

Trouble in Your Marriage? Try Mediation

How to repair your relationship with this therapy alternative

By [Suzanne Gerber](#) September 29, 2015

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Beverly and David arrived at the mediator's office together, but he lagged a few steps behind. The Minneapolis couple, in their late 50s, had been together 13 years. When they sat down with [Janet Rowles](#), a mediator who specializes in emotionally difficult situations, they joked that they were either going to get married or break up. They had come seeking help with not just one problem, but for lessons in conflict resolution.

"David spends money like it's going out of style," Beverly said, citing the sports car he'd recently bought without consulting her. As the primary earner in the couple, she acknowledged that she was upset by his selfishness. David, she added, had become increasingly unavailable and dismissive.

When Rowles asked David to respond, he said, "I'm [tired of fighting](#). Tired of stress. I just can't take it anymore." He shared that he'd had an abusive stepdad and when Beverly got aggressive, he shut down.

What Rowles did next took them both by surprise. Rather than getting them to a point of mutual agreement — or even to talk to each other politely — she explained the importance of "deep listening" when someone is upset.

"When people are upset, they *act* upset," Rowles told them. "We need to learn how not to be shocked by this and how to listen without getting defensive or aggressive. What

people really need when they're angry is to be allowed to speak and to be *heard*. Then they can calm down.”

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— Janet Rowles, mediator

So Rowles had them practice “reflection,” the process of listening to difficult statements, responding empathetically, and then asking to hear more.

David had an easier time and was believable. But Beverly said she felt awkward and knew she sounded inauthentic. Rowles explained that the authenticity is in the *trying* and helped her find language that was more heartfelt and believable.

Rowles then demonstrated how body language, specifically softening one's look, plays an important role in the other party feeling heard. Beverly had been holding her body in a tense way, so Rowles asked her to relax her shoulders and rest her hands in her lap. She further instructed her to lean a bit forward and try it again. When she did, Beverly reported feeling a renewed connection — her eyes even filled with tears.

Beverly said that simply lowering her shoulders made her feel vulnerable and that that was a scary place for her. Deeply moved, David told her how happy he was to see this side of her, which he hadn't seen in a long time. He added that even though he skipped a big car show to come here, he was glad he had and that this session had been better than any of the therapy they'd had. Beverly agreed.

“The closeness we can feel, even given extreme differences, is amazing,” says Rowles. “Listening to someone deliver difficult information in an upset manner is never easy, but with practice, we can strengthen our ability to listen.” This, she notes, is a hallmark of mediation — in contradistinction to psychotherapy or couples counseling.

“What brings resolution is the mediator's willingness to invite conflict into the room and not judge people when they're acting upset, to not shut down or neutralize their emotions, and to facilitate both parties getting listened to,” Rowles added.

How Mediation Is Different From Therapy

Couples counselors use their academic and clinical training to identify and diagnose symptoms of neurotic behavior and mental disorders and then devise a therapeutic treatment plan. It's common practice to help the parties understand their behaviors, which are accepted to be the cause of their marital conflict.

The goal of mediation, however, is to resolve conflict, which has nothing to do with mental health. Mediation aims to help two (or more) parties find a mutually acceptable resolution to their points of difference or disagreement. It's all about identifying goals and finding a way to achieve them that bypasses the inherent conflict.

Who Needs Mediation?

Rowles is of the opinion that "lawyers and judges rarely make good mediators," which is why she believes trained mediators who are not conflict-averse are in the best position to help individuals reach resolutions.

While mediation is becoming increasingly more common, "it's not usually people's first idea yet of where to turn in a conflict," Rowles adds. "They still turn to attorneys or the police. But often lawyers refer people to mediators."

Rowles is convinced that the reason people can't, or won't, reach an agreement is because they believe they need to fiercely defend their point of view. "People aren't in their wisest, most patient, forgiving place when their issues are being triggered. But when they are listened to, they feel stronger and are more likely to look beyond their issue," she says. "And when both parties can drop their guards and look at the bigger picture, they usually make better, more *durable* decisions."

Mediators work with all kinds of disputing parties. Frequently it's couples contemplating divorce or who want to stay together but need help with specific issues. Another common situation is divorced people seeking support negotiating the conflicts that continue to arise. Often, families come to address issues with childrearing, especially with teenagers.

Mediation can even benefit small organizations, like condo associations or charities that don't have a clear chain of command. Part of what people appreciate about mediation is

that it tends to be effective more quickly than therapy and, as a result, less expensive.

3 Mediation Conflict Tips for Couples

With the caveat that this isn't as simple as it may sound, Rowles offers these three suggestions for dealing with three common types of conflict:

1. **Blame.** Instead of blaming back or getting indignant, remind yourself that this person is having strong feelings and this is how they are getting through it. When they try to blame you, respond with a statement or question that is curious or empathetic. If your partner says, "Such-and-such a problem is all your fault!" keep a soft look on your face and reflect back, "Wow! It's all my fault. Tell me more about that."
2. **The Silent Treatment.** If someone is upset and gets very quiet, it can be difficult to move through the conflict. If you want him to talk, you have to exhibit a genuine willingness to listen. Calmly tell him that you want to be a good listener and that you are ready to listen, even if the things he has to say may be difficult for you to hear. Once he begins to speak, no matter *what* he says, don't criticize or "correct" him. More important than defending yourself is helping him feel safe to be his true, imperfect self in front of you.
3. **Bringing Up the Past.** People bring up the past because it still hurts. But if you can help them feel really listened to, they'll be more inclined to let it go. When your mate references a past transgression, relax your face and body, lean in and say, "Oh my, this is a real hurt. Please tell me more. Even though I haven't listened before, I would like to listen now."



By [Suzanne Gerber](#)

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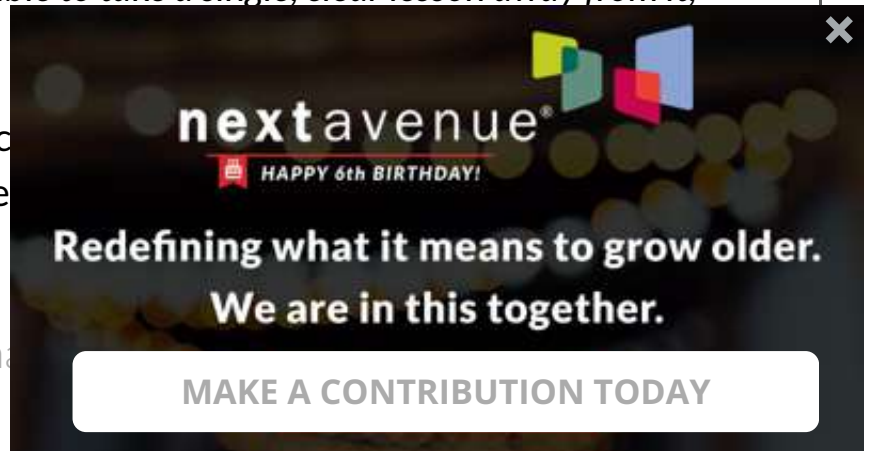
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