

Redirecting Conversations When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

Reading 25

[Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)

What To Do, Say, & Avoid When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

When involved in a conflict conversation, it is easy to feel defensive, and we may feel threatened or attacked. How we respond can make the conflict worse or move the conversation in a positive direction. Realize that although any accusations or judgments they are making may not be true, the feelings behind them are legitimate. Anger is often a secondary feeling (they may feel disappointed or hurt) and their feelings are real. Although challenging, avoid responding in a way that makes them feel defensive or attacked. An effective response avoids judging, accusing, blaming, the use of “you statements” (preaching, put-downs, criticism, giving solutions, threats, and ultimatums, and asking “why” out of anger) and redirects the conversation back to listening to one another, asking genuine inquiry questions, considering what each other is saying, using “I Statements”, and collaborating to find solutions that meet both of your needs.

What To Do & Say When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

1. Don't respond immediately.
2. Take 2, 3, or more deep breaths.
3. Continue to breathe deeply.
4. Determine what you are feeling and why.
5. Collect your thoughts.
6. Try to focus on what they feel and are upset about, not the accusations or put-downs.
7. As difficult as it may be, try to understand their point of view.

8. You can slow things down by paraphrasing/summarizing, asking genuine inquiry questions, and acknowledging their feelings. This also communicates that you are trying to understand, taking their feelings and needs seriously, and considering what they say. You will not be able to move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels that you are listening, understanding them, and are considering their feelings and needs. Whenever you feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to proceed, remember that it is always a good time to listen/paraphrase/summarize, and ask genuine inquiry questions. Examples of what to say include:

- “It seems like you are really angry at me because...”
- “So, you are angry at me because...?”
- “I want to make sure I understand what you are upset about. You are upset that...”
- “I’m not completely sure I understand what is going on. Would you say more about...”
- “You think I...?” What led you to that conclusion?
- “I’m not sure I understand. Would you please say some more about...?”
- “So, you want me to...?”

Throughout This Process, Continue To:

- Paraphrase and Summarize
- Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions
- Use “I Statements Whenever You Speak
- Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem-Solve Together

What To Do If The Person Continues to Attack You

If you are feeling attacked and that is making it difficult for you to listen, examples of what you can say include:

- *“I am feeling attacked”.*
- *“I want to understand what you are saying but I am having difficulty listening because I feel attacked.”*
- *“I want to understand what you are saying, and I would like to come to a resolution that works for both of us, but I will not continue this conversation if you continue to call me names/judge me/put me down/attack me.”*
- *“For me to be able to listen to you and consider what you are saying I need you to stop calling me names/judging me/putting me down/attacking me. Are you willing to do that”?*

- Try to move the conversation back to mutual problem-solving.
- Take a break. Tell the person you want to listen to what they are saying, and understand and consider what they are saying, but you are having a difficult time listening, and it is important for you to be able to do that. Reschedule a time to finish the conversation. An example of what to say includes:
 - *“I need to take a break. I want to listen to, understand, and consider what you are saying, but I am having trouble listening now. Can we schedule a time when we can continue this conversation?”*
- If the conversation goes nowhere or they continue to attack, walk away. Examples of what to say include:
 - *I will not allow you to continue to speak to me like this. I am ending this conversation and leaving.*
 - *I will not allow you to continue to speak to me like this. I am ending this conversation and leaving. I would like to continue this conversation in the future and understand and consider what you are saying, but only if you avoid calling me names/judging me/putting me down/attacking me.*
- If they are being emotionally or physically aggressive, leave, just leave. Examples of what to say if you choose to say something before leaving include:
 - *I feel attacked, and I will not allow you to continue treating me like this. I am ending this conversation and leaving.*
 - *I will not allow you to continue to treat me like this. I am ending this conversation and leaving.*

What to say if you are feeling frustrated or disappointed because you believe the other person is not acting in good faith, not listening to you, or not considering your needs: share your feelings with them.

Examples of what to say include:

“I’m feeling frustrated because it seems to me that you are not considering my needs

“I’m feeling frustrated because I have shown a willingness to compromise and change, but you have not been willing to do that.

“I’m feeling frustrated because I have offered several solutions that I think will meet both of our needs and you have not offered any and keep sticking to your original position”.

“I feel disappointed because I don’t feel like you are taking my needs seriously.

What to say if you are wrong or if you have said or done anything to hurt the other person: apologize.

Examples of what to say include:

“I am sorry”.

“I am sorry for what I said (did, didn’t do).”

“I want to start our conversation by apologizing for what I said (did, didn’t do). I’ve felt really bad (guilty, regretful) ever since I said (did, didn’t do). I wish I would have apologized sooner”.

“I know I said... I shouldn’t have said that. I was acting out of anger. I know that is no excuse. I am truly sorry.”

“I know I didn’t...when I said I would.” I am sorry. In the future, I will do what I say I will do”.

For more information and background on apologizing, see the [How to Apologize Reading](#) and [How to Apologize Skill Card](#).

You Have Successfully Redirected a Conversation When:

1. Neither of you is feeling defensive, threatened, or attacked.
2. You both avoid judging, accusing, blaming, and using “you statements” (preaching, put-downs, criticism, giving solutions, threats, ultimatums, and asking “why” out of anger).
3. Both of you are listening to one another, asking genuine inquiry questions, considering what each other is saying, using “I Statements”, and collaborating to find solutions that meet both of your needs.