneficent Overall Structure of Mediation Therapy

I knew everything he was telling me. I remarked that I did not really need anything explained, and he said that explanations were never wasted, because they were imprinted in us for immediate or later use or to help prepare our way to reaching silent knowledge.

— Carlos Castenada, *The Power of Silence*<sup>[1]</sup>

## Advantages of a Structured Approach

Permeating the entire mediation therapy process are values, attitudes, and strategies that provide a *beneficent structure* for couples and families in crisis. This overarching beneficent structure provides a strong, caring, neutral holding environment for two people who are at serious odds with one another. For the mediation therapist, “being with” the couple or family means being fully present with the agonies and the ambitions of *each* member of the family.

The mediation therapist has faith in the structure and conveys this faith to the couple. In the course of twelve sessions she or he has many times seen a blend of strong emotion, rational stepping back, plus instruction in

assertiveness, communication, negotiation, and decision making lead to individuals' knowing their own decisions and to their making a mutual or mutually understood decision. The mediation therapist informs the couple that *many* others before them have positively achieved their decision-making goals in mediation therapy. She or he indicates that the mutual nature of making life-changing decisions lessens the assumed guilt or responsibility that one person adopts when making a decision of this magnitude alone and imposing it on a partner.

As mentioned previously, mediation therapy is used for many types of decisions between family members, with divorce decisions only one type. In eighteen years of experience with divorcing families, my observation has been that unilateral decisions to divorce set the stage for ongoing intense feelings of rejection, rage, jealousy, and inadequacy. Because I know that unilateral decisions to separate lead—in the short and over the long run—to such intense feelings, I encourage people in mediation therapy to make mutual decisions, or at the very least mutually understood decisions.

Building upon the possibility for mutuality in the decision-making process, the beneficent structure of mediation therapy supports the tolerance of ambiguity about the future direction of the relationship. The mediation therapist conveys a positive value in a wait-to-see attitude. Not knowingness may be positively defined as the pursuit of the best possible future.

Because the couple senses they will be well guided in their search for their future direction, a feeling of safety and solidity in the structure is conveyed. The mediation therapist makes abundantly clear that the intervention will be balanced between the discharge of very intense feelings and rational problem solving. Through illustration, the mediation therapist conveys that there will be consistency in mediation therapy; she or he will always set limits on their fighting, will redirect nonproductive discussions or arguments, and will ask questions to set them thinking. She or he consistently conveys confidence in their own abilities to reach decisions and conclusions. The mediation therapist lets both individuals know that she or he is for them, supports them, and is advocating for the best decision for each of them. When one of them subtly indicates that unless the mediation therapist is *for* him or her and *against* the other, the mediation therapist takes the time to explain his or her loyalty to their unit: loyalty to their making the best possible decision for each and for both of them together. If one of the individuals cannot tolerate sharing the clinician with the partner, or is distinctly in opposition to sharing one clinician, a thoughtful referral should be made to separate psychotherapists.

Another aspect of the mediation therapy that conveys safety to the couple is that the mediation therapist will have explored his or her own biases about marriage and divorce and other relationships in order to learn to be neutral, but not valueless, about the outcome of relationships. Examination

of the mediation therapist's biases about marriage and other relationships may be done by asking oneself specific questions, such as was undertaken in chapter 2 with the use of bias sorters. Alongside understanding one's own biases, the beginning mediation therapist is encouraged to incorporate the understanding, the *belief*, that people often have two very different, even oppositional, antagonistic positions that are *both true*.

In order to stay out of other people's polarizations, out of their either/or thinking, mediation therapists must be able to think in terms of grays, blends, effective mutual compromises, and nuances. They must be able to phrase their own disagreements as "I agree with part of what you are saying, but where I take a different view is on . . ." and, in order to model effective disagreement, they must have phased out polarizing statements such as "You're wrong!" or "I disagree." Open-ended questioning such as "How did that impact on you?" rather than "You must have been hurt!" helps to preserve the neutral stance needed for a beneficent overall structure.

One of the basic conflict negotiation principles mentioned in chapter 6 is funneling information through the mediation therapist. If, at the outset of the initial session, the mediation therapist never allows a couple to display their fighting and miscommunication, safety in the structure is conveyed. Paraphrasing what one person is attempting to say, but without the negative body language, the toxic tones, and gestures helps to disengage the couple



from the helplessness that they must be feeling in their inability to communicate. The mediation therapist must believe that setting the rules, the limits, or boundaries in mediation therapy is his or her province. The initial experience in mediation therapy must be different from what the couple or family has previously experienced. The saving grace of the process is in abiding by fundamental rules, the routines of the mediation therapy. Each couple's story unfolds within the structure of mediation therapy, which provides protection from the chaotic nature of their crises—for them, as well as for you, the mediation therapist.

Each couple's uniqueness quickly becomes evident in the structure of mediation therapy. Each couple brings a wealth of resources of its own to the process. Just as in a caring family, with clearly designated boundaries, each child may develop uniquely, without frequently having to test the boundaries and rules, so too in mediation therapy couples may, in a climate of safety, devote their energies to discovering their decisions about the future direction of their relationships.

As previously mentioned, the development of a neutral stance to structure mediation therapy does not mean the mediation therapist is morally neutral with regard to marriage or sustained long-term relationships. Valuing marriage, advocating the preservation of unions in which people grow emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and in which they may nurture any

offspring in those ways, is not incompatible with being an objective neutral guide for people to assess their relationship thoroughly.

An overall beneficent structure is conceptually oriented to provide limits and boundaries within which couples have the autonomy to be guided in making their own decisions. It is a safe structure within which toxic, really poisonous feelings may be released. It is a structure in which couples may step back to see what has happened and one within which they may get moving out of the stasis that has kept them immobile and ensnared.

The overall structure of mediation therapy is one in which the mediation therapist is sophisticated in guiding individuals to their own decisions, while remaining neutral as to the outcome of the decision making. To a large degree the mediation therapist controls the decision-making process, while the couple controls the outcome of the process—their decision.

## **Strategies Used in Mediation Therapy**

### **The Rational Structures**

The rational structures are questions that are answered by the couple. Like several excellent photographs of an individual, they are revealing, but freeze several moods at specific points in time rather than conveying the essence of the person. Structures, like photographs, are only temporal

evidence, frozen in time, of an ongoing process. To quote Castenada, “They are only one island in an endless sea of islands.”<sup>[2]</sup>

My rational structures were named before Carlos Castenada’s “flimsy rational structures” became known to me.<sup>[3]</sup> Adding the qualifier flimsy to my own rational structures does what I am trying to do in emphasizing that rational exploration, rational stepping back, while an important part of the decision making in mediation therapy, is but *one* aspect of an integrated process. Having stated that reason, emotion, and perception—seeing, hearing, feeling, intuiting, trusting, instructing—will be equal guests in my intervention, I may introduce the rational structures of mediation therapy as “flimsy rational structures,” good structural inquiries, which are not intended to stand on their own for decision making. After all, rational structures are questions *in words*. Inner knowing, the experience of leaping with courage to a decision, does not have words, initially: rather it is an *experience* of conviction, of intellectual, emotional, and sensory coming together with solidity. Once we know, we can look back at the rational structures to understand how and why we know what we know.

Rational structures are guided inquiries into the natures of the mediation therapy clients, into their relationship to one another and into their past and present situations.

Promoting rational self-reflection is the goal of the flimsy rational structures. Typically the structures are woven into the couple's ongoing dialogue with one another. For couples trying to make a marriage, or live-together, or go-their-own-ways decision, the twenty rational structures may often be posed to a couple consecutively, which is how the first several and last several structures are typically presented to couples. The middle structures are more interchangeable. There is room for modification, subtraction and addition to the rational inquiries. By themselves, the rational structures only go so far toward the attainment of silent knowledge or inner knowing.

The rational structures in mediation therapy will be described in detail in chapter 4. These rational inquiries are attempts to get couples to uncover and share what they know about themselves, as individuals and as a unit. The self-reflective process is intended to contribute to what Carlos Castenada might agree we could call the world of "silent knowledge" or what I call inner knowledge.<sup>[4]</sup> The rational structures stem from a need to get to a place of inner knowing.

Through a process of rational stepping back to observe themselves as individuals, and as a unit, and by expressing deep emotion between them, and within themselves, the individuals arrive at a place of deep inner knowledge of the direction they want to take in their futures. The rational structures

allow them to travel backward from inner knowledge, through what Castenada calls “concern” to a rational understanding of how they know what they know.<sup>[5]</sup> People’s logic, their linear thinking, will be satisfied, in that not only will they know a decision, but they will now be able to explain *how* they know—to themselves and to significant others.

### **Other Strategies**

The rational structures coexist in mediation therapy with uncovering the perceptual channels—visual, auditory, kinesthetic—that were previously blocked and distorted. The perceptual channels become islands of seeing what is really there, and of hearing what has been said and not said, and of feeling what one honestly feels. The safety of the structure in mediation therapy, additionally, encourages and allows the sharing of emotions at such depth that long-standing emotional blockages to understanding are frequently cleared, creating passageways of understanding between people. A man in his forties sobbed deeply remembering his dog, Patches, who was taken away when he and his mother had to move from their home, when his father went to prison when he was seven years old; his wife sat by, tears rolling down her cheeks. Another woman sobbed about how stupid she still feels as a result of her mother’s criticism of her.

People in mediation therapy are given instruction, often for the first

time in their lives, in the art and science of assertiveness, communication, negotiation, and decision making. They are encouraged to become aware of their intuition and of their own inner wisdom. The process of decision making in mediation therapy is not a linear, solely rational process, but encompasses the person using every avenue of understanding, including the cognitive, that he or she has at her disposal.

## Summary

A confluence of many kinds of information—sensory, educational, emotional—not just rational, contributes eventually to decisions that are experienced with a sense of inner knowing. The twenty rational structures presented in the next chapter are genuine suggestions that will need to be modified to meet the unique needs of a specific decision-making population. There is instruction with each rational structure, but no instruction on when in the mediation therapy to present it for use with a particular couple, although as mentioned before, appendix A does offer one possible twelve-session plan.

## Notes

[1] Castenada, *The Power of Silence*, 218.

[2] *Ibid.*, 261.

[\[3\]](#) Ibid., 247.

[\[4\]](#) Ibid., 218.

[\[5\]](#) Ibid., 261.

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