



Dealing with Aggressive People

© 2013 Susan Fee, M.Ed., PCC
Professional Clinical Counselor

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Introduction

One of the main reasons clients fail to speak up in relationships is fear of the other person becoming mad or aggressive. This tactic can leave less assertive clients feeling scared and tongue-tied. Or, the opposite can happen and clients turn to aggression themselves, because hurt people hurt other people. Yet, there's a much healthier alternative!

Teaching clients how to spot the signs of aggression and respond assertively will help them preserve self-worth and sometimes the relationship. It will be necessary to communicate boundaries and understand how to avoid falling victim to emotional manipulation. This text offers specific strategies that you can share with clients to help them deal with aggressive people.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Define aggressive behaviors.
2. Recognize and set healthy boundaries.
3. De-escalate aggression with appropriate empathy.

Let's Get Started!

Four Behavior Styles

There are four behavior styles: passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive. When behaving passively, you stifle your feelings and opinions to please others. If disrespected, you remain silent to avoid conflict. Passive body language and vocal delivery appears meek and you may feel invisible. Aggressive behavior is self-serving and controlling. Tactics include yelling, name-calling, sarcasm, and intimidating body language. Passive-aggressive behavior is when someone appears friendly to your face and then attacks you behind your back, or uses the silent treatment to manipulate you. Assertive behavior honors your rights and the rights of others. This means sharing your feelings without attacking others for theirs. Assertive body language appears confident and comfortable, using direct eye contact and a firm voice.

Remain Calm Around Aggressive People

There's nothing an aggressive person enjoys more than to stir up other people. However, one person's anger can't escalate into a fight unless you join in. Your first response should be to stay calm. It's going to take some practice, especially if the other person likes to push your buttons.

Hide Your Buttons

You'll stand a better chance of staying calm if you don't offer communication ammunition. You could very well be inviting attacks by giving obvious signals about what sets you off. Here are some phrases to avoid saying around a button pusher:

- "You make me so mad!"
- "Stop making me feel guilty!"
- "Stop doing that; you know it upsets me!"
- "You know I don't like it when you say that!"
- "How am I supposed to feel now?"
- "Don't make me cry!"

Aggressive people will prey on your weaknesses, exploiting them to gain control. But, they can't push your buttons unless you reveal them. You're going to have to exercise some self-control not to react, but once you quit responding in an emotional way, the other person eventually will too. Even if he tries to intimidate you or steer the conversation in the direction of feelings instead of facts, don't fall for it. Aggressive people aren't interested in how you feel, so protect yourself, and just talk about the facts of the situation.

Identify Triggers

Triggers are personal weak spots that set you off. They may be circumstances, accusations, words, old stories, or behaviors that trigger an emotional reaction in you. The more you become aware of your areas of vulnerabilities, the more you can control your response. The best solution to some triggers is to avoid them all together, if possible. For example, someone who wants to quit smoking is best to avoid hanging around others who are smoking if the smell of cigarettes stimulates a desire to smoke. But, other situations are impossible to avoid like having to deal with certain people. If he's a co-worker or family member, you can't always leave. So, you need to find ways to manage trigger impulses so that you don't become emotionally hooked.

Start by taking stock of what annoys or scares you about dealing with an aggressive person. When do you find yourself shutting down or losing emotional control? Some people freeze at the sound of yelling. Others respond negatively to sarcasm. Identify your hot buttons by finishing this sentence, "I'm fine until..." Next, assess the behavior of specific individuals with whom you've had chronic conflict. Detail the phrases or behaviors that irritate you by finishing this sentence, "I hate it when this person does/says..." If it's a pattern of behavior, then it's better to assume it will happen again, rather than hope the next time will magically be different!

Make a Plan

If just thinking about your triggers upsets you, it's all the more reason to form a response plan. Write down the words, actions, and scenarios that you most dread and think of at least two

reasonable responses that would keep you calm. This is not about creating a witty comeback to fuel the fire, but rather a response that allows you stay in control of your emotions. (Zinging back is a sign of *losing* control because you let the trigger get to you.) Thinking of at least two possible responses gives you options depending on the circumstances. For instance, one option is to remove yourself from the situation, but if you're talking in the car, that's not a choice.

Pay attention to how you typically respond to triggers and do something different to interrupt the pattern. If you normally stay and fight, then take a break. If you yell, stay silent. If you become tongue-tied then practice taking a deep breath and making a firm statement that you've practiced saying out loud. Triggers are only as powerful as you allow them to be. Once you've mastered your response, they cease to control you. Remember, people become aggressive because it's worked for them in the past. If you can show that their button pushing doesn't affect you, they'll be forced to change.

Show Empathy

One of the most important people skills to master is empathy. It's the ability to accurately perceive and reflect another person's feelings, *separate from your own*. Good communicators, or those described as high in emotional intelligence, use empathy to monitor subtle social cues and respond based on the emotional climate. They're aware of their own feelings, how they affect others, and how someone else is feeling. Because of this, people who show empathy tend to be well liked and manage conflict well.

It takes a lot of maturity to set aside how you may be feeling to recognize someone else's emotional state, especially if you don't understand or agree with his viewpoint. That doesn't mean your feelings don't count, but that you're able to recognize two sets of possibly conflicting emotions. Empathy and sympathy are related but different in important ways. They're both feeling responses, but when dealing with an aggressive person, empathy is an appropriate response, not sympathy.

Empathy is Not Sympathy

Sympathy is agreeing with someone's feelings to the point that you feel what he feels. If he's sad, you're sad and therefore you want to fix his problem so you can feel relief. With sympathy, you're sharing his feelings versus empathy where you can imagine how someone is feeling, but you don't join in solidarity. The distinction is important to understand because if you show sympathy to an angry person, you're agreeing that he's right to behave aggressively. You'd be enabling unhealthy conflict resolution since aggressive communication includes no regard for the interests of others.

One way to determine if you're offering someone sympathy instead of empathy is that his story will get stuck in the problem. He'll keep repeating the same things that made him mad. An empathic response advances the story. Choosing empathy as a first response to anger often dissipates the situation so that it doesn't become aggressive. If you skip over it and go straight to telling a person to "calm down," or start fact-finding, it's likely to escalate the situation. The need

to feel understood is universal. When you acknowledging someone's feelings it shows you're listening and at least trying to see things from their perspective.

Vent versus Rant

You might think that allowing a person to vent is a great way to decrease anger. It's true up to a point. Blowing off a little steam can feel good as long as it's contained. You can tell it's working because the person's anger decreases and he calms down. But, when venting continues too long without being redirected into problem solving, it evolves into a rant. Now the person's anger revs up to a point of no return. To fuel a rant, he has to pull from history, give multiple examples, and repeat stories. As he doing so, he's getting increasingly upset.

The tipping point between venting and ranting can be hard to gauge, but typically, anything past two to three minutes stops being helpful. Once you start hearing, "And *then...*" you know the person is about to work himself into a tizzy. Other indicators are repetitive stories, tangents, and a return to intense emotions and behaviors like yelling. If you've ever gone off on a rant, you know you end up feeling worse afterwards because you're even more upset.

What You Allow, You Teach

You teach people how to treat you based on what you allow. Aggressive people are quick studies of human behavior. They know whom they can blow their top with and when it's not safe, the same way kids learn whom they can disrespect and when they better not cross the line. If you continually allow someone to speak condescendingly to you, it sends the message that it's okay.

When you're first dealing with an aggressive person, there's a grey area between offering empathy, allowing a short venting session, and diffusing the situation. In that short window, you're waiting to see if the person de-escalates and will speak to you respectfully. If not, it's important to reign in the behavior by clearly stating what you're willing to tolerate. It's impossible for someone to recognize when he's crossed the line if you've never drawn it. Be careful of falling into the trap of believing that because *you* would never treat someone harshly that others won't do it to you. What you would do is irrelevant. What matters is the reality of teaching this person your standards.

Know Your Boundaries

Boundaries are known as borders or limits. In relationships, boundaries are often defined as the line where you end and the other person begins. People with healthy boundaries have developed an identity that is separate and distinct from others, allowing them to coexist in a healthy way. They're not dependent on others for personal nurturing, validation, or fulfillment.

Picture relationship boundaries as a fence between two properties. Some fences are mammoth brick walls that send the message that outsiders are unwelcome, or they'll have to work really hard to get in. Other fences are flimsy or even falling down. Some are sturdy and kept in

good condition, but clearly accessible if you go through the intended gate. What do your boundaries look like? It's possible to have different "fences" with different people. Aggressive people will always test your boundaries, and if you're not firm, they'll trample them.

Signs of Healthy Boundaries

In healthy relationships, the boundary between two people is easily identifiable. The two are independent beings, yet are close enough to be connected and have an impact on each other's life. The boundaries are flexible, allowing breathing room to grow and change. They can be adjusted to promote intimacy or extended to promote safety. Here are the signs of healthy boundaries:

- You can speak honestly without fear of retaliation.
- It's okay to say no and to hear no from others.
- You have a strong sense of identity and respect yourself.
- You give and expect reciprocity.
- You experience shared power and responsibility.
- You're clear when the problem is yours and when it belongs to someone else.
- Personal information is shared gradually in a mutually trusting relationship.
- You know your own needs, wants, and feelings and communicate them clearly.
- You're responsible for your own happiness and fulfillment.
- You value your opinions and feelings as much as others.
- You're able to ask for help when you need it.
- You don't compromise your values or integrity to avoid rejection.

It's safe to say that these conditions won't be present with a chronically aggressive person. Your first step is to educate him on your expectations. If he ignores you, the next response is to protect yourself and maintain boundaries that keep you healthy, including ending, distancing, or limiting the relationship. Many times, this is the only way to gain his attention and respect. Personal boundaries are like your rules of engagement that state what you're willing to allow. If he refuses, there's no sense assuming he'll change if you bend your own rules.

If he respects your boundaries sometimes, but not always, remember that inconsistency is still a sign of disrespect. If you're the giver of second chances, except you've given into the double digits, be prepared to be disappointed. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Compromising your standards will never be the best tool to teach someone else to respect you. Healthy boundaries allow you to maintain self-respect even when others are brooding, angry, or try to make you feel guilty. Since your identity is not attached to theirs, you're free to feel differently.

Signs of Collapsed Boundaries

There are two types of unhealthy boundaries: collapsed and rigid. When boundaries are collapsed it's like a broken fence between properties. There are no real defining lines between people because you can't tell where you end and others begin. In these types of relationships, you look to others

for validation and approval, even if it makes you feel bad. Here are the signs of collapsed boundaries:

- You can't say no because you're afraid of rejection or abandonment.
- Your identity consists of what you think others want you to be.
- You tend to be either overly responsible and controlling or passive and dependent in your relationships.
- You take on other people's problems as your own.
- You share personal information too soon, before establishing mutual trust.
- You have a high tolerance for abuse or being treated with disrespect.
- Your wants, needs, and feelings are secondary to others' and are sometimes determined by others.
- You ignore your inner voice.
- You feel responsible for others' happiness and fulfillment and sometimes rely on your relationships to create that for you.
- You allow others to define your limits or try to define limits for others.

When a person has collapsed boundaries, he compromises his values and beliefs in order to please others or to avoid conflict. Unfortunately, this causes inner turmoil and suffering. If this sounds familiar, you know how scary it is for you to say no to an aggressive person because it means he may end the relationship. Somewhere along the line, you've adopted the false belief that if you're nice enough, you can make everyone happy so they'll stay connected to you. If that worked, you'd never experience conflict, but of course, the opposite is true.

Shifting from unhealthy to healthy boundaries will cause a change in your relationships. You've attracted people who only like you because you have no boundaries. They can take advantage of you all they want! When that stops, they'll either have to change with you or leave. The good news is that you'll replace them with people who respect you for you, not what you can do for them.

Signs of Rigid Boundaries

The other type of unhealthy boundary is known as rigid. This is when a person is too distant from others, operating like an island. Many times these boundaries form in response to having been deeply hurt in a relationship. The reaction is to over-correct and not trust anyone. You'd rather be alone than hurt in another relationship, even though the loneliness hurts. Here are the signs of rigid boundaries:

- You are likely to say no if the request involves close interaction.
- You avoid intimacy by picking fights or staying too busy.
- You fear abandonment or engulfment, so you avoid closeness.
- You rarely share personal information, preferring to remain an enigma.
You have difficulty identifying wants, needs, and feelings.

- You have few or no close relationships.
- If you have a partner, you lead separate lives and virtually no shared social life.
- You rarely ask for help.
- You don't allow yourself to connect with other people and their problems.

Rigid boundaries are considered unhealthy because it's necessary to interact with others to get through life. On the outside, a person with no relationships may profess happiness because he doesn't have to deal with "drama." But, on the inside, he often feels depressed with a deep longing to connect. If this describes you, others may see you as the aggressive one, displaying a stern, gruff demeanor. Since you don't care about preserving relationships, you think you have nothing to lose by offending others.

In reality, there's much to be lost without the richness of interpersonal relationships. There's a lot you can accomplish by yourself, but not everything. There will be times you can greatly benefit from the help of others, which by no means is a weakness. In fact, it takes great strength to recognize and admit you need assistance. The chance of making mistakes and ethical violations increases when you operate in a vacuum.

Statement Plus a Question

If your boundaries are violated, you'll need to firmly reinforce them. Remain assertive even if the other person is aggressive. Matching aggression doesn't mean you'll be taken seriously, it only signals that you've lost control and let someone else determine your emotional state. Therefore, avoid using aggressive tactics like making threats that will immediately escalate anger. If you say, "Back down or else!" to an aggressive person, he'll choose "or else." He has no choice but to accept your challenge, or be embarrassed.

"Saving face" is a term that refers to allowing someone to preserve his self-image. Even if he knows he's wrong, an aggressive person will often refuse to back down, because he doesn't want to admit he's made a mistake. He'll cross the line and continue the conflict rather than admit defeat. To avoid this, you must state your boundaries while allowing him to save face. Why should you give him a chance to protect his dignity when he's acting like a jerk? Because it's the only way you're going to get what you want. Making him look stupid will only cause a prolonged conflict, as his ego will keep him fighting.

Stating Boundaries

The communication formula that allows you to state your boundaries and at the same time offer the other person room to save face is called, "statement plus a question." When someone starts to behave inappropriately, use the statement to draw your line. Without waiting a beat, add a question to redirect the focus. If you stop at the statement, it will sound like a threat. But, by following up immediately with a question, you're giving him a chance to comply by responding to your question, not your boundary. Here's what it might sound like:

- “I’m willing to talk, but not have you yell at me. Would you like to continue or take a five minute break?”
- “This conversation seems more about personal attacks than solutions. If you’d like to refocus it, we can talk now, or we can meet at another time. What’s best for you?”
- “I’m going to end this conversation if the name-calling continues. I’d like to work this out when you’re ready. Do you prefer now or another time?”

In each example, the first sentence explains the terms of your boundary. The second sentence is the face-saving option offering to continue to talk or reschedule. If an aggressive person refuses to respect your boundary, *you must follow through and end the conversation* or lose all credibility! End the conversation calmly and say, “I’ll continue this conversation when it can be had respectfully.” Be careful about turning this into a threat by standing there and glaring. Disengage by walking away, ending eye contact, and remaining quiet.

Step Aside

Button pushers like to keep poking you to see what makes you flinch. But, those verbal jabs only have power if you fuel them. You influence what happens next based on how you respond (or don’t) to hurtful comments. Picture mean remarks like a huge ball of negative energy aimed at you. There are only three things you can do: push back, catch it, or step aside.

Pushing back is responding aggressively by using all your strength to fight. You’ve revealed your soft spot and you’re about to drain your energy defending yourself and firing back. Catching the ball of negative energy is responding passively by holding on to it. You do this by showing a pained look, agreeing with the attack, or apologizing. You absorb his comments and begin to wonder if he’s right. The third option is to step aside, and it’s the healthiest choice. When the fiery ball of negativity is coming your way, you simply step aside rather than try to stop it. Stepping aside is not stepping backwards (backing down) or running away (giving up). You’re maintaining your position, remaining engaged, but choosing not to acknowledge certain comments.

Step Aside in Motion

The step aside technique is good for taming an aggressive person’s attempts to rile your temper or when you feel it’s necessary to stand your ground and have a conversation. It’s not meant as a way to endure abusive situations. In those cases, it’s always best to end the conversation rather than let it escalate. Here’s how you can use the step aside technique:

- *Aggressive attack:* “The real problem is that you’re jealous!”
- *Step aside response:* “You’ve listed a lot of things that are bothering you. What solutions do you suggest?”
- *Aggressive attack:* “You’re an idiot!”
- *Step aside response:* “Earlier, we brainstormed two possible answers. Which one do you want to explore first?”

Yes, it's hard to listen to an attack and not respond to it! Your goal is to teach the aggressive person that his tactics won't work on you. Notice the step aside technique uses the familiar format of statement plus a question, but the statement isn't about boundary setting, just redirecting. Be prepared for this to get him momentarily agitated, but as long as you stay calm and keep asking questions that redirect the conversation, he should eventually stop. Remember, if he continues to badger you with disrespectful comments, end the conversation. When the step aside strategy is working, the other person learns that you refuse to be emotionally manipulated into getting mad.

Safety Threats

It can be hard to know when someone's anger may be potentially dangerous. If at any point you feel unsafe, that's reason enough to exit the conversation and get help if necessary. Take all threats seriously the first time. Never verify an aggressive person's intentions by asking, "Is that a threat?" This will only escalate the situation by challenging his ego. Don't bother trying to talk him out of his statement with, "I'm sure you didn't mean that." Even if he did overreact, he needs to learn that making threats is unacceptable. Just say, "I take threats seriously." Then, take appropriate action by exiting the conversation.

In Conclusion

People behave aggressively because it's worked for them in the past. Teaching clients to address these unhealthy behaviors in a firm, respectful, and safe way empowers them to set appropriate boundaries. By doing so, clients understand they don't have to endure poor treatment. In addition, they have tools to renegotiate relationships to a healthier level. There's no guarantee people will cease relying on aggressive behaviors, but what can change is how clients respond and feel about themselves afterwards.

TEST

Dealing with Aggressive People

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Circle the correct answer:

1. Aggressive behavior includes:
 - a) Respecting everyone's rights.
 - b) Crossing boundaries.
 - c) Reflecting feelings.

2. The best way to manage emotional triggers is to:
 - a) Identify them and make a plan.
 - b) Ignore them.
 - c) Blame them on the aggressive person.

3. Empathy is a helpful tool to deal with aggression when:
 - a) It leads to ranting.
 - b) It becomes sympathy.
 - c) It de-escalates the situation.

4. Signs of healthy boundaries include:
 - a) Emotional dependency, fear of rejection, silence.
 - b) Respect, open communication, reciprocity.
 - c) Isolation, few relationships, keeping feelings private.

5. The best way to respond to a safety threat is to make a joke.
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

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