

Dr. Larry S. Fong

Eileen Ailon

Dr. Jim Canniff

Dr. Valorie Seland

Hanita Dagan

Vikki Small

Karen Fawcett

# FAC NEWSLETTER - MARCH 2007



## *Managing the Stress in Your Life*

In the last newsletter, we discussed what stress is and what causes it. In this issue, you will learn how to manage the stress in your life and protect yourself against its harmful effects.

### *Learn to Have Healthy Relationships*

This subject could fill an entire book. In the limited space of this newsletter, let's look at the key components of this stress-reducing strategy.



1. **Identify the sources of stress in your relationships.** Write about them in a journal. Make a list of people who contribute to your stress reaction and explore what the issues are.
2. **Resolve the underlying issues.** For each of the situations identified in step 1, assess what needs to happen to resolve it. Make a list and design a plan to improve the situation.
3. **Learn skills to improve relationships.** Relationship skills are learned, identify the skills you need to develop, and make a plan for yourself. You can learn these skills by reading books, taking classes, or working with a therapist.
4. **Avoid toxic people and situations.** Some people have a toxic effect on you. If you can, limit the amount of time you spend with them. Look for opportunities to decline their invitations. When these people are family members, remind yourself that you don't have to feel guilty about avoiding anyone who makes you feel bad about yourself. In work situations, look for ways to rearrange your schedule or your workspace to avoid negative interactions.
5. **Seek out positive people and situations.** Look for opportunities and situations that help you feel good. For instance, think about people who bolster your self-esteem and look for ways to increase time with them.

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FONG AILON CANNIFF  
115 1st St. SW  
Calgary, AB T2P 0B3

[www.worldpsych.ca](http://www.worldpsych.ca)  
Phone: (403) 266-2017 Fax: (403) 266-4998



6. **Watch what you eat.** Some substances amplify the stress response. These include:

- **Caffeine** stimulates the release of stress hormones. This increases heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen to the heart. Ongoing exposure to caffeine can harm the tissue of the heart.
- **Refined sugar** and processed flour are depleted of needed vitamins. In times of stress, certain vitamins help the body maintain the nervous and endocrine systems.
- Too much **salt** can lead to excessive fluid retention. This can lead to nervous tension and higher blood pressure.
- **Smoking** is associated not only with disease and a shorter life span, it may also increase heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration.
- **Alcohol** robs the body of nutrition that it might otherwise use for cell growth and repair. It also harms the liver and adds empty calories to the body.

During times of high stress, eat more complex carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables, whole breads, cereals, and beans).

7. **Get moving.** The human body was designed to be physically active. However, in most jobs today, people are sitting down most of the time. They hardly move at all except when it is time for coffee break or lunch. When faced with stressors, we respond with our minds, not our bodies. It is not wonder that many of us have a difficult time responding to stressful events.

Exercise is one of the simplest and most effective ways to respond to stress. Activity provides a natural release for the body during its fight-or-flight state of arousal. After exercising, the body returns to its normal state of equilibrium, and one feels relaxed and refreshed.

8. **Look for ways to let go of tension and anxiety.** Meditation and progressive relaxation are two valuable ways to regenerate and refresh yourself. You can purchase meditation and relaxation audio-tapes or record your own. This is especially important because your health and long life depend on minimizing stress and achieving a sense of balance and well-being.



West, B. (2002). Managing the Stress in Your Life. In L. Cope Grand (Ed.), *The Therapist's Newsletter Kit*, (pp. 79 —80). New York;; John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



## *Parenting Coordinators Promote Accord for High Conflict Families*

Unsuccessful mediation, high rate of re-litigation, frequent change of lawyers, restrictions to children's access to a parent or extended family members, interference or refusal of access to information about children's well-being, false allegations of abuse, pervasive anger and distrust resulting in ineffective communication and extreme distortion of events—these are all characteristics of high conflict families affected by a bitter and acrimonious divorce or separation process. Previously, courts were ill-equipped to assist these parents and their children, caught in the crucible of adversarial interactions; however, a viable alternative dispute resolution process is emerging throughout judicial communities in the U.S. and Canada: Parenting Coordination.



Parenting Coordination is a process whereby an impartial third person called a Parenting Coordinator (PC) helps the parents to develop or implement their parenting plan. For this process to work efficiently, it is crucial that the judiciary, court services, legal professionals and PC's understand the interface between PC's and the court, from the importance of the initial designation of a PC to the procedures that enhance their opportunity to succeed with high conflict families.

One of the most difficult aspects of parenting coordination is setting and maintaining clear boundaries regarding roles and intervention. While the PC may have the skills traditionally attributed to psychotherapists, mediators, evaluators and educators, the PC is not functioning as a professional specifically in any of those roles. For instance, a PC is not appointed to provide therapy, conduct a custody evaluation, or provide legal or financial advice to the parties. This concept is often confusing to those who are new to the field and not yet comfortable with this clearly distinct professional position.

Parenting coordinators can face a number of pitfalls if guidelines and goals are not specifically defined. The Association of Family & Conciliation Courts Task Force published *Guidelines for Parenting Coordinators* in 2005 ([www.AFCCnet.org](http://www.AFCCnet.org)) to steer PC's and PC programs toward more uniform best practices. Due to the newness of this field, in many states and provinces there is no clear statutory authority for the courts to order parties to parenting coordination. Currently, the greatest tool of the PC is a standardized court order of appointment that delineates the court's expectations of the PC and parenting coordination process.

Courts have been using PC's with or without the consent of the parties. Although consent may be the preferred method of obtaining parties' participation in the parenting coordination process, the unique characteristics of high conflict families merit differentiation from other families whom the family court system encounters. The defining characteristics of high-conflict families often render them unable to make judgments or decisions that are based on sound, objective reasoning regarding their parenting. If children are at risk or abuse or neglect, courts may be in the position to require parenting coordination, even without parental consent.



PC's have the monumental task of establishing trust with parties who may have lost all trust for their co-parent and/or the judicial system. The safest method of avoiding a legal challenge to the parenting coordinating process is to gain the approval of the parties at the outset, if possible. When parties choose to use the process, they are less likely to challenge the power of the court to appoint a PC. If they also enter into an agreement as to who should serve as the PC, they are less likely to challenge the actions of the person they selected and the court is less likely to grant such a challenge. Even when parties resist the process of parenting coordination, the PC often provides a beacon of hope and a steady, qualified guide to the re-establishment of quality and stability in the parties' parenting roles.

The judge and the lawyers have the ability to "sell" the concept of a parenting coordinator to the parents. This is not a gimmicky or false sale; it is a good-faith opportunity to help the parents through a process that is normally less expensive, faster and more satisfactory to the parties. If the parents can create a modicum of cooperation, they will be better able to control the decision-making. When there is a proactive approach by the judge, hopefully with the help and support of the lawyers, the parties are usually very receptive. The idea of working outside the courthouse, with prompt access to a mental health or child development expert who is generally not in a judgmental position, appeals to even the most difficult parents.

**The use of a PC helps to protect the best interest of children by reducing their exposure to chronic parental hostility.**

The PC can best achieve her/his maximum potential if he/she has the confidence of the parties in the PC's work. If the parties are satisfied, the PC may go about his or her work in a successful manner, using the skills of their particular profession and additional relevant training. When a party is oppositional to the process, the PC's power diminishes quickly and a request to remove the PC often follows.

The PC's power to arbitrate is important. This power allows the PC to make a decision on routing matters which are enforceable until the court makes a different decision. Thus, adjusting a pick-up time, make-up visitation or attendance rules for school or sports activities can be decided by the PC, and the parties have to comply, at least temporarily. This prompt, efficient decision-making process saves much court time and legal expense, and allows the legal process to move along more productively. This power must, of course, be specifically provided for in the court order and normally will only be granted with the consent of both parties.

The court's use of parenting coordination serves the legitimate objective of assisting embittered and vitriolic parties in creating an infrastructure for implementation of their parenting plan. The use of a PC helps to protect the best interests of children by reducing their exposure to chronic parental hostility. Parenting coordination offers parents, children and families the opportunity to develop and maintain a new system of interaction that takes into account the myriad of family changes that occur with divorces. Eventually, many high conflict families are able to find security, stability and predictability in new patterns, of thought, feelings and behaviours.

Carter, D., Fieldstone, L., & Starnes, H. (2006). Parenting coordinators promote accord for high conflict families. *ACR Resolution Fall 2006*, 32-33.



## ARBITRATION COURSE

Retired Judge Michael H. Porter is teaching a short, practical hands-on Arbitration Course for mental health, legal and other professionals working as, or with Parenting Coordinators. The following topics will be covered:

- ◆ Understanding the arbitration process
- ◆ Learning procedural matters
- ◆ Dealing with evidence
- ◆ Overview of the *Arbitration Act of Alberta*
- ◆ Consideration of due process issues
- ◆ How to combine decision making with mediation skills
- ◆ Learn to recognize pitfalls of a mediation/arbitration process and how to prevent them from occurring

The course will be held on Friday March 16, 2007 and Friday March 30, 2007 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Cost is \$424.00 + GST. For registration information contact Judge Michael H. Porter at (403)286-1988 or e-mail: porterm@resolutionassociate.ca. The deadline for registration is **noon March 2, 2007**.



## SUGGESTIONS/COMMENTS?

*Do you have any suggestions for future articles*, or just a comment regarding this newsletter? We welcome your feedback. Please contact Wanda Mueller at 266-2017 or at [wmueller@worldpsych.ca](mailto:wmueller@worldpsych.ca).

## NEW ASSOCIATE

Please join FAC in welcoming our newest associate, Karen Fawcett

For 15 years Karen Fawcett has been providing expertise in the areas of executive recruiting, succession planning, strategic coaching, policy and procedures initiatives, and 360 degree interviewing. As President of her own Executive Recruiting firm, Karen's knowledge of the hiring of key personnel, employee retention programs, and knowledge in the oil industry is considerable.



With 18 years of significant life experience in mediation, she brings a unique perspective to conflict resolution, divorce coaching, and parenting mediation. Karen's experience in complex business and personal issues with the executives and management teams she consults for has resulted in her identification of a need for an Executive Enhancement Program which she has developed at Fong Ailon Canniff.

In her current role as an associate with Fong Ailon Canniff, Karen will continue in her role as a business consultant with a focus on mediation and arbitration in the workplace, as well as family centered mediation. She is a member of Alberta Family Mediation Society, Association of Conflict Resolution, Family Mediation Canada, has completed the LESA course, and is currently completing her arbitration coursework.

She was involved with Experience Canada, a nationally run federal government initiative providing work experiences for young graduates across Canada, and spoke at various functions around the province on behalf of the program.

We all feel that Karen will be a great asset to our firm, and she welcomes new referrals.