

# Talking Feelings when Talking Peace?

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## Background

How can a mediator address emotions? Some mediators put emotions at the center of their work. Others see it merely as an obstacle to achieve a deal.

This Policy Brief is inspired by the gap between rationalist-inspired analyses of peace mediation practice in the literature and the strong human touch found when listening to personal accounts of seasoned mediators or when engaging in role play simulations in mediation training. While interpersonal mediation has explored the role of emotions in depth, peace mediation research is only starting to grapple more deeply with the psychological aspects. In line with this, relatively little explicit guidance exists on how peace mediators can address emotions.

## Why emotions matter

Emotions in conflict are often simply equated with feelings that conflict parties have towards each other. Yet the feelings we experience in conflict are only one aspect in a complex interplay of cognitive, physiological, and behavioral processes.<sup>1</sup> Unpacking this helps explain why it is so difficult to remain level minded in conflict, to regulate one's behavior and to collaborate in finding mutually acceptable solutions.

When people get drawn into a conflict, they subconsciously assess their chances to fulfill basic needs such as security, affiliation, or autonomy. This assessment depends on past experiences how our needs were met or not and how we have learned to deal with this situation. The higher we – often sub-

consciously – perceive the threat that our needs will not be met, the more stressful a situation becomes to us.<sup>2</sup>

Our bodies may then react with stress symptoms, increasing for instance the heart rate. Such reactions can make it difficult for us to stay composed and capable of understanding and regulating our own reactions. We then struggle to keep a clear mind and to access our full capacity, which we badly need in a negotiation to listen to people we may disagree with, to explore different perspectives and options, and to engage in collaborative and creative problem solving. We also experience feelings such as fear, anger or shame. Yet in this state we often struggle to fully grasp and observe our feelings.

Instead, we become more emotional as we regress into thinking modes based on patterns and strategies that we learnt as children to help cope with the frustration of unmet needs. With our basic needs threatened in conflict, our brains tend to slip back into such thinking patterns. This promotes singular-minded positional thinking, which we so often encounter in conflict. Such thinking prevents creative exploration of different ways to fulfill our needs.<sup>3</sup>

The stronger our fear becomes of losing control over our needs, the more we spiral down towards the most basic instinctive coping mechanisms of reacting aggressively (fight), fleeing (flight) or shutting down internally (freeze/fold). Once we have reached this state, collaborative problem solving becomes even more difficult.

For peace practitioners, this has important implications. We need to ask ourselves how we can best support and inspire people to work through conflict from a place where they are



at their full capacity, uncompromised by regressive patterns, trauma, stress and fear reactions. We also need to understand that once conflict parties are starting to spiral down, it is difficult to bring them back by working solely on a cognitive level. This is because the patterns and strategies that kick in in these situations were learnt and consolidated in our brains through the complex interaction of intentions (needs), cognition (thoughts), feelings and behavior as described above. To work around or re-wire these brain structures means to re-experience the entire complex process in a new way.<sup>4</sup>

Inviting people experiencing conflict to access all channels involved in an emotional experience can thus help conflict parties to understand this entanglement and regulate their behavior and engage in creative problem solving. In that vein, when mediators assist conflict parties in observing and articulating their thoughts and body sensations, they help them gain access to their feelings. The feelings in turn serve as hints to the parties' needs. This makes it possible to explore needs and interests and identify win-win options.<sup>5</sup> Since people differ in what works best for them – be it body sensations, cognition or feelings – mediators should tailor their interventions to individual preferences. Lastly, by helping conflict parties to feel their emotions, mediators foster trust and parties' perception that they are heard and seen in the process, which also allows them to listen to each other more deeply. The resulting understanding may promote true transformation of conflict, restoration of relationships and the healing of past injuries and grievances.

## What is the challenge for peace mediators?

What sounds straightforward is a difficult job. Gaining the trust of parties, being capable to understand and giving resonance to emotions, providing empathy and creating a safe space requires experience, skills and emotional capacity. The political setting of peace mediation amplifies such difficulties. One can think of different challenges that make the work with emotions in peace mediation a delicate matter:

» **Purpose and process aim:** Not all peace mediation processes necessarily aim to promote deep transformation, restoring of relationships and healing. Some processes have more specific

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aims and limited time-frames. Mediation being a voluntary endeavor that seeks to empower conflict parties to resolve conflicts themselves, the aims of a process depend on the preferences of conflict

parties. If the parties do not seek to transform their relationship, but rather look for a compromise on a specific issue, mediators may find themselves without a proper mandate to address emotions to do so.

» **Representation:** As representatives, negotiators in peace mediation do not necessarily come to the table with a pre-existing personal conflicts and may thus not experience strong emotions. This begs the question whether a mediator giving space for emotion expression can really help foster positive relationships between representatives. In the absence of authentic strong feelings, representatives might display emotions in a strategic way. More generally, we can question the value of working through (difficult) emotions only with a limited number of representatives if the aim of a peace process is to transform the conflict overall, heal past injuries and restore relationships in society on a broad scale.

» **Complexity:** While peace mediation processes feature maximum complexity, the timeframe for such processes is often short – often because of political pressure to conclude peace talks in order to end violence. Peace mediators need to carefully assess what a process can achieve and avoid creating false expectations. The question then is whether it is possible to work through emotions in the limited time, or whether one risks overloading a process. Sequencing and postponing or outsourcing of this work are options in this connection.





- » **Lack of trust and face-saving:** Stakes are usually high for negotiators and confidence in the mediation process and trust in the adversary's honest intent to negotiate in good faith often low. Negotiators on the diplomatic stage and in military circles are likely to see the open display of (certain) emotions as weakness and vulnerability. The mediator may choose not to expose parties in this fashion, also because a show of emotion can mean to lose face towards the enemy or even towards one's own constituency.
- » **Cultural differences:** Expressing emotions is culturally coded as the act of showing emotions is perceived differently among different cultures. Even specific emotions have different connotations in different cultures. Peace mediation is usually a multicultural setup, involving people from different cultural backgrounds including different work cultures. Developing a joint understanding of the meaning of emotions, and the need to address emotions in a mediation process, may therefore be a very challenging endeavor.
- » **Trauma:** Trauma (both individual and collective) is a common psychological condition especially in violent conflict and it bears long-term effects on those affected. It can even be passed on intergenerationally and thus contribute to cycles of violence. Failing to understand how the display of emotions relates to the experience of trauma is a danger for peace mediators.<sup>6</sup> They risk making matters worse by stirring up trauma without the ability to hold the space needed to address it. On the other hand, they may miss opportunities and useful information to transform conflict on a deep level if they ignore the trauma patterns that condition parties' emotional states and reactions.

## Choosing a strategy

Peace mediators need to be aware of these challenges when they decide on a strategy to address emotions. This Policy Brief suggests that this reflection be explicitly built into the regular conflict analysis and process design. To support this reflection, we can think of three broad strategies to address emotions in mediation.

### Strategy 1: Limiting emotion expression

In this strategy, the mediator seeks to limit addressing emotions. The mediator may establish ground rules to regulate emotion expression or suggest postponing or outsourcing this work. This strategy allows peace mediators to keep processes focused on the limited goal of finding mutually acceptable agreements and thus perhaps more efficient on the short-term. This can be particularly relevant in case of time pressure. It also offers a low-risk strategy for mediators who do not feel equipped to address strong emotions or who feel that the expression of strong emotions is a risk for the process.

In this strategy, mediators can think of formats other than the main negotiating table where working with emotions is possible and conducive. This may include informal spaces at the margins of a process, parallel or follow-up processes, which focus on dealing with the past or trauma healing. An under-explored question is whether addressing emotions of broader constituencies in conflict contexts may help advance more narrow peace talks. Are there ways to consciously address the emotional realm in inclusion mechanisms? How would emotionally resonant feedback mechanisms work?

*The strategy of limiting emotion expression could apply when:*

- » Emotions risk getting in the way of substantial discussions while conflict parties are capable to discuss substance without working through emotions.
- » Substantial issues but not emotions or relationships are at the core of the conflict.
- » The window of opportunity for a political process is too short to include emotional work, which might overburden a process.

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- » The cultural background of the parties and the mediation makes explicit emotion display detrimental to the process.
- » Conflict parties are seen as too instable to express their feelings without regressing and falling into detrimental behavior.
- » There is a risk of stirring up trauma.
- » The mediator is not capable and willing to hold the space for working with emotions.
- » The Track 1 negotiation process is not seen as the right format to work through emotions, while formats running parallel (for example informal processes on track 2 or 3) are available for this work.

### Strategy 2: Indirectly addressing emotions

In this strategy, the mediator addresses emotions indirectly and avoids explicit reflection and deepening of feelings. Instead, the mediator addresses emotions on the motivational level (needs, interests), the cognitive level (thoughts), the behavioral level, or in terms of triggers and effects of emotion. One well-known approach is to discuss unfulfilled needs rather than the feelings linked to these.<sup>7</sup> A different approach is to discuss emotions on a cognitive level to help parties regulate them as they discuss perceptions and assessments linked to an event that triggered strong emotions.<sup>8</sup>

This strategy can help peace mediators circumvent the traps linked to explicit sharing of emotions. Discussing needs, interests or trigger events is usually more acceptable to conflict parties and involves less risk. Implicitly, the mediator still touches upon the emotional realm and may thus help parties step out of a spiral of emotions, regression or fear and stress reactions.

*The strategy of addressing emotions indirectly could apply when:*

- » The cultural background or setting permits discussing needs and interests, but not feelings.
- » Conflict parties are better able to work through emotions on other levels, for instance the cognitive or motivational.

- » Conflict parties use the expression of emotions in a strategic (or unauthentic) way.

### Strategy 3: Directly addressing emotions (and deepening emotions)

In this strategy, the mediator encourages explicit sharing and reflection of feelings, helping parties to acknowledge their own feelings and those of the other side. The mediator can address emotions on all levels including feelings, motivation, cognition, and body sensations. The mediator can systematically work his way from the party's positions at the surface via their feelings to the underlying needs and interests. The mediator can distinguish between feelings linked to stress reactions and those linked to underlying frustration of needs.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on the latter may bring older injuries to the fore that are triggered by the conflict.

To deepen emotions the mediator helps parties move from abstract descriptions of their emotion towards a very concrete and personalized experience in the present moment.<sup>10</sup> Such approaches are based on a belief in the transformative power of bringing difficult emotions into the open.<sup>11</sup> By supporting conflict parties to express their feelings in the presence of the other side, to deepen these feelings, they may feel truly seen and heard. This can foster openness to listen to the other side, to start exploring other perspectives and thus achieve a deeper level of understanding for each other. This in turn can foster reconciliation and transformation of relationships and conflicts.

In political negotiations focused on finding substantial agreements, mediators may invite parties to explore this level if the substantial negotiations face deadlock, creating a dedicated safe and sometimes informal space.<sup>12</sup>

An underexplored question is whether emotional work may positively interact with political talks if conducted in public formats parallel to the negotiations. This may also make it possible to identify and address patterns of collective trauma, which tend to reinforce cycles of violent conflict and block reconciliation.

*The strategy of directly addressing emotions could apply when:*

- » Emotions and relationships are at the core of the conflict and need to be transformed to allow meaningful work on a substantial level.





- » The parties' cultural backgrounds and the mediation setting allow explicit and genuine discussion of feelings.
- » Positive personal relationships between representatives can be fostered by providing a safe and informal space for discussing emotions.
- » The mediator assumes that conflict parties will be better able and more open to expressing their needs and interests and make progress on a substantial level once their emotions have been openly acknowledged.
- » There is willingness, trust and time on the part of the parties to focus on difficult feelings.
- » The parties' cultural backgrounds and the mediation setting allow explicit and genuine discussion of feelings.
- » Conflict parties are in a state of cold conflict, where conflict is not openly acknowledged and emotions suppressed, requiring action from the mediator to bring the conflict into the open.
- » Conflict parties show willingness and openness to the creation of public formats to work through psychological injuries and grievances linked to violent conflict.
- » Patterns of collective trauma reinforce cycles of violent conflict.
- » Conflict parties get hung up on maladaptive or secondary emotions and are not in touch with underlying feelings.

## Recommendations

- » Peace mediators should include the emotional realm into their regular conflict analysis and process design, allowing conscious decisions about how to address emotions.
- » Mediation support actors should:
  - › study the potential of strategies to address emotions and seek out the experience of senior mediators and peace practitioners.
  - › study the potential of addressing emotions beyond interactions at the main negotiation table, reflecting on such work in other process phases and with broader constituencies and its potential to enhance peace negotiations.
  - › reflect on how peace mediators develop and train their capacity to work with conflict party's emotions.
  - › include dedicated sessions on the emotional and psychological aspects of mediation into peace mediation trainings.





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