



# Who Are High Conflict People?

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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 not the issue! With HCPs the high-conflict pattern of behavior is the issue, including a lot of:

All-or-nothing thinking

Unmanaged emotions

Extreme behaviors

Blaming others

**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 receiving 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.

**Blaming others:** HCPs stand out, because of the intensity of their blame for others – especially for those closest 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.

### **A Predictable Pattern**

Perhaps 15% of our society (and growing) seems preoccupied with blaming others a lot of the time. 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.

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 book **IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!**):

- 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 by managing your responses and presenting their patterns of behavior to others.

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Bill Eddy is a lawyer, therapist and mediator. He is the President of the High Conflict Institute, based in San Diego, California. He is the author of several books, including: **SPLITTING: Protecting Yourself While Divorcing Someone with Borderline or Narcissistic Personality Disorder**; **BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People**; and **IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT! 12 Tips for Managing People Who Blame Others for Everything**. He is also the developer of the **New Ways for Families** program for high-conflict divorce cases, and the **HCI Pattern Analysis** method for presenting patterns of concerning behavior in family court cases. His website is [www.HighConflictInstitute.com](http://www.HighConflictInstitute.com).