

Thriving inside a *volcano*: Working over time with parents in high conflict (& complex) separations

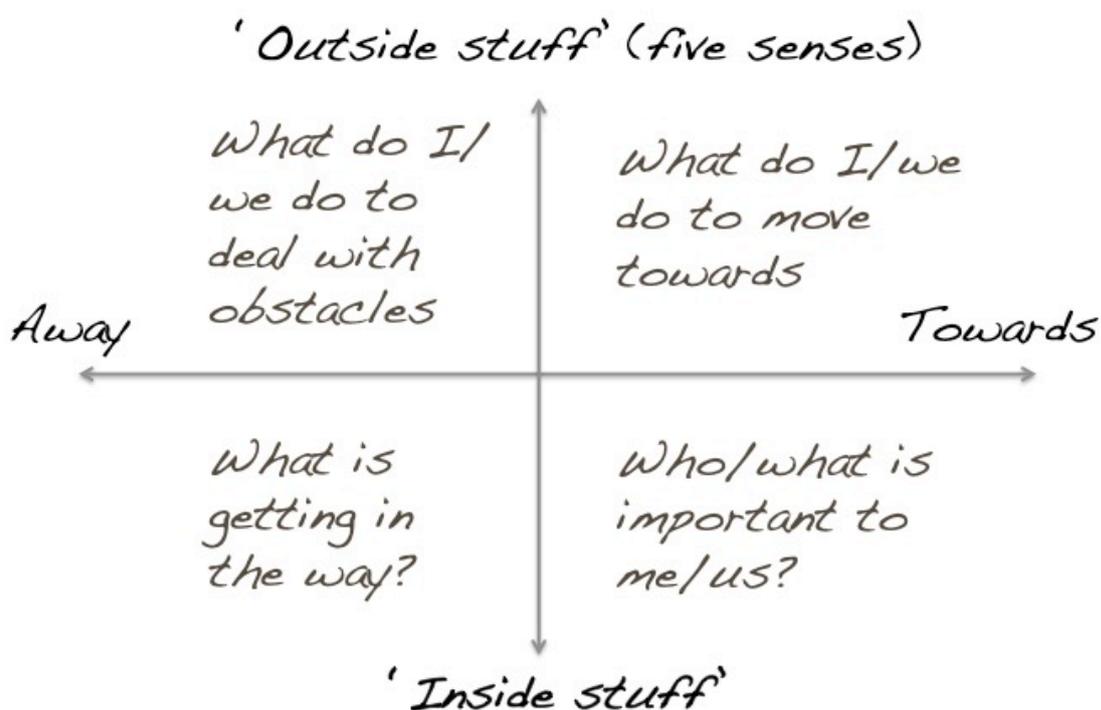
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SECTION 1: THERAPY TOOLS/ EXERCISES

1. The matrix

The matrix provides a tool for redirecting clients towards more effective, values guided action by offering a new perspective on their experiences and 'stuckness'.



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2. The volcano metaphor

A flexible metaphor for helping clients to connect experientially with many of the ACT core processes. Below are examples of how the metaphor might be used as an eyes closed exercise or in clinical conversation.

a) Eyes-closed script

“Are you willing to do a short eyes-closed exercise with me? Would you be willing to look at your situation from a different perspective?”

Have you ever seen a video/movie of a volcano erupting? Where molten rock, gas and other materials suddenly surge up through the earth’s surface?

Sometimes being an ex-partner in a difficult and messy separation can be like living next to your own personal volcano.

Imagine that you have chosen to live next to a volcano. The soil next to a volcano is often very fertile and so it makes sense that you launch headlong into life, building fences, nurturing crops and ensuring fertile soil for a healthy harvest. Depending on your DNA, your personality and your experience, you may or may not give the volcano much attention at all.

Suddenly, unpredictably your pleasure is interrupted by an unpleasant sensation. You are knocked off your feet by tremors in the ground. Although a bit rattled, you pick yourself up. You tell yourself that these won’t last long, are probably to be expected, that all will be fine and you get back to work.

After a while you notice more, and sometimes bigger, tremors. Over time, the tremors become more frequent and now there is also a smell in the air like eggs gone bad. You notice you are sweating and that your face and clothes are getting covered in black rain. You panic, and realise that perhaps you better start taking some action. So you commit to doing everything you can to protect yourself and your plot from the volcano and its messiness.

All of this is very instinctive. And sometimes it seems that you are making progress - things are momentarily quiet, only to erupt again and fill you with fear. Your volcano is relentless – and constantly picking yourself up off the ground and protect yourself is tiring. Trying not to inhale smelly gas is depleting you of oxygen. Struggling to cool yourself whilst at the same time shielding yourself from the black rain is exhausting. Sometimes you try to ‘fight fire with fire’, but you are no match for the ferocity of your personal volcano. This realisation brings its own fear.

Your struggle is so relentless and so volatile that at times you need to call on more resources to sustain it. But it’s your personal volcano, and you feel guilty and sad about the pollution it now inflicts on others.

You begin to ask yourself “was a move really necessary?” and “why didn’t I get better advice?” and begin to tell yourself that “if only I was in better physical condition”, “if only I

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chose a different location”, “if only I had better protective gear”. But none of this wondering improves your position. Your still struggling furiously, your personal volcano is active, the lava is getting thick and you are getting nowhere.

More importantly, sometimes you forget why you moved to the fertile ground in the first place.”

b) Expansions on the metaphor (where you can go ...):

- *To clarify the role of therapy and provide some hope:*

“So you call for help, and I show up – the SES volunteer with a plan. But before you can read the plan, you need to stop focussing on the volcano, and stop struggling furiously. Even though every fibre in your body screams in protest, you need to stop to consider the plan.

My job is not to save you, but to provide you with the tools to help yourself. I want you to learn how to respond in more helpful ways to your volcano when it erupts. I’m inviting you to come up with your own vital life plan so that you can feel the ground shake and notice the heat, gas and rain and at the same time connect with what really matters to you.”

- *To highlight the unworkability of strictly following thoughts, rules and advice.*

“People will give you all sorts of good advice about how best to live safely next to a volcano. Notice some of it is good advice, like “keep goggles and an emergency kit handy”, “make sure you have a flashlight and battery operated radio”.

Some of it is almost right, but mostly wrong, like “volcanos belch out smoke when they erupt” (it’s actually fine pieces of glass).

And some is just urban myth, like “volcanic eruptions mean that the earth’s core is in crisis”, “if you stick your head in the sand, the volcano will silence itself”

Most of this of this advice is well meaning and at times can fill your head. So how do you tell whether any of the advice you are offered for living safely next to a volcano is worth following?”

- *To generate a discussion of values and goals*

“Most people who live near volcanos have an emergency plan. The overall aim of the plan is ‘SAFETY’ – that is, to keep people and livestock alive. The details in the plan relate to specific actions that people have agreed help to keep people safe.

This is like the difference between values and goals. ‘Knowing your evacuation route’ might be a goal. And this is the service of living safely – the value.

What if we were to work on developing an emergency plan of sorts – to help you take effective action in line with your values?”

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- *To instil 'hope'*

"When your personal volcano erupts, and you focus on the heat, the smell and the ash, you become distracted from the landscape in front of you. People often choose to live next to volcanos because the soil next them is fertile and nutrient rich. There is a reason for them choosing to in some of the most beautiful and scientifically enthralling places in the world.

What happens when you narrow your focus to the negative aspects of your experience and your choice (i.e., tunnel vision). What if we broadened the focus a little bit?"

b) Clinical conversation (dialogue)

Therapist: *"Would you be willing to look at your situation from a different perspective?"*

"Have you ever seen a video/movie of a volcano erupting? Where molten rock, gas and other materials suddenly and ferociously surge up through the earth's surface?"

Client: *"I have. I think I might know where you are heading with this"*

Therapist: *"Great – so let's keep working through this together."*

"Sometimes being an ex-partner in a difficult separation can be like living next to your own personal volcano. Volcanoes operate according to their own schedule – they are unpredictable, random and volatile – and when they erupt they have very serious and catastrophic consequences. They can damage structures, change landscapes, kill plants or animals, and pollute the air and water."

Client: *"OK – so it's starting to sound like I chose the wrong place to live".*

Therapist: *"Those thoughts "maybe this is my fault", "maybe I've created this", do they show up often?"*

Client: *"Often enough – because it doesn't make sense".*

Therapist: *"Of course. And those thoughts, and the feelings that show up with them – in a way they provide an 'answer'. But what if a lot of this is inaccurate, and doesn't capture the bigger picture?"*

Client: *"I'd like for that the be the case."*

Therapist: *"People often choose to live next to volcanos because the soil next them is really fertile and nutrient rich. So in a way you have chosen a really sensible plot and you've launched headlong into life, building fences, nurturing crops and working hard to ensure fertile soil for a healthy harvest."*

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Client: *"I really have. I'm definitely not perfect, but I know that I've tried hard to make the children a priority and to maintain a strong relationship with them. But it was always a case of 'two steps forwards, one step backwards'. At times, it feels like I can't go further back."*

Therapist: *"There are some thoughts about the hopelessness of your situation?"*

Client: *"It certainly seems that way. I probably should have seen this coming. Maybe I needed to keep a more watchful eye on the volcano"*

Therapist: *"Ouch, they are hard thoughts to carry. And I get them – there's a sense of 'where did I go wrong'. But if you're willing, I'd like to keep going with this?"*

"You started to re-build your life and suddenly, unpredictably, your pleasure was interrupted by unpleasant sensations. You were knocked off your feet by small tremors in the ground. Although a bit rattled, you picked yourself up. You told yourself that all will be fine and you got back to work."

Client: *"Yes, that was what it was like". It started off as small things – I thought they were 'teething problems' so I didn't think too much about them. I thought that this was all just part of the adjustment process and that once the legal stuff was settled that things would get better."*

Therapist: *"Notice those thoughts – more answers. Our minds can at times be sense-making machines."*

Client: *"My mind is a sense-making expert!"*

Therapist: *"And after a while you noticed more tremors. Over time it became more unpleasant, there was also a smell in the air like eggs gone bad, you noticed you were sweating and that your face and clothes were getting covered in black rain".*

Client: *"And that's kind of where things are at now. I'm no better off. I feel like I live under a cloud of ash".*

Therapist: *"So protecting yourself, defending yourself is instinctive. You are now doing as much as you can to minimise the volcano's damage".*

Client: *"It feels like I don't have a choice. There's a lot at stake here".*

Therapist: *"And that thought, 'there's a lot at stake', a thought that in the early days lead you to constantly pick yourself up off the ground, over time has morphed into a commitment to an ongoing struggle – trying not to inhale the smelly gas, trying to cool yourself from the heat whilst at the same time, shielding yourself from the black rain."*

Client: *"It's exhausting. When you put it like that, no wonder I'm spent emotionally and physically. And it's not just me, I realise now that I have brought others to my defence – my partner, my family. And now they are covered in black rain and other crap too".*

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Therapist: *“And has the volcano stopped erupting?”*

Client: *“Not really – I’m here aren't I? I don’t think I’ve got anywhere.”*

Therapist: *“And let me guess, you sometimes forget about the fertile ground you moved to in the first place?”*

Client: *“I’m not proud of this, but yes, at times that happens”.*

Therapist: *“Whilst pre-occupied with fending off the volcano, you’ve been distracted from some of the most beautiful and scientifically enthralling real estate in the world”.*

3. Just like me script

This exercise aims to help people cultivate compassion and empathy by contacting the similarities between them and others. It is a flexible exercise that can be therapist or client-guided. Adapted from an exercise designed for kids from Stop Breathe Think app.

*“Just like me.....she is a living breathing human being
She gets sick and sometimes her feelings hurt
Just like me he wants to get along with people
She wants to do well, just like me
Sometimes he feels sad, just like me
Sometimes she gets angry, just like me
Sometimes he feels left out, just like me
Just like me, she wants to be happy.*

Keep going thinking of the things you have in common. Continue silently repeating your own “just like me” phrases

It’s almost time to finish – would you like to send friendly wishes to the person you were thinking about? I hope you are safe, and may I be safe too, I hope you are as happy and healthy as you can be, and may I be as happy and healthy as I can be too.

Take your time to think of other kind wishes and say them silently

You really do have things in common even with people who at first seem so different to you.

4. Plan for vital living

This exercise is designed to help couples plan a cohesive/shared response to threats/assaults from outside the relationship that is guided by their shared values.

See over for the exercise.

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(Emergency) Plan for Vital Living (Adapted from The Gottman Island Survival Game)

Most emergency plans aim to keep us safe. However, this plan is a little different. This plan aims to ensure that when life gets messy and/or there are outside threats to the stability of your relationship, you are able to take effective action and “secure” a meaningful relationship and family life.

Your task:

Step 1: Each of you are to write down on a piece of paper what you consider to be the 5 most important qualities/attributes that you would like to bring to your relationship/family in times of crisis. There are no right or wrong answers.

Give each quality a rating, ranging from 1 = “most important”, 2 = “next most important”, etc.

Below are some examples of qualities/attributes but there are numerous others. Make the list your own.

<i>Attentiveness</i>	<i>Affection</i>	<i>Appreciation</i>
<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Balance</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
<i>Courage</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Engagement</i>
<i>Compassion</i>	<i>Closeness</i>	<i>Fairness</i>
<i>Curiosity</i>	<i>Fun</i>	<i>Generosity</i>
<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Inspiration</i>	<i>Hope</i>
<i>Forgiveness</i>	<i>Integrity</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<i>Humour</i>	<i>Guidance</i>	<i>Spontaneity</i>
<i>Kindness</i>	<i>Growth</i>	<i>Stability</i>
<i>Respect</i>	<i>Tenderness</i>	<i>Trust</i>
<i>Tolerance</i>	<i>Security</i>	<i>Validation</i>
<i>Understanding</i>	<i>Reciprocity</i>	<i>Warmth</i>

Step 2: For each quality/attribute, write down two actions that you can take in your relationship/family that would be you “living” this quality/attribute when things get messy.

Step 3: Share your list with your partner. Together, come up with a consensus list of 5 items, each with associated behaviours. Work together as a team, talking it over and negotiating. Both of you need to be influential in coming up with the final list.

The final list should provide guidelines for responding tricky situations and for restoring stability when outside ‘threats’ impact your relationship.

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Steps 1 and 2: Most important qualities

Attribute	Ranking (1 = "Most important")	Actions
<i>e.g., communication</i>	2	<i>Discuss potential changes in plans before any change is made</i>

Step 3: Plan for vital living

Attribute	Ranking (1 = "Most important")	Actions

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SECTION 2: BACKGROUND

The divorce/separation landscape

- Between one-third and one-half of marriages end in separation/divorce
- Up to 50% of separations/divorces involve children
- Children's negative responses to the changed family situation post-separation and issues around management and care of the children/step-children pose a substantial challenge for parents and step-families
- Approximately 29% of children from separated/divorced parents become alienated from one parent

Parental alienation – a particular kind of complexity

- Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS; Gardner, 2002) remains a controversial diagnosis (e.g., Childress, 2015), however the consensus in the literature is that alienating behaviours and parental alienation exist (Maturana et al., 2018)
- 'Alienation' is used to refer to actions taken by one parent that interfere with a child's relationship with the other parent (i.e., targeted parent, TP) for illogical, untrue or exaggerated reasons, including:
 - Bad-mouthing the TP
 - Interfering with a child's time with the TP
 - Creating fear in a child that the TP is 'dangerous'
 - Rejection of a child for showing loyalty to the TP
 - Rewarding a child's rejection of the TP
 - Spreading animosity about the TP to other people
- Alienating behaviours are a matter of degree. In mild cases, children may display some rejection of the TP, but is able to maintain contact. In severe case, children reject the TP and all contact is refused.
- Impacts of alienation on children are well documented with recent literature advocating conceptualisation of parental alienation within a child abuse framework (Harman et al., 2018)

Targeted parents

- Recent systematic review identified only 9 studies examining the characteristics and experiences of TPs (Maturana et al., 2018). In sum, TPs report:
 - dissatisfaction with legal and mental health services
 - despair, frustration, isolation and hopelessness
 - resilience and positive coping strategies
- Conceptualisation of alienation as a form of intimate partner violence has been proposed (Harman et al., 2018).

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