

## Defusing Anger in Others

Occasionally, people approach us in such a state of anger or frustration, that it is first necessary to calm them down, or defuse their anger to some degree, before we can work effectively to meet their needs. Note that this is not always possible and, at some point, it should be considered whether alternative interventions should be applied (e.g., contacting police or guard service). Below is some general information regarding anger, with recommendations for reducing anger in others.

### Key Points

- Anger and aggression are often the product of frustration and a feeling of powerlessness.
- Efforts to resist physically or verbally are counterproductive, and put the aggressor in an even more defensive position.
- Listening is the most important skill in defusing anger. Do not attempt to reason with a person in the midst of irrational anger.
- Aikido Principle: Aikido moves to dissipate the power of an attack by leading the attacker in a new direction so that the attack is neutralized. Rather than resisting a person's anger, redirect their verbal aggression into a non-threatening form of discussion that can bring about a cooperative, problem-solving approach.

## Six Elements of Defusing Anger in Others

1. Communicating Respect
2. Cooperating
3. Effective Listening
4. Reframing
5. Asserting
6. Disengaging

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1. Communicating Respect: Demonstrating respect is a primary means for de-escalating hostility.

- Communicate respect with appropriate listening skills and non-aggressive body language.
- Show an interest in resolving the issue or meeting the other's needs and concerns.
- Acknowledge the importance of their concern.
- Refrain from openly judging his/her behaviour.

2. Cooperating: Cooperate, unless doing so causes harm to you or others.

- Demonstrate that you understand he/she is upset and angry.
- Refrain from pointing out some reason why the person should not be angry.
- Do not disagree, but focus on communicating a bit of empathy for the person's feelings.
- Your objective is not to cure the other person of their anger; it is simply to avoid escalation.

3. Effective Listening: Listening skills are crucial to defusing anger. In any attempt to defuse anger, the focus must shift from getting your point across, to understanding the person, and allying with them toward a common goal.

- Everyone wants to be listened to, and to feel understood. People often become angry or aggressive only after a lengthy period of not feeling acknowledged.
- Do not give in to the temptation to interrupt or correct the angry person. Rational arguments may only provoke their hostility.
- When people are under stress associated with conflict or insecurity, the potential for misinterpretation is greatly increased.
- Paraphrase, clarify, and gather information.
- Validate the person's experience. You do not have to agree with them, only that you have listened to them and understand why they might be

- feeling the way they do (e.g., "If I felt like I was getting the 'run around' all the time, I'd probably feel angry too").
- Use 'open-ended' questions (e.g., "What would you like to see happen in this situation?").
  - Be aware of your reactions, and attempt to change your 'judgment' into 'curiosity.'
  - Generally, match, then lower the person's intensity.
  - Watch nonverbal communication (i.e., open or closed posture, frowning, shaking your head?).
  - Standing at an angle (sideways), rather than directly opposing someone, can help keep a situation calm and non-adversarial.
  - Don't talk too much, and use the person's name (if known).

**4. Reframing:** Redirect aggression into a non-threatening discussion of the person's underlying needs.

- When faced with hostility, it is natural to push back. Reframing is a way to change directions.
- Reframing reflects understanding, but changes the emphasis from differences to common ground, from the negative to the positive. A reframe upon what the person clearly values, can lead to new directions and common ground (e.g., "I can see that 'honesty' and 'fairness' are very important to you, they are to me as well...").

**5. Asserting:** There are times when you clearly need to assert your own needs and interests in order to effectively manage the situation (and help the person place boundaries upon their anger).

- Set clear, firm boundaries, and expectations for appropriate behaviour.
- Be 'hard' on the issues, but 'soft' on the person.
- Use 'I' statements. 'You' statements tend to raise the level of tension (often accusatory). For example, "I feel anxious when you pound on the desk...and it makes it hard for me to listen to you effectively."
- Use 'and,' rather than 'but' (e.g., "I can see your point, and I can also see the need for..."). 'But' is known as the 'verbal eraser,' as it tends to erase everything that precedes it in a statement.
- Assertive requests are not always appropriate (with high threat, cooperation is primary).

**6. Disengaging:** Remove yourself (or the other person) from the threatening situation when listening and other methods are failing to reduce threat.

- Disengage when you are also angered and/or fear for your safety.
- Explain the need for a break or 'time-out,' and also a commitment for you (or someone else) to return to the matter. Offer food or beverage, if available and appropriate.

- Request assistance of supervisor, co-worker.
- Debrief your experience with someone you trust.

## If Someone Shows Signs of Losing Control

1. Get help before trouble starts. Use a prearranged warning signal to alert others.
2. Stay calm. This will help keep the person calm.
3. Talk slowly and calmly. Use a firm, confident tone.
4. Don't threaten, but inform of consequences of inappropriate behaviour.
5. Try to leave yourself an escape route.
6. Seek safety at your first opportunity.
7. Take time to debrief the situation with colleagues, supervisors, and/or counselling and psychological services.