

## STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR: FIRST RESPONSE SKILLS

Kurtz SM, Silverman JD, Draper J (1998) *Teaching and Learning Communication Skills in Medicine*. Radcliffe Medical Press (Oxford)

Check your mindset, remembering that:

- Conflict or “difficult “ behaviour is healthy and normal
- All difficult behaviour is communicating something
- The “difficult” person may be saying something that everyone else in the group is thinking; what looks like “difficult” behaviour may in fact be brave behaviour
- Separate the content and the process of the message and consider the meanings of both

Begin with the “first response” skills for use in any conflicted or defended situations, especially where the behaviour is overt and direct:

1. **use the accepting response**
2. **paraphrase**
3. **re-establish common ground**
4. **review and intentionally use Gibb's strategies regarding defensive and supportive climates.**
5. **learn to say and practise saying: "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong" if appropriate!**

### 1. Use the accepting response

Use the accepting response often, particularly when strong feelings (positive or negative) are present (Briggs and Banahan 1979). Also called the ‘supportive response’ or the ‘acknowledging response’, the accepting response provides a practical and specific way of:

- accepting non-judgmentally what the other person says
- acknowledging the legitimacy of the other person to hold their own views and feelings
- valuing the other person’s contributions

This approach is effective because it establishes common ground through a shared understanding of each other’s perspective.

The primary characteristic of the accepting response is that it expresses acknowledgement and acceptance of the other person's feelings or ideas and confirms his or her right to have them. Expressing acceptance builds a base for trust. It is not an attempt to help the other person overcome negative feelings or alter ideas with which we disagree. It does not offer agreement or disagreement, attempt to correct misperceptions or offer reassurance. Those steps can come later if they are appropriate. Rather the accepting response expresses understanding, support and acceptance of where the other person "is" or how he feels. Acceptance here means acknowledgement and not agreement.

For example:

In response to an outburst of angry words, the accepting response might be:  
"I can feel how angry you are; feeling angry is fair enough."

Or if someone disagrees strongly:

"Yes, that’s clearly another way to look at this - an interesting alternative..."

Then PAUSE - allow time for the other person to feel accepted. Do not at this time offer help or advice or try to talk the other person into feeling or acting differently. Also guard against hesitating briefly and then going on with "but...".

The acknowledging response helps to establish or re-establish acceptance and therefore trust. The other person will often briefly respond with more of whatever emotion or idea they were expressing. Again employ the accepting response followed by silence. Usually at this point the accepting response will have laid the foundations of a non-defensive atmosphere that enables the parties involved to re-establish common ground, go on with constructive problem solving, correct misperceptions and think through alternatives. We describe the accepting response more fully in the context of doctor-patient communication in our companion volume.

## **2. Paraphrase**

Paraphrase frequently - restate in your own words your perception of the content of the other person's message and/or the feelings that go with it. Paraphrasing is an attempt to verify that your interpretation of the message is the same as the other person's intended meaning. Encourage all involved to paraphrase important parts of the interaction to make sure that everyone understands each other accurately. Work at becoming aware of and confirming un-stated assumptions that you think may cause distortions in your own perception or that of others. The accepting response and paraphrasing skills are especially important with cross-cultural groups.

## **3. Re-establish common ground**

After acceptance, continue conflict management by "returning" to a point where there is *mutually understood* common ground. That common ground may for example be an openly discussed and mutually understood definition of the problem. It is usually better to start problem solving and conflict management with a focus on common ground regarding smaller issues of disagreement rather than larger ones, because:

- it's easier to establish common ground and make progress on smaller issues
- such a focus assists all parties to develop a stake in working on tougher issues and reaching resolution.

Stop whenever silences feel noticeably uncomfortable and re-establish what the mutually understood common ground is. Proceed again to try to deal with the conflict when silence feels relatively more comfortable. This tactic also helps prevent escalation from simple disagreement to ego conflict where participants start "attacking" each other personally. The latter is much more difficult to manage.

Seeking common ground is an effective way to reduce tension, deal with misunderstanding and create a supportive climate. The aim is to establish common points of reference, *for example through jointly agreed upon objectives*.

## **4. Review and intentionally use Gibb's strategies regarding supportive and defensive climates.**

These behaviours are especially significant when dealing with conflict since some degree of defensiveness is inevitable whenever conflict occurs. A word of caution is necessary here: distinguish carefully between defensiveness and fair defence. Labelling others as defensive can be a way of discounting them and/or their fair defence of their actions. Such discounting in effect gives you inappropriate permission to ignore what is being said or to stop listening altogether.

## **5. Learn to say and practise saying: "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong" or "I never thought of/knew that; thanks for enlightening me."**

Used sincerely, these simple phrases are remarkably effective.