

# Emotional Regulation in Conflict Management

## The Four-Stage Process — Your Applied Framework

The four-stage loop a mediator runs for each emotion that rises in the room. Stage 0, underneath it all: regulate yourself first — a non-anxious, settled presence is what the room reorganizes around.

### 1. Signs from Participants

*bodily, expressive & behavioral indicators you observe*

▲  
Biological Expressions & Action urges

### 2. What's Driving the Emotion *(the driver)*

▲  
Prompting Event ↔ Interpretation

### 3. Identify the Emotion *[words]*

*name it precisely — precise naming is itself regulating*

▼ *based on stages 1–3*

### 4. Course Correct & Reframe

— NEUTRALIZING —

- Check the Facts · Opposite Action\* · Problem Solving
- Affirmation & Recognition
  - Consider the environment & past:
    - Hypervigilance · Hypovigilance (hypoarousal) · PTSD / trauma responses
    - **Biological:** Hippocampus (memory) · Prefrontal cortex (reasoning) · Amygdala (threat alarm)

*\*Opposite Action = act all the way opposite to the emotion's action urge.*

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## A Mediator's Working Cheat Sheet

Companion tool to *Mediation as Affective Systems Stabilization: A Theoretical Framework for the Mediator as Systemic Emotional Regulator* (Stafford). Work left to right across the master table for any rising emotion in the room.

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### How to use this sheet

The room develops an emotional life of its own. Your job is to stabilize that affective field *before* reaching for content. Run the same loop for each emotion that rises — it may take thirty seconds or an hour, and it repeats throughout the session. The six numbered columns of the master table are the four working stages in order:

1. **Stage 0 — Regulate yourself first** (the substrate). Steady your own breath, posture, and pace. A non-anxious, differentiated presence is what the room reorganizes around.
2. **Read the signs** → columns 1–2 (physical signs; expressions & action urge). Bodies tip before words do — intervene early.
3. **Find the driver** → columns 3–4 (what's driving it; prompting event vs. interpretation). The event is rarely the cause — the *interpretation* usually is.
4. **Name it precisely** → column 5. "Upset" carries no information; "this looks like shame, not anger" changes the problem. Precise naming is itself regulating.
5. **Course-correct & reframe** → column 6, using the decision below.

#### The decision at Stage 4 — ask: does the emotion fit the facts?

- **Fits the facts, and acting on it is effective** → acknowledge it, then **Problem-Solve** the real issue.
- **Fits the facts, but acting on it would be ineffective** → **Opposite Action**: validate the emotion as legitimate and model/channel the opposite of its urge.
- **Does not fit the facts** → **Check the Facts**: surface the interpretation and widen it, then Opposite Action.

**Throughout:** neutralize rather than suppress (the emotion is information), use affirmation/appreciation where a party feels unseen, and read the body's state — cognitive work only holds inside the window of tolerance. See the context and distinctions tables after the master grid.

## Master Working Table — Reading and Regulating Emotion in the Room

For the emotion you are seeing, scan left to right: signs → urge → driver → event/interpretation → precise name → your move.

Emotion	1 · Physical Signs (what you observe)	2 · Biological Expressions & Actions (the action urge)	3 · What's Driving It (the deeper driver)	4 · Prompting Event ↔ Interpretation	5 · Name It Precisely (the specific words)	6 · Mediator Course of Action
<b>ANGER</b>	Muscles tightening; jaw set, teeth clamping Hands clenching / fists; leaning forward Face flushed or hot; feeling about to “explode” Glaring; tightened muscles around the eyes	Urge to attack — to remove the obstacle (Frijda) Raised / sharp voice, sarcasm, swearing Pointing, pounding, criticizing, blaming Or: walking out, brooding withdrawal	A blocked goal, or unfair / hurtful treatment of self or someone cared about Threatened status, autonomy, or role (Shapiro) Often: “I’m right; this is illegitimate.”	<b>Event:</b> goal blocked or interrupted; insult; attack; pain. <b>Interpretation:</b> “treated unfairly,” “they should know better,” rumination on a past wrong. Separate the event from the meaning (Lazarus).	irritation, annoyance, frustration, exasperation, indignation, resentment, fury, rage <b>Anger vs. contempt:</b> anger targets the act; contempt dismisses the person.	<b>Fits facts:</b> a real right/goal is blocked or someone is genuinely harmed. <b>Check facts:</b> if driven by an old grievance or a “should.” <b>Opposite action:</b> validate the concern, model calm, willing hands, slow the tempo. <b>Problem-solve:</b> if the blocked goal is real and solvable.
<b>CONTEMPT (&amp; Disgust)</b>	Upper-lip / nose tightening; one-sided smirk Eye-roll; looking down at or away from Cool, flat affect; arms crossed; pulling back Disgust: recoil, “ugh,” covering, distancing	Urge to expel / push away / lower the other’s status (Frijda) Dismissive tone, mockery, sarcasm Talking past the other; refusing eye contact Sneering; treating with disdain	Moral judgment — “they are beneath me / immoral / disgusting” A violated value; status hierarchy Plutchik: contempt = anger + disgust (a blend)	<b>Event:</b> behavior read as hypocrisy, betrayal, or a values violation. <b>Interpretation:</b> global character judgment — “they’re the kind of person who...”; moral superiority. The most relationship-corrosive reading.	contempt, scorn, disdain, derision, condescension disgust, aversion, repugnance, loathing, antipathy <b>Watch early —</b> contempt predicts breakdown.	<b>Rarely useful:</b> almost always ineffective in the room. <b>Check facts:</b> on the global character judgment. <b>Opposite action:</b> invite a charitable explanation / perspective-taking; restore the other’s standing (status — Shapiro); stay respectful where the urge is to dismiss.
<b>FEAR / ANXIETY</b>	Fast heartbeat; breathless or held breath Muscles tense; trembling; “butterflies,” nausea Sweating; lump in throat; going quiet Frozen stare or darting eyes	Urge to flee / avoid; freeze; placate (Frijda) Pleading; talking less, or fast & nervous Shaky voice; avoiding the topic / leaving	A perceived threat to life, health, well-being, standing, relationship, or competence Loss of control or of help; the unfamiliar Trauma cue of past harm (window of tolerance)	<b>Event:</b> new/uncertain situation; a procedural change; a charged statement. <b>Interpretation:</b> “I’ll be harmed / rejected / embarrassed,” “I’m losing control,” catastrophizing. <b>Note:</b> fear = specific threat; anxiety = diffuse, no clear object.	apprehension, nervousness, worry, unease, dread, panic, terror <b>Anxiety (diffuse)</b> often → cognitive paralysis; <b>fear (specific)</b> supports focused response.	<b>Fits facts:</b> a real, present threat exists. <b>Check facts:</b> name the threat, weigh the odds, list other outcomes, plan a non-catastrophic / coping response. <b>Opposite action:</b> approach in small steps; paced breath; predictable structure; signal safety — don’t push a flooded party.
<b>SADNESS / GRIEF</b>	Low energy; heaviness; slumped posture	Urge to withdraw / isolate; to give up; to stay still (Frijda)	Loss — of a person, role, the status quo,	<b>Event:</b> a loss, an ending, an outcome worse than hoped.	disappointment, discouragement, hurt, sorrow, dejection,	<b>Fits facts:</b> a genuine, often permanent loss — make

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<b>SHAME</b>	Eyes drooping or tearing; chest hollowness Quiet, slow, monotone voice Withdrawal; difficulty swallowing	Crying; talking little; avoiding Seeks comfort; conserves energy	an expectation, or hope Separation; powerlessness Things not as wanted, or worse than hoped	<b>Interpretation:</b> “this is permanent / hopeless,” “I’m powerless,” “nothing will change.” <b>Note:</b> grief = real, often permanent loss; disappointment = an unmet, revisable expectation.	loneliness, despair, grief, anguish <b>Sadness</b> (a state) vs. <b>depression</b> (pervasive).	room for it (containment); don’t rush. <b>Check facts:</b> if “hopeless/permanent” isn’t accurate. <b>Opposite action:</b> get active; re-engage; one small concrete step; name what is still in the party’s control. <b>Problem-solve:</b> if the unmet need is solvable.
	Face hot / blushing; gaze down or away Shrinking posture; covering the face “Wanting to disappear”; pit-of-stomach dread Halting, quieter speech	Urge to hide / withdraw / conceal the self (Frijda) Appeasing or over-apologizing Or: attacking others to deflect; going silent	Identity-level judgment — “I am defective / unlovable / a failure” Fear of rejection if a trait is exposed Comparison to a standard one feels one fails	<b>Event:</b> exposure or criticism of a private characteristic; being “found out.” <b>Interpretation:</b> “they’ll reject me,” “I am bad,” global self-condemnation. <b>Key line:</b> shame = “I am wrong”; guilt = “I did wrong.”	embarrassment, self-consciousness, contrition, humiliation, mortification <b>Often masked as</b> anger or contempt toward others.	<b>Rarely fits:</b> a whole person is not defective. <b>Opposite action:</b> reduce exposure; normalize (“common in disputes like this” — universality, Yalom); restore standing; allow disclosure to someone who won’t reject; slow the pace. <b>If guilt is real beneath it:</b> support repair without identity-condemnation.
	Tension, jitteriness; hot face Restlessness; sighing Sometimes a lowered head	Urge to repair the specific harm; make amends (Frijda) Apologizing, confessing, fixing Conciliatory posture	“My behavior violated my own values or an agreement” — action-focused Awareness of harm caused An unmet commitment	<b>Event:</b> did, or failed to do, something against one’s own values; caused harm. <b>Interpretation:</b> “my actions caused this,” “if only I’d...,” “I behaved badly.” <b>Useful when accurate:</b> guilt motivates repair.	regret, remorse, contrition, culpability <b>Guilt</b> (behavior → repair) vs. <b>shame</b> (identity → hide).	<b>Fits facts:</b> behavior genuinely violated the party’s values → support repair: acknowledge, apologize, make amends, commit to change, accept consequences gracefully. <b>Not justified:</b> check the facts; reduce over-responsibility; stop over-apologizing; look forward. Channel repair energy into the agreement.
	Muscle / teeth tightening; face flush Pit-of-stomach pain; body rigidity Tightening when the other is recognized	Urge to level the gap — to get even or to “show up” the other (Frijda) Criticizing or diminishing them; or working harder	“They have what I want / need and I don’t” — comparison Feeling unappreciated, inferior, or treated unfairly by life	<b>Event:</b> the other gets recognition, resources, or status the party wanted. <b>Interpretation:</b> “it’s unfair,” “I deserve it more,” “I’m less-than,” discounting one’s own.	covetousness, discontent, longing, resentment, “green-eyed” <b>Distinguish from jealousy</b> (fear of losing what one has).	<b>Fits facts:</b> another genuinely has something the party needs/wants. <b>Check facts:</b> on “unfair / deserve / inferior” and on exaggerating the other’s advantage.

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JEALOUSY		Avoiding the person	(appreciation, status — Shapiro)	<b>Note:</b> envy = wanting what another has.		<b>Opposite action:</b> count blessings; inhibit diminishing the other; affirm the party's own contribution; redirect to their interests. <b>Problem-solve:</b> toward what the party actually needs.
	Fast heartbeat; breathless; lump in throat Muscles tensing; teeth clenching Injured pride; a sense of rejection	Urge to control / guard / keep hold of the valued thing (Frijda) Interrogating, monitoring, accusing; clinging Collecting "evidence"; sometimes threats	A valued relationship, role, or asset feels threatened or in danger of being lost/taken (affiliation, role — Shapiro)	<b>Event:</b> a third party or a change threatens a valued bond, role, or asset. <b>Interpretation:</b> "I'm being replaced / cheated / displaced," "they'll take it," "I don't measure up." Check whether the threat is real.	suspicion, possessiveness, rivalry, mistrust, defensiveness, fear of losing someone/something	<b>Fits facts:</b> a valued relationship/role/asset is genuinely at risk. <b>Check facts:</b> how likely is the threat? other readings? <b>Opposite action:</b> let go of controlling moves; stop "spying" / interrogating; share rather than guard; take in the full information. <b>Problem-solve:</b> if it's about allocation (common in family/asset disputes).

## Mediator Course of Action — Decision Reference (Stage 4)

First ask whether the emotion *fits the facts* of the situation (intensity and duration too). Then choose the move. “Opposite action” means acting **all the way** opposite to the urge — in posture, voice, and behavior — until the emotion shifts.

Emotion	Fits the facts when...	If NOT justified, or acting on it is ineffective → OPPOSITE ACTION (act opposite, all the way)	If the FACTS are the problem → PROBLEM-SOLVE / how to neutralize
<b>ANGER</b>	A real goal/right is blocked, or self or someone cared about is genuinely attacked, hurt, insulted, or threatened.	Gently disengage rather than attack; take a timeout; breathe slow and deep; willing hands (palms up, jaw and chest unclenched); imagine a good reason for the other’s behavior; be a little kind.	Name the legitimate concern under the heat; convert it into a workable interest; return parties to collaborative work on the blocked goal. Neutralize, don’t suppress — the anger is information.
<b>CONTEMPT / DISGUST</b>	Something could genuinely poison/contaminate; or a person/group is doing real, serious harm to the party or their group.	Move toward rather than away; imagine understanding and empathy; take in the other’s point of view; treat with respect where the urge is to sneer; be kind to the one you feel contempt for.	Surface the value that feels violated and have it heard; restore the dismissed party’s standing (status). Re-humanize before any content work — contempt blocks every other move.
<b>FEAR / ANXIETY</b>	There is a real, present threat to life, health, well-being, standing, or a relationship.	Approach what is feared in small steps, over and over; keep eyes/ears open and take in that the room is safe; confident posture and steady voice; paced breathing; create a sense of control and mastery.	Make the threat explicit and right-size it; add predictable structure, choice, and pacing (signal safety). If a real risk exists, plan concretely for it. Do not pursue exposure with a flooded party — regulate first.
<b>SADNESS / GRIEF</b>	A genuine and often permanent loss has occurred, or things truly are not as the party needed or hoped.	Get active and approach rather than withdraw; avoid avoiding; build mastery with one competent step; increase small positive/forward actions; bright posture, head up, upbeat tone.	If a real, solvable unmet need drives the sadness, problem-solve it. If the loss is real, make room for grief first (containment) before any push toward solutions.
<b>SHAME</b>	(Shame fits the facts only if a value the party shares would lead people they care about to reject them if the trait/behavior became public.)	Make the characteristic or behavior known to people who will NOT reject the party; repeat it without hiding; no over-apologizing; take in the full information; head up, steady voice, look others in the eye.	Normalize through universality (“I see this often”); reduce exposure and slow the pace; restore standing. If JUSTIFIED GUILT sits beneath the shame, switch to the guilt-repair track below.
<b>GUILT</b>	The party’s own behavior genuinely violated their own values, agreement, or moral code.	(When guilt is NOT justified): make the behavior public to those who won’t reject; repeat it without hiding; no apologizing for a non-transgression; take in the information; head up, steady voice.	When guilt IS justified: support repair — acknowledge, apologize, make amends or prevent similar harm, commit to change, and accept consequences gracefully; then let it go. Channel repair into the agreement.
<b>ENVY</b>	Another person or group genuinely has something the party needs or wants and does not have.	Inhibit any move to destroy or spoil what the other has; count ALL the party’s blessings (without discounting them or exaggerating deprivation); stop inflating the other’s advantage — check the facts.	Redirect to what the party actually needs and can pursue; affirm and make visible the party’s own contribution and worth (appreciation). Problem-solve toward the underlying need, not the comparison.
<b>JEALOUSY</b>	A truly important and desired relationship, role, or object is in real danger of being damaged, lost, or taken.	Let go of controlling the other’s actions; stop spying, snooping, and interrogating (“fire the private detective”); share what the party has; no avoiding — take in all the information about the situation.	If a real threat to a valued bond/role exists and the dispute is about allocation, problem-solve who gets what. Address the underlying need to belong / matter (affiliation) directly.

## Naming With Precision — Telling Close Emotions Apart (Stage 3)

*Parties (and mediators) collapse distinct emotions into one word. Each pair below carries a different action urge and needs a different move.*

Confusable pair	Ask this to tell them apart	Differing action urge	Why it changes the mediator's move
<b>Anger vs. Contempt</b>	Is the target the act (anger) or the person's worth (contempt)?	Anger → attack to restore a boundary/goal. Contempt → dismiss, lower status.	Contempt is far more corrosive; it needs re-humanizing and status repair, not just de-escalation.
<b>Shame vs. Guilt</b>	"I AM bad" (shame) or "I DID something bad" (guilt)?	Shame → hide/withdraw. Guilt → repair/make amends.	Shame work reduces exposure and normalizes; guilt work supports a concrete repair. Treating shame as guilt deepens it.
<b>Fear vs. Anxiety</b>	Is there a specific, nameable threat (fear) or a diffuse dread (anxiety)?	Fear → focused escape/approach. Anxiety → freeze, scan, paralyze.	Name and right-size a specific fear; for diffuse anxiety, add structure, pacing, and safety cues first.
<b>Sadness vs. Grief vs. Disappointment</b>	Is the loss real and permanent (grief), a state (sadness), or an unmet but revisable expectation (disappointment)?	All → withdraw/conserve.	Grief needs space and containment; disappointment may be problem-solvable. Don't rush a real loss toward a fix.
<b>Envy vs. Jealousy</b>	Wanting what another HAS (envy) or fearing the LOSS of what you have (jealousy)?	Envy → level the gap. Jealousy → guard/control.	Envy work redirects to the party's own needs and worth; jealousy work tests the threat and releases control.

## Context That Shapes the Move

*These lenses sit behind every column: what is really driving the emotion, what state the party's nervous system is in, and the presence you bring.*

Lens	What to watch for, and how it changes the move
<b>Regulate yourself first (Stage 0)</b>	You are part of the system you are stabilizing. A reactive mediator amplifies dysregulation; a non-anxious, well-differentiated presence is the reference point the room reorganizes around (Bowen; Friedman). Settle your own breath, posture, and pace before and during — it is a clinical-grade intervention, not self-care on the side.
<b>The five core concerns (Shapiro &amp; Fisher)</b>	Strong emotion in conflict is usually driven by a thwarted core concern: APPRECIATION (feeling devalued or unheard), AFFILIATION (treated as adversary/outsider), AUTONOMY (decision freedom impinged), STATUS (standing diminished), or ROLE (role unfulfilling or undefined). Naming and meeting the concern often does more than addressing the surface position.
<b>Window of tolerance &amp; arousal (Siegel; Porges)</b>	Above the window = hyperarousal (fight/flight: racing, attacking, fleeing). Below = hypoarousal (shutdown: numb, flat, withdrawn, “not there”). Cognitive and reappraisal work only holds INSIDE the window. Read which state the party is in, and regulate arousal before content. Hypervigilance and hypoarousal can be trauma-shaped — widen the window with safety, pacing, and choice.
<b>Trauma, the brain &amp; memory</b>	Under threat the amygdala drives the alarm, the prefrontal cortex (reasoning, perspective-taking) goes offline, and the hippocampus mis-files memory so the past intrudes on the present. This is why “just be reasonable” fails with a flooded party, and why a current trigger can ignite an old, disproportionate reaction. Stabilize the body first; the thinking brain comes back online after.
<b>Affirmation &amp; appreciation language</b>	Where the driver is feeling unseen or devalued, affirmation is regulatory: acknowledge effort, sacrifice, and what each party values; reflect the legitimate concern under the heat; make people feel heard before asking them to move. (Pairs with the APPRECIATION core concern; cf. Brown, Atlas of the Heart.)
<b>Scope reminder</b>	A mediator reads, names, paces, and regulates the room — a mediator does not diagnose, treat, or process trauma. These cues inform pacing and choice of move; they are not clinical labels. When a party needs clinical care, refer.

## Sources & Attribution

This cheat sheet is an original synthesis prepared as a companion to the author's framework paper. It draws on, and attributes its concepts to, multiple traditions rather than any single source. It does not reproduce any copyrighted worksheet; emotion vocabularies, prompting events, and the check-the-facts / opposite-action / problem-solving logic are paraphrased and integrated from the works below.

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*Prepared as a practice companion to the author's framework. © Bryan D. Stafford. The mediator reads, names, paces, and regulates the affective field; the mediator does not diagnose or treat. When clinical care is indicated, refer.*