

## **Lynn Lott presents tips for therapists and marriage counselors dealing with clients around divorce**

Well-known writer and speaker Lynn Lott, a licensed marriage and family therapist from Santa Rosa, California, held a workshop called Positive Divorce, at the Bloomington Sheraton on April 3, 2009 for those in the therapy community dealing with clients who are considering divorce.

Lott has maintained her family practice for 40 years, based on Adlerian principals. She is the author of national best-selling books on positive discipline, such as [Positive Discipline A to Z](#), [Positive Discipline for Teenagers](#), and [Positive Discipline in the Classroom](#).

Summaries of her workshop presentation are available below. You also can check out her website at [www.lynnlott.com](http://www.lynnlott.com) and her blog at [www.lynnlottblogspot.com](http://www.lynnlottblogspot.com).

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### **Expanding your client's toolbox by opening them up to see beyond expectations**

*These excerpts are from Lynn Lott's Positive Divorce workshop, April 3, 2009, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In her own words:*

Most of us have just a small number of tools to use when handling life's challenges. Many people use just one tool. We wouldn't think of hiring a carpenter to build our next home if he came to the meeting with the architect and said, "By the way, I only use a hammer when I build a house."

Yet, in dealing with a marriage relationship, or a divorce, most people only have limited tools. In my therapy, what I give people are navigational tools to help them through life. I do this because once people are open to change, they are open to learn, grow and get rid of black and white thinking. When people are stressed, as they are when they think they might need to get divorced, they get into black and white thinking.

As a therapist, I help people see more choices. As I help them expand their toolbox, I tell them that they will be able to use these new tools in their new life. And you, as a marriage counselor or therapist, will be able to use these tools in your practice and in adversarial situations, as well as with your clients. The purpose of these tools is for each of us to feel our power.

When people are in an adversarial situation like divorce, they often don't know the rules of engagement, and also ignore the effect of their behavior on their children. One of the things that happens too little in divorce is parents involving the children. Parents think they know what the kids are feeling, but when I talk to their kids, the kids have other issues, ideas and input. An important tool to add to the life skills toolbox is for parents to listen to their children instead of assuming things.

Another tool to open people to change is to remove the blame game. In Positive Divorce, we're looking for solutions, not who to blame.

When people come to me because they want to get divorced, the first thing I tell them is that you may ultimately decide not to get divorced, or you may decide to get divorced. Don't lock yourself into one position right away. Because before you get divorced, you will want to be sure you are certain that you want to be divorced. I've

noticed that when people come to me and want to get divorced, they have a pre-conceived notion of what that process will be like, what will happen and how it will all work out.

When I got divorced, nothing went the way I expected . That's where people start. As the actual reality begins to unfold, I find that there is a gap between people's expectations and what really is unfolding. The bigger the gap between expectations and reality, the more the stress that the two divorcing people will feel. Being aware of this paradigm of stress is an important tool. Learning how to move the expectations and the reality closer together is another tool.

So when I entered the divorce process myself, I had to learn acceptance. As soon as I could accept what is, rather than what I thought "should be," then I could begin to think of options. It takes time to make changes. Yet when clients come to us, they want change to be immediate, and they want that change to happen in everybody around them, not in themselves. But the only real change has to happen within the client for it to lead to a new action and a new life.

### **Knowing your "top card" and your partner's "top card" helps you accept separate realities**

*These excerpts are from Lynn Lott's Positive Divorce workshop, April 3, 2009, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In her own words:*

I do an exercise with my clients that helps them understand their personality style or what I call their "top card." There are basically four top card styles, and these styles of behavior usually become most pronounced when we are stressed, as we would naturally be in a divorce situation.

We probably create our top card based on our separate way of seeing life, our separate realities, and what we decide about life, by the time we are 5 year old. And they apply our private logic.

To determine a person's top card, I ask them what they dislike most. It flows from that.

#### The Chameleon

If they dislike rejection and hassles, their top card is pleasing (the chameleon). These are people who act friendly and say yes when they mean no. They are sensitive to others, but they feel resentful if ignored. They need approval from others. Their challenge is to be more open and honest about what they are thinking and feeling.

#### The Eagle

If they dislike criticism and ridicule, their top card is control (the eagle). These are do-it-yourselfers, who often stuff their feelings. They make good leaders, but also keep a social or emotional distance. They need others to give them time to sort out their feelings. Their challenge is to stop and listen to what others are saying without withdrawing.

#### The Lion

If they dislike meaningless and unimportance, their top card is superiority (the lion). These are people who take on too much, worry about always doing more, and put down other people. They get a lot done and are precise and knowledgeable, but often feel overwhelmed and can be rude or insulting. They need others to thank and affirm them. Their challenge is to give credit and show an interest in others.

#### The Turtle

If they dislike stress and pain, their top card is comfort (the turtle). These are people who only do what they know they do well and avoid risks. They are fun to be around, but can also appear to be lazy. They need others to encourage them and give them time. Their challenge is to show up, speak up and ask for what they want.

Sometimes when I am working with clients in divorce, I give each a stuffed animal based on their top card, and ask them to relate to each other as if they were the animals. I want someone who likes comfort to think of themselves as a turtle, who will retreat under stress. If the spouse is a lion, with the top card of superiority, I give them a lion. A lion is a lion and a turtle is a turtle, and the first thing I ask them to do is accept that they are different and you can't turn one animal into another. The turtle can't be the lion and the lion can't be the turtle.

The top card is a personality profile. It helps people see their point of view and helps others see their point of view. People play their top card when they are afraid. So I ask them about their feelings. So we get away from judging who they are and instead understanding what they are feeling.

### **Winning strategies when dealing with people begin by knowing your feelings**

*These excerpts are from Lynn Lott's Positive Divorce workshop, April 3, 2009, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In her own words:*

When people come to me for help, whether for divorce counseling or something else, I think that I most help them when I help them understand their feelings.

Clients want us to give advice. When people are in dispute, they want us to pick a side or try to be judge and jury. I see them wanting to pick what I call losing strategies, not winning strategies.

Here's what I call losing strategies:

- Being right
- Controlling your partner
- Seeking revenge
- Withdrawing or stonewalling
- Endlessly venting
- Being defensive
- Showing contempt

Rather, I steer my clients into what I consider winning strategies. At the base of all of these winning strategies is to understand how you feel and be able to articulate it.

Here is what I call winning strategies:

- Say what you want
- Use the "I" message to state your feelings and your wishes and hopes
- Choose your battles, and give generously where you can
- Empower your ex or your child
- Say that you may have to agree to disagree, but you'll be happy to think about it and get back to the issue
- Refuse to be treated disrespectfully saying, "Stop! I can't work things out when I feel disrespected. Shall we try again?"
- Ask, "What do you need from me to give me what I want."

Depression is a giant hairball of feelings. It's not a separate feeling. It's hopeless, helplessness, anger, discouragement all rolled together. The danger in saying "I feel depressed," is that people treat you like you have a disease.

I tell my clients, don't be lazy about how you feel. Tell me exactly how you feel. We can't help you unless we really know what is going on. If your gas gauge is reading empty, and you don't look at it, you'll get into problems.

When a client tells you a problem, you as a therapist want to fix it. Rather, a more helpful response would be:

"You feel \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_ and you wish \_\_\_\_\_."

So when a person says to you, "My ex-husband hasn't paid his child support payments since August," a helpful therapy statement, rather than suggesting a solution, would be, "You feel frustrated and vulnerable, because you don't know if you can make ends meet, and you wish he would honor his commitments." That way you are connecting with your client on a feeling and emotional level, and they feel supported and understood.

Then say, "Tell me when you're ready to move on." Once they articulate a feeling and are heard, they are more ready to consider choices. That empowers your clients.

A mediator could use this if a couple is in a stuck or blaming situation. You can say to the man: "Ask her how she feels. Ask her why? Ask her what she wishes would happen." And then do the same to the woman, asking her to ask these same questions of the man.

## Understand the change process in order to take your clients through it

*These excerpts are from Lynn Lott's Positive Divorce workshop, April 3, 2009, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In her own words:*

The **first** part of change is desire. People come to you because they do want help. Your job is to help them gain awareness, **second** step in the process. They're stuck in their own private logic. Be the little guy on their shoulder pointing out what they are doing. The **third** step is acceptance which translates to accept that what is, is. I have yet to find a simple way to help people get there, but when they get to acceptance, they start seeing options, the **fourth** step in the process. They start seeing the world in a different way.

Here is what I see as the steps along the change process:

Follow your dreams

Surround yourself with those who will love and support you

Turn life into an adventure

Connect with family

Get moving and active and try things

If you think it, say it

Make time for friends

Be ready for surprises

Welcome the unexpected

It is OK to beg and whine (for a little while)

Create routines that work for you

Make time to play and learn

Meditate

Revisit the familiar

Bad is bad, so don't sugar coat it

Life is a circle and endings are rarely the end

This is hard. There is work involved. But you made the right decision. I'm here to help you through it.