

Redirecting Conversations When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

Skill Card 25

Conflict Resolution Skills Module

What To Avoid When Feeling Defensive, Threatened, or Attacked

When trying to resolve an interpersonal conflict, 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. Although it is difficult, avoid responding in a way that makes them feel defensive, threatened, or attacked. Avoid judging, accusing, blaming, put-downs, and criticism.

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 be feeling disappointed or hurt), and their feelings are real. Focus on what they are feeling and why they feel that way.

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

- Don't respond immediately. Take 2, 3, or more deep breaths. Continue to breathe deeply. Collect your thoughts. Try to focus on what they feel and are upset about, not the accusations or put-downs. As difficult as it may be, try to understand what they are feeling and why from their point of view.
- 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 them, taking their feelings and needs seriously, and considering what they say.

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...?"*

Throughout This Process,

Continue To:

- Paraphrase and Summarize
- Ask Genuine Inquiry Questions
- Use "I Statements Whenever You Speak
- Collaborate, Negotiate, and Problem Solve Together. Move the conversation to mutual problem-solving.

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. The conversation now focuses on feelings and needs.
4. 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.

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, 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."*
- ✓ 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".*

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 feel disappointed because I don't feel like you are taking my feelings and needs seriously.

What to say if you are wrong or 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 know I didn't...when I said I would." I am sorry. In the future, I will do what I say I am going to do".

See the Redirecting Conversations Reading ([Conflict Resolution Skills Module](#)), the How to Apologize Reading ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)), and the How to Apologize Skill Card ([Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships](#)) for more information on how to redirect conversations and how to apologize.