

# **The Attachment-Aware Mediator**

*How Attachment Style Shapes the Way Adults Approach, Process, and Respond to Conflict in Mediation*

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## Abstract

Conflict is not only a disagreement over substance; it is an attachment event. The moment two people experience threat, rejection, or the possibility of abandonment inside a relationship, the brain's oldest relational machinery comes online and begins to govern perception, emotion, and behavior—often well below conscious awareness. This paper argues that attachment style is a primary, underutilized variable for understanding and managing conflict in mediation. Drawing on the foundational attachment scholarship of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Main, and Hazan and Shaver, and extending it through Mikulincer and Shaver's model of attachment-system dynamics, Bowen Family Systems Theory, the somatic and neurosequential trauma frameworks of van der Kolk and Perry (including the body's fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses), and the distress-tolerance and emotion-regulation framework of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), the paper develops an integrated, practice-oriented account of how anxious, avoidant, disorganized, and secure orientations change the way disputants enter, experience, and exit conflict. It then advances an original synthesis: that a mediation session becomes its own emotional system with its own identity, and that the mediator's central task is to read the attachment patterns in the room, regulate the emotional climate, and function as a temporary secure base from which parties can do the hard work of negotiation. The paper closes with concrete, attachment-tailored interventions and a psychoeducation framework that mediators can deploy in real time.

## 1. Introduction: Why Attachment Belongs at the Center of Conflict Management

### 1.1 Conflict activates the attachment system

Every adult carries an internal template—what Bowlby (1969/1982) called an *internal working model*—for what closeness, dependence, and rupture mean and what to expect when a relationship is strained. These models are not abstract beliefs; they are pre-rational expectations, laid down in early caregiving relationships and continually revised, that tell a person whether others are reliable, whether the self is worthy of care, and what one must do to stay safe when connection is threatened (Bowlby, 1973; Belsky, 2002). Conflict is precisely the condition that activates this system. As Pietromonaco and colleagues (2007) argue, relational conflict functions as a stressor that (a) acts directly on the attachment bond, (b) taxes each partner's capacity to regulate emotion and behavior, and (c) raises the stakes of disclosure and vulnerability. Conflict, in other words, is rarely processed as a neutral problem to be solved; it is processed as a question about the security of the bond.

This is why two people can sit at the same table, hear the same words, and leave with radically different accounts of what happened. Their working models filtered the same event into different meanings. A person who expects others to be responsive interprets a raised voice as friction to be worked through; a person who expects others to be rejecting or unavailable interprets the same raised voice as evidence of imminent abandonment or attack (Pietromonaco et al., 2007;

Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Understanding attachment style, then, is not a peripheral nicety for the conflict professional. It is a way of seeing the hidden architecture that determines how a person will *approach* conflict (with avoidance, vigilance, or openness), how they will *process* it (with flooding, shutdown, or reflective balance), and how they will *respond* (with pursuit, withdrawal, aggression, or collaboration).

## 1.2 From interpersonal to intrapersonal: attachment is always in the room

Attachment shapes both interpersonal and intrapersonal experience. Interpersonally, attachment orientation predicts the conflict-communication patterns partners fall into—mutual constructive engagement, demand-withdraw, or mutual avoidance (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). Intrapersonally, attachment governs the private experience that precedes any observable behavior: the speed and intensity of threat appraisal, the felt sense of whether one can tolerate the distress of the moment, and the running internal commentary about one's own worth and the other's intentions. A securely attached person in conflict can usually hold a dual awareness—"this is hard, *and* the relationship is not ending." An insecurely attached person frequently loses that dual awareness, and the internal world collapses into a single, overwhelming signal: danger. The mediator who attends only to the words on the table, and not to the attachment drama unfolding inside each party, is managing the visible ten percent of the conflict.

## 1.3 Why this matters specifically in mediation

Mediation is a particularly attachment-saturated form of conflict management. Unlike arbitration or litigation, where a third party imposes a decision, mediation requires the disputants themselves to remain engaged, tolerate discomfort, take the other's perspective, and co-author a resolution (Goltsman et al., 2009; Benedikt & Kowalik, 2020). It asks people to do, voluntarily and often in the presence of someone they feel wronged by, the very things that insecure attachment makes hardest: stay present under threat, regulate strong affect, trust a process, and risk vulnerability. The empirical hint that this matters is already in the literature. In an exploratory study of real-life mediations, Nelson and colleagues (2011) found that the speech of securely attached disputants was markedly "more useful and enhanced toward resolution" than that of insecure disputants—and they explicitly emphasized the role of the mediator in working with these differences. Mediation also appears to outperform unfacilitated negotiation for couples in conflict, raising both the probability of agreement and satisfaction with the process (Bogacz et al., 2020), suggesting that the third party is performing regulatory work that the parties cannot do alone.

The thesis of this paper follows from that observation. The mediator's first job is diagnostic and regulatory, not substantive: to **identify the attachment styles in the room and manage the session accordingly**. Two further ideas, developed below, sharpen this claim. First, building on Bowen Family Systems Theory, the session itself becomes its own emotional system with its own identity—an entity with a climate, a set point, and an anxiety level that the parties and the mediator jointly create and that, in turn, shapes the conflict. Second, attachment style is the principal contributor to how each party loads emotion into that system, how readily they become

dysregulated, and how much distress they can tolerate—a capacity best understood through the lens of DBT.

## 2. The Session as Its Own Emotional System: A Bowenian Frame

### 2.1 The family (and the table) as an emotional unit

Murray Bowen's central insight was that the emotional functioning of a family is not the sum of its individuals but a *system*—a unit regulated by automatic, largely non-conscious emotional processes that operate, he argued, in all living things (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Papero, 2024). In Bowen's model, two counterbalancing forces, togetherness and individuality, operate in proportional opposition, and the energy that powers the system is *anxiety*: the organism's response to real or imagined threat (Papero, 2024). When anxiety rises, the system's automatic mechanisms—triangling, conflict, distancing, and over- and under-functioning reciprocity—engage to restore emotional equilibrium. Prolonged anxiety resets the system to a more reactive set point.

A mediation table is, for the duration of the session, exactly such an emotional system. The moment the parties sit down, a new emotional unit forms with its own togetherness-individuality balance and, crucially, its own anxiety level. This is the sense in which **the session acquires its own identity**. It is not merely a container in which two pre-formed conflicts are aired; it is a living system whose collective anxiety can rise and fall, whose members can be pulled into automatic patterns, and whose climate determines what kind of thinking is possible at the table. When the system's anxiety spikes, both parties lose access to reflective, problem-solving cognition and revert to reflexive emotional positions. When it settles, the same two people become capable of perspective-taking and compromise they could not reach minutes earlier.

### 2.2 Differentiation of self: the capacity the table requires

Bowen's construct of *differentiation of self*—the degree to which a person can distinguish the feeling process from the intellectual process, and maintain a thoughtful, autonomous self while remaining in emotional contact with others—names precisely the capacity that effective negotiation demands (Bowen, 1978; Brown & Errington, 2024; Calatrava et al., 2021). Highly differentiated people can stay calm in conflictual relationships, hold an "I-position," resolve problems effectively, and reach a compromise; less differentiated people respond to relational stress with emotional reactivity, fusion, or emotional cutoff (Lampis et al., 2018). The empirical record links higher differentiation to better marital adjustment and lower interpersonal conflict, and links its sub-components—emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff—to poorer outcomes, with emotional cutoff an especially robust predictor of relational distress across cultures (Skowron, 2000; Rodríguez-González et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017).

The conceptual bridge to attachment is direct. What Bowen called low differentiation—chronic emotional reactivity, fusion, and cutoff under relational stress—maps closely onto what attachment theory calls insecurity. Emotional reactivity and fusion echo the *hyperactivating*

strategy of anxious attachment; emotional cutoff echoes the *deactivating* strategy of avoidant attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Differentiation describes the trait-level capacity to stay regulated and self-defined in a charged relational field; attachment describes the developmental origin and moment-to-moment dynamics of that same capacity. Read together, they tell the mediator both *what* is happening at the table (the system's anxiety is rising and members are being pulled toward reactivity, fusion, or cutoff) and *why* a given party is especially prone to one of those moves (their attachment history).

### 2.3 The mediator as a differentiating, non-anxious presence

The practical consequence is that the mediator is not outside the system; the mediator is its most influential member. In Bowenian terms, the mediator's task is to be the most differentiated presence in the room—to remain a "non-anxious presence" who does not get absorbed into the system's escalating anxiety or pulled into a triangle by either party (Brown & Errington, 2024). Because emotional systems regulate through contagion, a mediator who stays regulated lowers the anxiety of the whole system, which raises the parties' temporary, borrowed capacity for differentiated functioning. This is the systemic mechanism beneath a familiar piece of mediator craft: the calmer and more centered the mediator, the more reasonable the parties become. Attachment theory then specifies *how* to deliver that regulation to a particular party, because, as Section 5 develops, an anxiously attached disputant and an avoidantly attached disputant need opposite things from the mediator in order to settle.

## 3. What Attachment Styles Are and How They Shape Conflict

### 3.1 The foundational architecture

Attachment theory began with John Bowlby's recognition that the human infant's bond to a caregiver is a biologically rooted survival system, not a by-product of feeding (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980). Mary Ainsworth operationalized individual differences in this system through the Strange Situation, identifying secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant patterns in infancy based on how children used the caregiver as a secure base and responded to separation and reunion (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Mary Main extended the work in two decisive ways: she identified a fourth, *disorganized* pattern marked by contradictory, fearful behavior with no coherent strategy (Main & Solomon, 1990), and she moved the field "to the level of representation" by developing the Adult Attachment Interview, showing that adults carry coherent—or incoherent—*states of mind* with respect to attachment that predict their own children's security (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

The leap into adult relationships came when Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver (1987) reconceptualized romantic love as an attachment process, demonstrating that the three Ainsworth patterns had recognizable adult analogs in how people experience closeness, jealousy, and fear of abandonment. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) reorganized adult attachment into a four-category model defined by two underlying dimensions—the model of the self and the model of

the other—yielding secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful-avoidant styles. Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) then established that adult attachment is best captured by two continuous dimensions, *anxiety* (fear of rejection and abandonment) and *avoidance* (discomfort with closeness and dependence), the framework operationalized in the widely used Experiences in Close Relationships measures. Most contemporary research treats attachment dimensionally while retaining the category labels as useful shorthand.

### 3.2 The engine: hyperactivation and deactivation

The single most useful idea for the conflict professional is Mikulincer and Shaver's (2003, 2016) model of what the attachment system *does* under threat. When a person perceives threat, the attachment system seeks proximity to a security-providing figure. If security is attained, the person returns to balanced functioning. If it is not, the person adopts one of two *secondary strategies*:

- **Hyperactivation** (the anxious strategy): turning the alarm *up*. The person intensifies bids for closeness, reassurance, and attention; escalates emotional expression; ruminates on threat; and remains hypervigilant to any sign of rejection. The implicit logic is, "If I protest loudly enough, I can compel the other to respond."
- **Deactivation** (the avoidant strategy): turning the alarm *down*. The person suppresses attachment needs, distances, denies vulnerability, and pursues compulsive self-reliance. The implicit logic is, "I cannot count on anyone, so I will need no one."

These are not merely descriptive labels; they are measurable regulatory strategies with physiological signatures. Individuals using deactivating strategies show *increased* skin conductance—covert arousal—precisely when asked to recall attachment threats they verbally minimize, revealing the effortful suppression beneath the calm surface (Dozier & Kobak, 1992; Eilert & Sumich, 2023). Insecurity, in short, is an imbalance: anxious attachment over-relies on others and amplifies distress, while avoidant attachment pursues a pseudo-autonomy that conceals unresolved arousal (Messina et al., 2023). Secure attachment, by contrast, is associated with flexible, balanced regulation—the capacity to use cognitive reappraisal effectively and to turn to others as a genuine resource without being flooded or shut down (Eilert & Sumich, 2023; Domic-Siede et al., 2024).

### 3.3 The four orientations in conflict

When translated into the conflict table, the orientations produce distinct, recognizable profiles. The evidence base linking attachment to conflict behavior is now substantial and consistent across romantic, family, organizational, and cross-cultural samples (Shi, 2003; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; González-Ortega et al., 2021). Table 1 summarizes the four orientations across their defining characteristics, their typical behavior under conflict, and the mediator stance each calls for; the narrative that follows elaborates each row.

Attachment Style	Core Characteristics	Typical Conflict Behavior	Mediator Approach
Secure	Comfortable with both intimacy and autonomy; positive model	Approaches conflict as a solvable problem inside a	Lowest-maintenance party and a resource for the

Attachment Style	Core Characteristics	Typical Conflict Behavior	Mediator Approach
<i>(low anxiety, low avoidance)</i>	of self and others; flexible emotion regulation.	durable bond; compromises, collaborates, tolerates the other's distress.	system; let their regulated tempo help set the table's climate without exploiting their patience.
<b>Anxious / Preoccupied</b> <i>(high anxiety)</i>	Fear of abandonment; seeks reassurance; hyperactivates the attachment alarm; hypervigilant to rejection.	Pursues, protests, blames, and escalates; occupies the 'demand' role; struggles to let a dispute rest. Loud, visible distress.	Provide containment and reliable responsiveness: structure, explicit acknowledgment, steady contact; gently contain flooding. Do not match intensity or leave bids unanswered.
<b>Avoidant / Dismissing</b> <i>(high avoidance)</i>	Values independence; avoids emotional closeness; deactivates attachment needs; covert arousal beneath a calm surface.	Withdraws, stonewalls, changes topic, resists compromise that requires dependence; occupies the 'withdraw' role.	Give space, autonomy, and low-pressure entry points; work interests/cognition before affect; avoid the pursuer role. Don't mistake flat affect for low stakes.
<b>Fearful-Avoidant / Disorganized</b> <i>(high anxiety, high avoidance)</i>	Desires closeness but fears it due to mistrust or trauma; contradictory, hard-to-track internal world.	Alternates approach and attack, engage and flee; most associated with controlling behavior and breakdown of any coherent strategy.	Maximize safety, predictability, and trauma-informed pacing; keep arousal low; avoid surprises; respect the limits of mediation and consider clinical referral.

Table 1. Attachment orientations in conflict and the corresponding mediator approach.

**Secure (low anxiety, low avoidance).** Secure individuals approach conflict as a solvable problem inside a durable bond. They use more compromising, integrating, and collaborating strategies; they can self-disclose and tolerate the other's distress without retaliating or fleeing; and they report greater confidence in their ability to resolve disputes (Pistole, 1989; Shi, 2003; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). In Bowenian terms, they bring higher differentiation; in DBT terms, they bring higher distress tolerance. They are the easiest parties to mediate and, when present in a dyad, raise the quality of the whole interaction—couples with at least one secure member show less dysfunctional conflict resolution regardless of the other's style (González-Ortega et al., 2020).

**Anxious / preoccupied (high anxiety).** The anxious disputant approaches conflict already braced for abandonment. Hyperactivation drives conflict *engagement* and escalation: they pursue, protest, blame, and demand contact; they may perceive benign or ambiguous behavior as threatening; and they struggle to let a dispute rest (Greenwood, 2015; Bonache et al., 2016; Yildiz, 2023). Their distress is loud and visible. In demand-withdraw cycles, they almost always occupy the *demand* role (Akalın Sevi et al., 2025). Critically, their escalation is not aggression for its own sake but a desperate, maladaptive bid for responsiveness—a fact that reframes how the mediator should respond.

**Avoidant / dismissing (high avoidance).** The avoidant disputant approaches conflict by minimizing and exiting. Deactivation drives *withdrawal*, stonewalling, topic-changing, and emotional flatness; it inhibits open communication and resists compromise that would require dependence or vulnerability (Pistole, 1989; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). Their apparent calm can be misread as reasonableness or as contempt; physiologically, they are often as aroused as anyone at the table, but the arousal is hidden (Dozier & Kobak, 1992). In demand-withdraw cycles, they occupy the *withdraw* role, and the pairing of an anxious pursuer with an avoidant withdrawer produces one of the most corrosive and self-perpetuating patterns in all of conflict (Domingue & Mollen, 2009).

**Disorganized / fearful-avoidant (high anxiety, high avoidance).** The fearful disputant wants closeness and fears it simultaneously, producing contradictory, hard-to-track behavior: approach, then attack; engage, then flee. Disorganized attachment is the attachment style most strongly associated with controlling, punitive behavior and the breakdown of any coherent conflict strategy (Gilbert, 2021; Eilert & Sumich, 2023). These parties are the most challenging to mediate because the strategy that would calm them in one moment can frighten them in the next, and because their history frequently includes trauma that the conflict reactivates.

### 3.4 Power, communication, and high-conflict dynamics

Attachment also organizes the *power dynamics* and communication style of a dispute. Anxious attachment is associated with a *lower* perceived sense of power and higher distress intolerance, which pushes the person toward both demanding and withdrawing behaviors and away from constructive communication; avoidant attachment is likewise associated with lower perceived power but expressed through demand rather than withdrawal (Akalın Sevi et al., 2025). Perceived power, in turn, partially mediates the link between attachment and constructive communication—meaning that interventions which restore a party's sense of agency at the table can directly improve how they communicate. In high-conflict and high-stakes situations the stakes of these dynamics escalate sharply: insecure attachment is linked through destructive conflict-resolution strategies to intimate partner violence victimization, with anxious attachment driving escalating engagement and avoidant attachment driving withdrawal (Bonache et al., 2016). Social competencies such as self-efficacy and perspective-taking partially account for the link between avoidance and non-mutual conflict styles, pointing to concrete, trainable leverage points (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000).

**[INTEGRATE PRIOR WORK]** — *If your earlier conflict-management model includes a typology of conflict behaviors, escalation stages, or power dynamics, this is the natural place to map your categories onto the four attachment orientations.*

### 3.5 Making the connection concrete: from working model to conflict style

The link between attachment and conflict style is often asserted but rarely traced. It is worth making concrete, because the connection is sequential and mechanistic rather than vague or correlational. First, a working model sets a baseline expectation about whether others will be

available under stress and whether the self is worthy of care (Bowlby, 1973; Belsky, 2002). Second, the onset of conflict registers as a threat, activating the attachment system and triggering rapid, pre-reflective appraisal of how dangerous the moment is and whether the other can be counted on (Pietromonaco et al., 2007; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Third, if proximity and felt security are not restored, the person deploys a secondary strategy—hyperactivation or deactivation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Fourth, that strategy, expressed in observable behavior, *is* the conflict style: hyperactivation surfaces as conflict engagement, pursuit, protest, and escalation; deactivation surfaces as withdrawal, stonewalling, and disengagement (Shi, 2003; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Bonache et al., 2016).

The conceptual payoff is that "conflict style" is not a free-standing personality trait or a mere communication habit to be corrected with better technique. It is the visible surface of an attachment strategy doing its protective job. Anxious engagement is a bid for responsiveness wearing the costume of an argument; avoidant withdrawal is a bid for safety wearing the costume of indifference. The mapping is direct: secure attachment yields collaboration and problem-solving; anxious attachment yields engagement and escalation (the demand role); avoidant attachment yields withdrawal and disengagement (the withdraw role); disorganized attachment yields oscillation between the two (see Table 1). For the mediator, this turns observation into diagnosis: a conflict style read *backward* is a map to the unmet attachment need driving it. The escalating party is not simply "difficult," and the silent party is not simply "reasonable" or "checked out"; each behavior names a need. Addressing the need—not merely managing the behavior—is what actually changes the style.

## **4. The Body in Conflict: Attachment, the Threat Response, and Dysregulation**

### **4.1 Why insecure attachment becomes emotional dysregulation**

The thread connecting attachment to conflict behavior is *emotion regulation*. Secure attachment develops in a relationship where a caregiver reliably helps the child return to equilibrium after distress; through thousands of such cycles, the child internalizes the capacity to self-soothe and to use others for co-regulation (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Insecure attachment develops when that scaffolding is inconsistent (anxious), rejecting (avoidant), or frightening (disorganized), leaving the adult with a regulation system that either overfires or shuts down. The empirical association is robust: secure attachment correlates negatively with emotion dysregulation across its dimensions, while insecure styles correlate positively; a systematic review of physiological, biochemical, and behavioral measures finds that the link holds even when people verbally deny distress (Parada-Fernández et al., 2021; Eilert & Sumich, 2023). Mentalization—the capacity to understand behavior in terms of mental states—significantly mediates the path from insecure attachment to dysregulation, which means that helping a party reflect on what is going on inside themselves and the other is not a soft adjunct but a mechanism of regulation (Parada-Fernández et al., 2021).

In conflict, dysregulation is the proximal cause of breakdown. When the attachment system fires and emotion floods, the prefrontal capacities required for negotiation—perspective-taking, impulse control, flexible problem-solving—go offline. The anxious party floods *outward* (escalation, pursuit, tears, accusation); the avoidant party floods *inward and conceals it* (shutdown, exit, stonewalling). Either way, the window in which productive mediation is possible has closed. This is why a Bowenian read of the session's rising anxiety and an attachment read of each party's regulatory strategy are two views of the same event.

#### 4.2 The body keeps the score: conflict as a physiological event

Conflict is not experienced first as a thought; it is experienced first as a bodily state. Bessel van der Kolk's central argument is that threat and trauma register in the body and the survival brain *before and beneath* conscious, verbal processing—the body keeps the score (van der Kolk, 2014). Under threat, the autonomic nervous system mobilizes, the prefrontal "rational" brain is downshifted, and in intense states, the brain's speech centers can effectively go offline, leaving a person unable to find words for what they feel. This recasts the dysregulation described above as fundamentally *somatic*: when a party at the mediation table floods or shuts down, their physiology has shifted into a defensive state that the words on the table cannot reach. The attachment evidence converges on the same point. Insecure and unresolved attachment register in autonomic, biochemical, and nonverbal channels even when the person verbally denies distress—the covert skin-conductance arousal of deactivating ("calm") individuals being the classic demonstration (Dozier & Kobak, 1992; Eilert & Sumich, 2023; Bogacz et al., 2020). The body is keeping score at the table, whether or not the parties can name it.

Bruce Perry's complementary framework explains why this governs what a mediator can actually do. The brain processes from the bottom up—brainstem first, cortex last—in a sequential, state-dependent way, so a dysregulated lower brain gates access to the thinking brain above it (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). You cannot reason with a person whose survival state is active because the reasoning machinery is, in that moment, physiologically unavailable. Perry's clinical sequence—*regulate, then relate, then reason*—names the order of operations exactly, and it is the neurobiological restatement of this paper's thesis: regulation is not a soft preliminary to the "real" cognitive work of mediation; it is the bodily precondition that makes cognition possible at all.

#### 4.3 Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn: how attachment shapes the threat response

The nervous system's menu of defensive responses is wider than the familiar "fight or flight." Contemporary trauma and polyvagal models describe at least four survival states—fight, flight, freeze, and fawn—each a bodily strategy for surviving threat, and attachment history strongly shapes which one a person defaults to under conflict (Porges, 2011; Walker, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014).

- **Fight**—sympathetic mobilization toward aggression: the body surges, the voice rises, the person attacks or defends. This is the embodied form of hyperactivation and of

Bowen's emotional reactivity; it surfaces as escalation and the demand role and is most associated with anxious (and some disorganized) orientations.

- **Flight**—sympathetic mobilization toward escape: agitation, pressured speech, leaving the room, or changing the subject to get away from the charge. It appears as anxious agitation or as an avoidant exit.
- **Freeze**—dorsal-vagal immobilization: going blank, numb, or silent, unable to speak or move. The stonewalling that appears contemptuous or indifferent is frequently a freeze state—a physiological shutdown, not a strategic snub—which is exactly why the "calm" avoidant party can be covertly highly aroused (Dozier & Kobak, 1992). Freeze maps onto avoidant deactivation and disorganized collapse.
- **Fawn**—appeasement: placating, over-accommodating, and abandoning one's own needs to defuse the threat and restore the bond. Fawn is especially tied to anxious and fearful orientations and to relational trauma, and it is the most *invisible* response at the mediation table because it looks like cooperation. It is not. An agreement reached from a fawn state is appeasement rather than genuine consent, and such agreements frequently collapse afterward because they were never truly the party's own (Walker, 2013).

The securely attached person, under moderate threat, can remain in a regulated, socially engaged state—what polyvagal theory calls ventral-vagal—and stay in dialogue; insecurity narrows the menu toward the defensive states (Porges, 2011). For the mediator, the operational lesson is to *stop reading the body as a message about good faith*. Freeze is not agreement and not contempt; fawn is not genuine consent; fight is not necessarily bad faith; flight is not disinterested. Each is a nervous-system state, not a negotiating choice. Fawn deserves particular vigilance because it produces the fragile, short-lived settlements that bring parties back to the table. And because these are bodily states, they yield to bodily interventions—grounding, paced breathing, breaks, and the distress-tolerance skills developed below—which work at the level where the problem actually lives (van der Kolk, 2014; Perry & Winfrey, 2021).

#### 4.4 Distress tolerance: the DBT bridge

Dialectical Behavior Therapy offers the most actionable framework for addressing the regulation problem at hand. Developed by Marsha Linehan (1993) for chronically dysregulated clients, DBT rests on a *biosocial* theory: emotional dysregulation arises from the transaction between a biologically sensitive emotional system and an invalidating environment—a developmental story that overlaps substantially with insecure and disorganized attachment (Chapman, 2018; Crowell et al.). DBT organizes its skills into four modules—mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness—and each has been shown to produce independent, additive improvements in emotion regulation across diverse populations (Heath et al., 2021; Neacsiu et al., 2014).

The module most relevant to mediation is *distress tolerance*: the capacity to survive an emotional crisis without making it worse—without escalating, fleeing, retaliating, or capitulating. Distress tolerance is exactly what the mediation table demands and exactly what insecure attachment undermines. Anxious disputants typically have low distress tolerance and try to discharge distress *through* the other person (reassurance-seeking, escalation); avoidant disputants have low

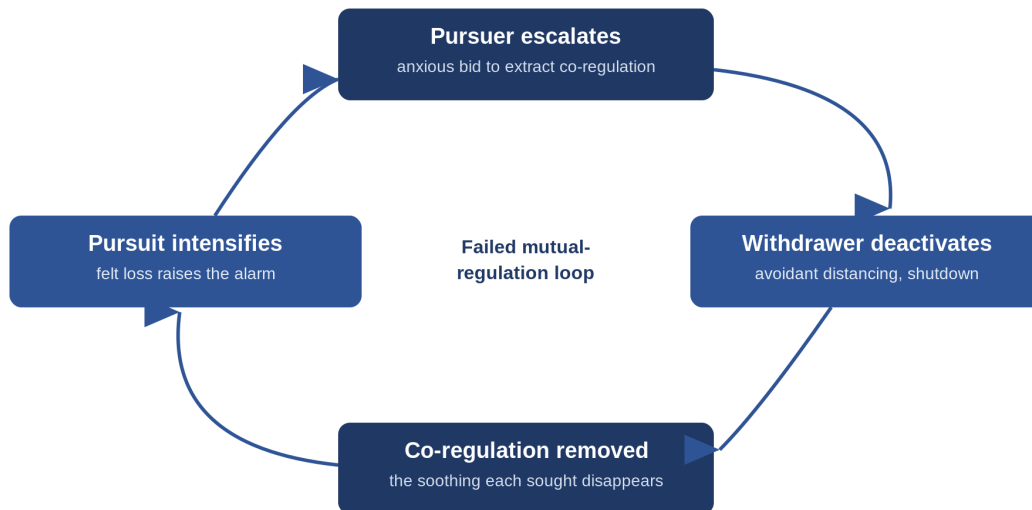
distress tolerance and try to escape distress by leaving the field (withdrawal, cutoff). Notably, DBT research suggests that *decreasing maladaptive coping* predicts improvement even more reliably than increasing adaptive coping (Southward et al., 2023)—a finding with a direct mediation analog: often the mediator's most valuable move is not to add a clever reframe but to interrupt the maladaptive cycle (the escalation, the stonewall) long enough for the system to settle. DBT has been successfully adapted for couples in marital distress in which one or both partners are dysregulated, improving both emotion regulation and dyadic adjustment (Rady et al., 2021), demonstrating that these skills transfer to the relational, multi-person settings mediators work in.

#### 4.5 Emotion regulation is interpersonal, not just individual

A crucial correction follows from the attachment frame. Emotion regulation is typically taught and measured as an individual skill, something a person does inside their own head. Attachment theory shows it is, at root, *interpersonal*: a matter of co-regulation. The infant does not learn to calm itself in isolation; it borrows the caregiver's already-regulated nervous system, is soothed through contact, and only gradually internalizes that capacity through thousands of repetitions (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Adults never fully outgrow this design. Under threat, we still reach out to others for help regulating, and the security-providing figure serves as an external regulator of our internal state. Most research has concentrated on intrapersonal strategies and neglected this interpersonal dimension, yet the defining imbalance of insecure attachment is precisely an imbalance in turning to others: anxious attachment over-relies on others to regulate distress, while avoidant attachment forecloses that route in favor of a brittle pseudo-autonomy (Messina et al., 2023).

In conflict, this makes regulation a dyadic, reciprocal event rather than two separate solo performances. One party's attachment orientation and regulatory state shape the other's experience and behavior—the partner effects repeatedly found in dyadic research—and the presence of even one securely attached, well-regulated member measurably improves the whole dyad's conflict process (Sierau & Herzberg, 2012; González-Ortega et al., 2020; Schudlich et al., 2013). The demand-withdraw cycle is best understood in exactly these terms: not as two individuals who happen each to be dysregulated, but as a *failed mutual-regulation loop*. The pursuer's escalation is an attempt to extract co-regulation from the partner; that pressure triggers the withdrawer's deactivation; the withdrawal removes the very co-regulation the pursuer was seeking; and the felt loss intensifies the pursuit. Each person's regulatory move is the other's dysregulating trigger.

The implication for mediation is foundational and reframes what the mediator is actually doing. The mediator is not merely coaching two individuals to self-soothe in parallel; the mediator is a *co-regulator*—the temporarily steady nervous system that both parties borrow until they can stabilize. This is the interpersonal substance of the secure-base function developed in Section 6 (Mallinckrodt, 2010). "Regulating the system," in other words, is not a metaphor for managing the mood in the room; it is the literal mechanism by which dysregulated parties become capable of negotiation.



*Figure 1. The failed mutual-regulation loop. The pursuer's bid to extract co-regulation triggers the withdrawer's deactivation, which removes the very co-regulation sought, intensifying the pursuit—each party's regulatory move is the other's dysregulating trigger.*

#### 4.6 Emotional tolerance as the hinge variable

Synthesizing the frameworks yields a single hinge variable for the mediator to track: **the parties' moment-to-moment capacity to tolerate emotional distress without resorting to their secondary attachment strategy or dropping into a survival state.** Each tradition names a facet of the same thing. Bowen names the systemic version (the table's anxiety relative to its members' differentiation). Attachment theory names the individual origin and form (hyperactivation vs. deactivation). The somatic and neurosequential traditions name the bodily mechanism (the fight-flight-freeze-fawn threat response and the bottom-up brain) and supply the order of operations—*regulate, relate, reason* (van der Kolk, 2014; Perry & Winfrey, 2021). DBT names the trainable skill (distress tolerance) and supplies the in-session tools. The mediator's regulatory craft consists of keeping the session's anxiety inside the band where both parties can stay bodily regulated, and of lending parties the distress tolerance they cannot yet supply themselves—precisely the corrective function a secure base provides.

## 5. Existing Work on Attachment in Conflict and Mediation

### 5.1 A mature literature on attachment and conflict

The link between attachment and conflict behavior is one of the better-established findings in relationship science. Beginning with Pistole's (1989) demonstration that secure adults use more integrating and compromising strategies, three decades of research have converged: across romantic couples, parent-child dyads, organizational teams, and multiple cultures, secure attachment predicts constructive, mutual, problem-solving conflict strategies, while attachment anxiety predicts escalation and conflict engagement and attachment avoidance predicts

withdrawal and disengagement (Shi, 2003; Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Hasan & Khan, 2025; Tinuoye et al., 2025). The patterns are dyadic, not merely individual: a partner's attachment shapes one's own conflict experience, and the most destructive combination—mutual avoidance and demand-withdraw—clusters in insecure-insecure pairings (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Sierau & Herzberg, 2012). The mechanisms are increasingly specified, running through intimacy (Schudlich et al., 2013), perceived power and distress intolerance (Akalın Sevi et al., 2025), social self-efficacy and perspective-taking (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000), and emotion dysregulation and mentalization (Parada-Fernández et al., 2021).

## 5.2 A thin literature on attachment in mediation

What is striking is how little of this has been carried into mediation research specifically. The clinical world has built entire attachment-based treatment models—most prominently Emotionally Focused Therapy, which treats couple conflict as protest against attachment insecurity and explicitly works the demand-withdraw cycle (Johnson, 2019)—but the mediation field has largely treated disputants as rational, interchangeable negotiators. The exceptions are illuminating and few. Nelson and colleagues' (2011) qualitative study of real mediations found that attachment security audibly shaped disputants' speech, with secure speech far more conducive to resolution, and the authors called directly for mediators to attend to attachment. Bogacz and colleagues (2020) showed in a randomized study that adding a mediator to couple conflict improved agreement and satisfaction and that physiological arousal (skin-conductance synchrony) tracked relational closeness—evidence that mediation does measurable regulatory, not merely informational, work. Adjacent clinical research shows that attachment representations predict the trajectory of change in structured interventions and that therapists who attend to a client's capacity for synchrony improve interpersonal outcomes (Bernheim et al., 2019).

The gap is therefore not in whether attachment matters for conflict—that is settled—but in a worked-out, practice-level account of *what the mediator should do about it*. That is the contribution the next two sections attempt.

**[INTEGRATE PRIOR WORK]** — *Position your previous publications within this landscape here, noting where your work already anticipates or diverges from the attachment-based reading.*

## 6. Synthesis: The Attachment-Aware Mediator

### 6.1 The core claim

The argument of this paper can be stated as a single proposition: **effective mediation of emotionally charged conflict requires the mediator to identify the attachment patterns in the room and to manage the session as an emotional system whose anxiety must be kept within the band where parties can stay regulated, while functioning as a temporary secure base that lends each party—according to their attachment style—the specific regulatory experience they cannot yet provide themselves.** Every element of that sentence has been

built up across the preceding sections: identification (Section 3), the session as system (Section 2), the regulation band and distress tolerance (Section 4), and the secure-base function (below).

## 6.2 The mediator as a temporary secure base

The most generative idea for practice comes from research on the psychotherapy relationship as an attachment bond. Mallinckrodt (2010) showed that clients form genuine attachment relationships with helping professionals—treating them as "stronger and wiser," seeking proximity, using them as a safe haven under threat and a secure base for exploration—and, crucially, that the professional should *regulate therapeutic distance differently* for clients with hyperactivating versus deactivating patterns. The mediator, for the life of the session, occupies a structurally similar position: a temporarily idealized, neutral figure whose steadiness the parties borrow. This reframes neutrality. Neutrality is not emotional absence; it is the *reliable, non-anxious availability* that lets frightened people do frightening work. And it cannot be delivered identically to everyone, because the anxious and avoidant parties need opposite things.

## 6.3 Differential management by attachment style

**Managing the anxious / preoccupied party.** The hyperactivating party needs *containment and reliable responsiveness*. Their escalation is a bid for assurance that they have not been abandoned at the table; meeting it with coldness or impatience confirms the fear and intensifies the protest. The mediator settles them by providing structure (predictable turns, clear process), explicit acknowledgment ("I heard that, and we will come back to it"), and steady emotional contact, while gently containing flooding so it does not overwhelm the system. The goal is to supply enough security that the alarm can come down from hyperactivation to baseline, restoring access to reflective thought. What does *not* work is matching their intensity or leaving their bids unanswered.

**Managing the avoidant / dismissing party.** The deactivating party needs *space, autonomy, and low-pressure entry points*. Pushing them to emote, pressing for closeness, or demanding immediate disclosure triggers deeper withdrawal, because dependence is exactly what their strategy is organized to avoid. The mediator engages them by respecting autonomy ("you decide how much to say"), working through cognition and interests before affect, avoiding the pursuit role, and offering small, face-saving moves toward engagement. Their hidden arousal (Dozier & Kobak, 1992) means the mediator should not mistake flat affect for low stakes. Mallinckrodt's (2010) prescription—*increase* distance for the hyperactivating client and *decrease* it for the deactivating client until each can tolerate a more balanced position—translates directly into mediator proxemics, pacing, and pressure.

**Managing the anxious-avoidant pairing.** When a pursuer and a withdrawer meet, the mediator's job is to *interrupt the cycle itself*, naming the pattern without blame ("When one of you presses and the other steps back, you each get more of what you fear"), slowing the pace so the pursuer is contained and the withdrawer is not flooded, and using caucusing to regulate distance for each. Recall that decreasing maladaptive coping often matters more than adding adaptive

coping (Southward et al., 2023): breaking the demand-withdraw loop is frequently the single highest-value intervention available.

**Managing the disorganized / fearful party.** These parties require maximal safety, predictability, and trauma-informed pacing. Because approach and avoidance alternate unpredictably, the mediator should keep arousal low, avoid surprises, externalize structure heavily, and be prepared to slow down or pause. Where a trauma history is active, the limits of mediation must be respected and clinical referral considered.

**Leveraging the secure party.** Where one party is secure, that security is a resource for the whole system (González-Ortega et al., 2020). The mediator can let the secure party's regulated tempo help set the table's climate, while taking care not to exploit their patience in a way that produces an unfair settlement.

#### 6.4 Attachment, positions, and interests

One of the foundational moves in interest-based mediation is helping parties shift from *positions*—the concrete, stated demands they arrive with—to the *interests*, the underlying needs and concerns, that lie beneath them (Fisher & Ury, 2011). Attachment theory explains why that shift, which can look like a simple matter of reframing, is so difficult for some parties, and it specifies what has to happen before the shift is possible. A position is a defensible, external demand; an interest is a vulnerable, often unspoken need. To move from one to the other is to expose vulnerability—precisely the act that insecure attachment is organized to prevent.

For the anxious party, a position commonly functions as a *proxy for the attachment bid*. The demand—"I want the house," "I want an apology," "I want more time with the children"—is fused with a deeper need to feel valued and not abandoned, so conceding the position feels like conceding the self's worth. Hyperactivation keeps them gripping the position, because releasing it registers not as compromise but as annihilation of the underlying need. For the avoidant party, positions serve the opposite function: they *defend autonomy*. Holding a fixed, self-sufficient stance maintains distance and forecloses the dependent, exposed negotiation that exploring interests would require; deactivation keeps the real interests hidden, frequently even from the party themselves. The disorganized party may switch positions erratically because the underlying interests are themselves in conflict—wanting closeness and fearing it at once.



*Figure 2. The regulation gate. A position is a rigid, defensible demand; an interest is a vulnerable, underlying need. The move between them passes through a regulatory "gate" that stays closed while the attachment system is firing—so regulation must precede interest-identification, which precedes integrative agreement.*

The general principle is that a party cannot safely move from position to interest while the attachment system is firing, because the move demands exactly the vulnerability that the threat response is busy suppressing. This reframes a central mediator task. The progression from positions to interests is not primarily *cognitive*—a matter of asking sufficiently clever questions—but *regulatory*. Only after the mediator has lowered the system's anxiety and lent enough security can a party tolerate naming an interest aloud. Restoring a party's sense of agency and perceived power, which attachment research links to more constructive communication (Akalin Sevi et al., 2025), and scaffolding perspective-taking, which partly accounts for the move from avoidance toward mutual conflict styles (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000), are the concrete levers that make interests reachable. The sequence is therefore fixed: regulation precedes interest-identification, which in turn precedes any durable, integrative agreement. A mediator who pushes for interests before the parties are regulated will meet the positions hardening, because the request to be vulnerable has itself become a threat.

## 6.5 Managing the session as a system

Alongside individual management, the mediator tends the system. Practically this means continuously monitoring the table's anxiety level and intervening to keep it in the workable band: slowing pace, introducing breaks, using private caucuses to detoxify escalation, sequencing easier agreements early to build the system's confidence, and refusing to be triangulated. The mediator's own regulation is the system's thermostat; the discipline of remaining a non-anxious presence is not a personality trait but a deliberate, trainable practice (Brown & Errington, 2024). When the mediator stays differentiated, the parties' borrowed differentiation rises, and the same two people who could not speak civilly become able to negotiate.

## 6.6 An integrated working model

The mediator can hold a simple operational loop: **(1) read** the attachment signals (pursuit/escalation = anxious/hyperactivating; withdrawal/flat affect = avoidant/deactivating; chaotic alternation = disorganized); **(2) gauge** the system's anxiety against the parties' visible distress tolerance; **(3) regulate** by lending the style-appropriate secure-base experience and keeping the system in band; **(4) only then negotiate** substance, in the windows where regulation holds; and **(5) repeat**, expecting to cycle back to regulation whenever anxiety spikes. Substance rides on regulation, never the reverse.

**[INTEGRATE PRIOR WORK]** — *Cross-reference your existing intervention sequence or stage model with this five-step loop; the two can likely be braided into a single named framework.*

## 7. The Attachment-Aware Mediator in Practice

This section turns the synthesis into a working toolkit: how to identify attachment patterns in the room, an easy-to-use core skill set, the catalog of interventions, a decision logic for adjusting in real time, the use of psychoeducation, and how a mediator and co-mediator can divide the work. None of it requires the mediator to diagnose, label, or therapize anyone; it requires only structured noticing and disciplined responding.

### 7.1 Identifying attachment style in session: what to watch and listen for

Attachment shows up behaviorally, and within the first several minutes a mediator can form a working hypothesis from four observable channels: how a party tells the story, how their body behaves, what happens when stress rises, and how they respond to the mediator's bids. The aim is a flexible read, held lightly and revised continuously—a hypothesis that guides response, never a box that fixes a person.

For the **anxious / preoccupied** party, watch and listen for: speech that is flooded, fast, and hard to interrupt, with long grievance narratives that circle back and a difficulty letting any point rest; preoccupation with the relationship and the other's intentions ("he doesn't care," "she always...") alongside frequent appeals for the mediator's agreement or reassurance; visible activation—leaning in, rising voice, tears, urgency, the body in fight or flight; and heightened sensitivity to any hint of rejection from the mediator, checking whether you are "on their side."

For the **avoidant / dismissing** party, watch and listen for: speech that is clipped, abstract, or minimizing ("it's not a big deal," "I'd rather not get into feelings"), favoring facts over emotion; distancing moves such as topic changes, intellectualizing, checking the time, physical withdrawal, and flat affect; pronounced self-reliance and discomfort with dependence, including reluctance to ask for anything or admit need; and a calm surface that may mask real arousal—recall the covert physiological activation of deactivating individuals (Dozier & Kobak, 1992).

For the **fearful-avoidant / disorganized** party, watch and listen for: contradictory signals—approaching then attacking, opening up then shutting down, asking for help then refusing it; a

narrative that becomes disorganized around painful content, with signs of a trauma response such as freeze, dissociation, or sudden state shifts; and fawn markers—rapid, total agreement, placating, and abandoning their own stated needs to keep the peace, a cooperation that feels too easy.

For the **secure** party, watch and listen for: a coherent, balanced narrative that owns their own part and acknowledges the other's perspective, and the capacity to stay regulated under disagreement—hearing hard feedback without flooding or shutting down and moving flexibly between positions.

Two cues deserve special emphasis. First, the separations and reunions built into the process—breaks, caucuses, the beginning and end of sessions—are miniature attachment situations, and how a party handles them (relief, anxiety, indifference) is informative. Second, the mediator's own reactions are data: feeling pulled to rescue often signals an anxious party; feeling shut out or bored often signals an avoidant one; feeling confused or destabilized often signals disorganization. These reads map directly onto the orientations and mediator approaches summarized in Table 1.

## 7.2 A quick-start skill set for the session

The following five skills are simple, low-risk, and usable by any mediator regardless of theoretical background. They are the starter kit for attachment-aware practice.

1. **Regulate before you reason.** Before addressing substance, check the room's arousal; if a party is flooded or shut down, lower the temperature first—slow your own pace and voice, acknowledge the feeling, offer a breath or a brief break. Perry's order—*regulate, relate, reason*—is the whole skill in three words (Perry & Winfrey, 2021).
2. **Be the thermostat, not the thermometer.** Your own regulated nervous system is the most powerful intervention in the room; steady breathing, an unhurried voice, and non-anxious presence lower the system's anxiety by contagion (Brown & Errington, 2024). Do not match a party's intensity.
3. **Match the distance to the style.** Move toward the avoidant party gently and give them control; offer the anxious party structure and reliable acknowledgment. When in doubt, give space to the one who is withdrawing and contact to the one who is reaching (Mallinckrodt, 2010).
4. **Name the pattern, not the person.** "When one of you presses and the other pulls back, you each get more of what you fear" externalizes the cycle and lowers blame (Johnson, 2019). Describe what the system is doing rather than what either party is.
5. **Validate first, solve second.** A brief, genuine acknowledgment ("that mattered to you—I understand why") answers the attachment bid and frees cognitive bandwidth for problem-solving. Validation is not agreement; it is the precondition for it.

### 7.3 In-session interventions, mapped to attachment and DBT

The following interventions translate the synthesis into moves a mediator can make at the table. Each pairs an attachment rationale with a DBT-informed regulatory function. Table 2 organizes the core DBT skill modules—mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness (Linehan, 1993; Heath et al., 2021)—by attachment profile, naming the regulatory challenge each party brings and the specific in-session application for the mediator.

Attachment Profile	Regulatory Challenge	Targeted DBT Skills	In-Session Application
<b>Anxious / Preoccupied</b>	Low distress tolerance; discharges distress through the other via reassurance-seeking and escalation; hyperactivated arousal floods outward.	Distress tolerance (paced breathing, self-soothe, TIP); mindfulness (observe and describe the feeling); emotion regulation (opposite action to the urge to escalate).	Validate and explicitly acknowledge bids; provide structure and predictability; coach brief grounding when escalating; slow the pace to contain flooding.
<b>Avoidant / Dismissing</b>	Suppression masks covert arousal; escapes distress by withdrawing or cutting off; dependence and emotional exposure feel threatening.	Mindfulness (notice internal state without acting on the exit urge); emotion regulation (label emotion, reduce vulnerability); interpersonal effectiveness (GIVE).	Begin with interests and facts before affect; offer choice and control to restore perceived power; normalize needing space; don't read flat affect as low stakes.
<b>Fearful-Avoidant / Disorganized</b>	Oscillating approach and avoidance; trauma reactivation; collapse of any coherent regulatory strategy.	Distress tolerance (STOP skill, TIP, grounding); mindfulness (orient to present and to safety); radical acceptance of the present moment.	Maximize safety and predictability; use STOP-skill pacing and frequent breaks; stay trauma-informed; respect mediation's limits and consider referral.
<b>Demand-Withdraw Dyad / Whole System</b>	Self-perpetuating pursue-withdraw loop; the system's anxiety rises and pulls both parties toward their secondary strategies.	Interpersonal effectiveness (DEAR MAN, GIVE); mindfulness of the pattern; "survive the moment" and decrease-maladaptive-coping-first framing.	Name the cycle as a shared trap without blame; interrupt the maladaptive move long enough for arousal to subside; reframe escalation as a bid and withdrawal as self-protection.

*Table 2. DBT-informed regulatory interventions mapped to attachment profile. Skill module labels follow Linehan (1993); "survive the moment" and "decrease maladaptive coping first" reflect Southward et al. (2023).*

**Regulating the system.** Pacing and pausing lower systemic anxiety and create room for distress tolerance; private caucusing regulates interpersonal distance individually—giving the avoidant party autonomy and the anxious party undistracted responsiveness; sequencing early, achievable agreements raises the system's collective sense of efficacy and lowers threat.

**Working the anxious party.** Validation and explicit acknowledgment (a core DBT skill) directly answer the hyperactivating bid and down-regulate protest; structure and predictability reduce abandonment threat; gentle containment of flooding (paraphrasing, slowing, focusing) prevents the system from tipping. Mediators can coach brief grounding—paced breathing, orienting to the present—when a party is visibly escalating.

*Working the avoidant party.* Beginning with interests and facts rather than feelings respects deactivation while still moving forward; offering choice and control restores the perceived power that improves constructive communication (Akalın Sevi et al., 2025); naming, without forcing, the legitimacy of needing space lets the party engage without surrendering autonomy.

*Working the cycle.* Naming the demand-withdraw pattern as a shared trap (an externalizing, EFT-style move) shifts blame off the persons and onto the cycle (Johnson, 2019); reframing escalation as a bid for connection and withdrawal as self-protection helps each party reinterpret the other's behavior less threateningly—engaging the mentalization that mediates regulation (Parada-Fernández et al., 2021).

*Building distress tolerance in vivo.* Brief mindfulness and grounding, radical-acceptance framing of what cannot be changed, and "survive the moment" coaching let parties stay at the table through waves of affect rather than acting on the urge to escalate or flee (Linehan, 1993; Heath et al., 2021). Because these waves are bodily—a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response, not merely a bad attitude—somatic skills such as paced breathing, orienting to the present, and brief breaks work at the level where the dysregulation actually lives, down-shifting the nervous system out of its survival state so the thinking brain can come back online (van der Kolk, 2014; Perry & Winfrey, 2021). This is the practical content of Perry's sequence: *regulate* the body first, *relate* to the calmed party second, and only then attempt to *reason* about substance. Often the highest-value act is simply interrupting the maladaptive move long enough for arousal to subside (Southward et al., 2023).

## 7.4 Adjusting interventions in real time: a working decision logic

Identification matters only if it changes what the mediator does next. The adjustment logic is simple and repeatable. First, *read the state*: is this party hyperactivated (fight or flight, pursuing, flooding) or deactivated (freeze, withdrawing, going flat), and what is the system's overall arousal? Second, *match the move*: give a hyperactivated party containment, structure, and acknowledgment; give a deactivated party space, autonomy, and a low-pressure entry; when both are dysregulated, regulate the system before working either individual. Third, *check the response*: did arousal go down? If yes, proceed toward substance; if no, regulate further before continuing. Fourth, *protect the gate*: do not push a party from position to interest until they are regulated, because the request to be vulnerable will otherwise read as a threat and harden the position (see §6.4). The single most common error is moving to problem-solving while a party is still in a survival state, and the remedy is always the same—step back to regulation.

A short menu of adjustments, keyed to the signal the mediator observes:

- **If a party escalates (fight):** slow down, lower your voice, validate the underlying concern, and consider a caucus to contain the escalation without an audience.
- **If a party withdraws or goes flat (freeze / avoidant):** stop pursuing, shift to interests and concrete choices, offer a break, reduce eye-contact pressure, and let silence sit.

- **If a party agrees too quickly (fawn):** slow down and test the agreement—"is this something you can genuinely live with, or does it mainly end the discomfort?"—to prevent a settlement that collapses later.
- **If the cycle spins (demand–withdraw):** name it, separate the parties into caucus, and regulate distance individually before reconvening.
- **If trauma activates (disorganization, dissociation):** pause, ground the party, prioritize safety and predictability, and weigh whether to continue or to refer.

## 7.5 Psychoeducation as a mediation tool

Psychoeducation—briefly teaching parties a usable frame for their own reactions—can itself be regulating, because understanding converts a frightening, characterological story ("I am being attacked / they are impossible") into a workable, normalizing one ("our alarm systems are firing"). Delivered lightly and without jargon or diagnosis, a mediator might normalize conflict as something that activates everyone's threat system—explaining in plain terms that the body can move into fight, flight, freeze, or appeasement, and that a racing heart, a blank mind, or the urge to flee or to placate are physiological reactions rather than character flaws or proof the other person is dangerous (van der Kolk, 2014); offer the pursue-withdraw frame so parties recognize the dance they are caught in rather than blaming each other; and name distress tolerance as a skill—"the aim right now is just to stay in the room while this feeling passes." Because mentalization mediates the path from insecurity to dysregulation (Parada-Fernández et al., 2021), the very act of inviting parties to reflect on their internal states and the other's is therapeutic in miniature. Psychoeducation should be calibrated to the parties' capacity and used to serve the settlement, not to turn mediation into therapy; its purpose is to lower anxiety and increase reflective function enough for negotiation to proceed.

## 7.6 Working as a pair: mediator and co-mediator roles

Co-mediation is uniquely suited to attachment-aware practice, because regulating a dysregulated dyad is frequently more than one person can do alone. The characteristic failure point of solo mediation is structural: attending to a flooding party can inadvertently leave a withdrawing party unattended, which confirms that party's deepest expectation—that they do not matter and will be abandoned the moment someone louder needs attention. Two practitioners can divide the work so that no party is ever left alone with their dysregulation.

A workable division gives the **lead mediator** the task and the **co-mediator** the system. The lead drives the substantive process and engages whichever party is currently in focus—validating, containing, working interests. The co-mediator functions as the system's regulator and safety net: monitoring the overall anxiety level, steadying the second party so they do not counter-escalate or shut down, watching for covert arousal, somatic freeze, and fawn-state false agreement, and signaling the lead when to slow, pause, or move to caucus. In caucus the pair can split, with one mediator co-regulating each party individually before reconvening, so that both parties receive the secure-base attention their styles require. The roles should be explicit, agreed in advance, and allowed to flex during the session—but the underlying principle holds steady: one practitioner

holds the task, the other holds the system. A pre-session huddle and a mid-session check-in (even a brief, silent signal system) let the pair hand the regulating role back and forth as the room shifts. Table 3 sketches a practical division of labor across common attachment-driven scenarios.

In-Session Scenario	Lead Mediator	Co-Mediator
<b>One party flooding or escalating (fight–flight; anxious)</b>	Stays with the escalating party—validates the underlying concern, slows the pace, and contains the flooding without shaming.	Quietly steadies the other party, prevents reactive counter-escalation, and tracks the system's overall arousal.
<b>One party withdrawing or going flat (freeze; avoidant)</b>	Gives space and control; shifts to interests and facts; resists the urge to pursue.	Watches for covert arousal and somatic shutdown; offers a face-saving entry point or a timely break.
<b>Demand–withdraw cycle active</b>	Names the cycle without blame and manages pacing and turn-taking between the parties.	Takes one party into caucus to regulate interpersonal distance individually.
<b>Quick, placating agreement (fawn)</b>	Slows down and tests whether the agreement is genuine consent or appeasement.	Notes whether the conceding party's body matches their words; flags fragile agreements that may collapse.
<b>Trauma or dissociation activates (disorganized)</b>	Pauses, grounds the party, and prioritizes safety and predictability.	Manages logistics—break, water, timing; monitors safety; supports the decision to continue or refer.
<b>Holding the whole system</b>	Drives the substantive agenda and the path to agreement.	Serves as the differentiation anchor—monitors anxiety, models calm, and signals when to slow or pause.

*Table 3. A practical division of labor between lead mediator and co-mediator across common attachment-driven scenarios.*

## 7.7 Pre-mediation assessment and mediator self-work

Two further applications follow. First, mediators can build a lightweight, informal attachment read into intake and the opening minutes—attending to how each party narrates the conflict, handles separation and reunion within the process, and responds to early stress—without administering formal instruments or labeling parties. Second, and consistent with both Bowen and the secure-base literature, the mediator's own attachment patterns and differentiation are part of the instrument. A mediator prone to anxious pursuit may over-function and rescue; one prone to avoidant deactivation may disengage when the table heats up. The discipline of self-regulation and self-differentiation is therefore not optional polish but core competence (Brown & Errington, 2024; Mallinckrodt, 2010).

**[INTEGRATE PRIOR WORK]** — *Your existing intervention toolkit can be slotted directly into §7.3; flag which of your techniques already perform a regulatory (vs. substantive) function.*

## 8. Synthesis and Integration with Prior Work

This paper has argued that attachment style is a foundational, currently under-used variable for understanding and managing conflict in mediation, and it has built an integrated account across

five bodies of theory. From attachment theory it takes the architecture of how adults approach, process, and respond to relational threat—through secure flexibility, anxious hyperactivation, avoidant deactivation, or disorganized contradiction (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main et al., 1985; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). From Bowen Family Systems Theory it takes the idea that the session becomes its own emotional system with its own anxiety and identity, and that differentiation is the capacity the table demands (Bowen, 1978; Calatrava et al., 2021). From the somatic and neurosequential trauma traditions it takes the recognition that conflict is first a bodily event—a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response in a bottom-up brain that must be regulated before it can reason (van der Kolk, 2014; Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Porges, 2011). From DBT it takes distress tolerance and emotion-regulation skills as the trainable, in-session hinge on which everything turns (Linehan, 1993; Heath et al., 2021). And from the psychotherapy-as-attachment literature it takes the mediator's central role: a temporary, differentially calibrated secure base (Mallinckrodt, 2010). The empirical literature establishes beyond serious doubt that attachment shapes conflict; the contribution here is a worked-out, practice-level synthesis of what the mediator should therefore do.

**[INTEGRATE PRIOR WORK — primary integration point].** *This is the section where your previous conflict-management scholarship should anchor the synthesis. The framework above was built to receive it: your definitions of conflict, your typology or stage model, your interventions, and your case material can each be cross-walked to one of the four pillars—attachment (how parties are wired), Bowen (the system at the table), DBT (the regulatory skill), and the secure-base mediator role (what you do). Share those materials and they will be integrated into a single, named model rather than presented as parallel literatures.*

Several directions for future work follow. The mediation field needs empirical studies—building on Nelson et al. (2011) and Bogacz et al. (2020)—that test whether attachment-tailored mediator behavior actually improves settlement rates, durability of agreements, and party satisfaction. It needs practical, non-clinical heuristics for reading attachment in the opening minutes of a session. And it needs training that treats mediator self-regulation and self-differentiation as core, assessable competencies rather than dispositional luck. The promise is considerable: a mediator who can see the attachment drama beneath the dispute, regulate the system that forms at the table, and lend each party the security they need is positioned to resolve conflicts that a purely rational, substance-first approach would leave stuck.

## **Note on a sensitive topic**

This paper touches on intimate partner violence, trauma, and emotional dysregulation in the context of theory and professional practice. Mediation is not appropriate for all disputes—particularly those involving ongoing abuse, coercive control, or active trauma—and the attachment-informed approach described here is intended to complement, not replace, clinical judgment and appropriate referral.

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## Appendix A: Quick-Reference Card for the Attachment-Aware Mediator

A one-page summary for use at the table. **Regulate** → **Relate** → **Reason**: you cannot reason with an active survival state—lower arousal first, connect second, problem-solve third. In a pair, one practitioner holds the task and the other holds the system.

### Identify and respond

Style	What you see & hear	What to do
<b>Secure</b>	Coherent, balanced story; owns their part; stays regulated under disagreement; moves flexibly.	Lighter touch. Let their steady tempo help set the climate; don't exploit their patience.
<b>Anxious / Preoccupied</b>	Flooded, fast, hard to interrupt; fears abandonment; seeks reassurance; leans in, voice rises, tears (fight / flight).	Validate and acknowledge bids; give structure and predictability; gently contain flooding; steady contact. Don't match intensity.
<b>Avoidant / Dismissing</b>	Clipped, minimizing ("not a big deal"); facts over feelings; distances, flat affect, checks the time (freeze).	Give space and control; start with interests and facts; don't pursue. Flat affect is not low stakes—arousal is often hidden.
<b>Fearful / Disorganized</b>	Contradictory (approach then attack); disorganized under pain; trauma signs; fawn = agreement that comes too easily.	Maximize safety and predictability; slow, trauma-informed pacing; test fawn agreements; consider referral.

### When the body takes over — read the signal, make the move

Signal	Adjustment
<b>Fight (escalates)</b>	Slow down, lower your voice, validate the underlying concern; caucus to contain without an audience.
<b>Flight (agitated, exits)</b>	Reduce pressure, offer a break, shift to concrete choices; don't chase.
<b>Freeze (blank, silent, flat)</b>	Stop pursuing, give space, let silence sit, offer grounding; the calm may be a shutdown.
<b>Fawn (placates, over-agrees)</b>	Slow down and test: "Can you genuinely live with this, or does it just end the discomfort?"

## Decision loop

Read the state → Match the move → Check the response (did arousal drop?) → Protect the gate: do not push a party from position to interest until they are regulated.

## Five quick skills

1. **Regulate before you reason.** Lower the temperature before addressing substance.
2. **Be the thermostat, not the thermometer.** Your regulated nervous system steadies the room; don't match intensity.
3. **Match the distance to the style.** Space to the one withdrawing, contact to the one reaching.
4. **Name the pattern, not the person.** Externalize the cycle to lower blame.
5. **Validate first, solve second.** Acknowledgment answers the attachment bid and frees bandwidth for problem-solving.

*The position-to-interest move is regulatory before it is cognitive: a party can only expose a vulnerable interest once the attachment system has settled.*