

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The mediator's toolkit – where does anxiety fit?

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Tuesday, February 22nd, 2022



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The Daily Blogpost from the Harvard Program on Negotiation (PON) is always a great way to start the day.

A quick read, it often turns something that I have been processing at the back of my mind into a more solid idea I can inspect and explore.

This week, a particularly relevant post about **anxiety** dropped into my in-box. It was just the right message although perhaps not quite as PON intended.

The post was written for the negotiation **coach** however I felt strongly that the post was talking to me and to all the other mediators whose daily work is helping parties traverse difficult relationships they need to repair.

I understand that we all have different mediation practices. Sometimes a mediation is just about the ‘least worst’ option of dividing the pie. Sometimes it is just haggling over the terms of how parties will extricate themselves from a deal gone wrong.

But sometimes – and this is the mediation world I inhabit – the mediation room is full of high emotion and the pain of significant relationships turned toxic. In this room the level of anxiety is overwhelming.

And it is catching.

Clinicians and wellness professionals reassure us that anxiety has always been with us – making an important presentation, going for a job interview, bidding on a house at auction (particularly in the

Sydney Real Estate Market!)

[Beyond Blue](#), one of the most respected wellbeing support services in this country for those suffering mental illnesses, names anxiety as our most common mental health condition. It refers to research estimating 45 per cent of us will experience a mental health condition in our lifetime with anxiety sufferers outnumbering those with depression 2:1.

So while none of us is a stranger to anxiety, to me this current level of anxiety seems more apparent and widespread. It is probably not surprising given the challenges of the last few years and there is no certainty that these challenges are behind us.

Over the years I have undertaken personal wellness training and explored the practices adopted by my colleagues to build a repertoire of tools to protect me and my own mental health in the mediation room. They have served me well.

Anxiety among mediators

However, as I continue to work in this anxiety-laden environment, I am finding the tools are not enough. Conversations with my colleagues make it clear I am not alone and they are also experiencing challenging symptoms of:

- **Zoom fatigue**
- **Hypervigilance** – an increased state of alertness; constantly scanning the landscape for potential threats. Anxiety is named as one of the most common causes of hypervigilance
- **Poor self-talk** around mediation outcomes
- **The ‘donut’ syndrome** (my name for this symptom) – developing a focus on the ‘hole’ (or what’s missing) rather than the substance of what has been achieved
- **‘Doomscrolling** – spending excessive time focusing on negative news. In my case this finds me checking my phone before I am even showered and dressed; compulsively scrolling through emails and messages from parties to be sure I have missed nothing and that nothing terrible has happened overnight.

Some helpful tools

My regular coping mechanisms have been quite challenged. However I have been very fortunate to find support and encouragement all around me.

- **.Tools from my network**

Professional colleagues are a precious source of support and resources.

During the pandemic, members of the marvellous [Australasian Facilitators Network \(AFN\)](#), which contains a significant number of professional trainers, shared skills and training generously, to help us transition seamlessly online and to harness new apps to make online work engaging and energising.

My confidence and energy have been boosted by learning to work with Google Jamboard, Padlet, Canva, Miro, Creately and more. This group, whose members represent the broadest range of facilitative skills, have been a constant source of encouragement and support.

The notion of learning as therapy was an entirely new frame for me and it is now firmly within my wellness regime.

These colleagues also pointed me towards a great reality check in the form of the [Zoom Exhaustion and Fatigue Survey](#), a tool designed by researchers from Stanford University. It was very encouraging to see my survey results identifying that I was actually dealing with Zoom fatigue more effectively than I had given myself credit for.

- **Professional support**

Professional support has never been more valuable. Pre-Covid (hard to remember what that felt like!) I worked regularly with more than one coach and I have now added another who has qualifications in psychology. Again this has provided some constructive reality testing.

It led me to take the [Anxiety and Depression Checklist \(K10\)](#) which is used by Australian General Practitioners and mental health professionals to determine what level of support an individual may require. The data emerging from the checklist gives a good indication of how our symptoms stack up against the general cohort of those experiencing anxiety and depression. Another piece of reassurance – I am doing surprisingly well and now I have a reliable benchmark.

- **And finally ...The advice from PON**

Although intended for the negotiation coach, the 4 strategies described in this article are just as helpful for us mediators. They include:

- **Reframing** – this skill is already a staple in mediators' repertoire. In the face of anxiety, the reframing being recommended is to reframe anxiety as excitement. A clever switch. The article encourages us to see that drawing on the same high arousal that fuels anxiety can actually increase authentic feelings of excitement.
- **Refocusing** – from what could go wrong to what could happen if things go well. A companion piece to reframing.
- **Preparing early** – an early focus on preparation apparently triggers early onset of anxiety for those of us who are susceptible. The article advocates '**defensive pessimism**' as a useful tool to stimulate effective preparation for anxiety-inducing events.

Researching this further, I discovered the [Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire](#) designed for anxious researchers at Wellesley College, which helped me explore the positive power of negative thinking and see the very real value that could be drawn from it.

- **Practising** – this failed to strike a chord at first however on reflection I could see what this might look like in my world. My work as a mediation coach with students and practising role plays with them reminds me of the skills I do have and the experience and wisdom I bring to the process. It stills the anxiety and stimulates confidence.

So anxiety has value?

It seems strange but confronting my experiences with anxiety and thinking more strategically about where it sits in my professional life, has been valuable.

Reframing anxiety as a gift has taken me to new experiences in learning and collegiality. I am grateful I have been able to make it to this side of the anxiety cliff and I have set some more

learning goals to maintain the process.


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over one of them, suggesting a search or analysis function. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, February 22nd, 2022 at 5:00 am and is filed under [Australia](#), [Cooperation](#), [Creativity](#), [Experience](#), [Flexibility](#), [Mediation Practice](#), [Mediation wisdom](#), [Mindset](#), [Peer Coaching](#), [Preparation](#), [Teamwork](#), [Zoom](#)

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