

Redirect Aggression: Assertiveness in the Way of Peace

How we respond to aggression matters. As discussed in “Stances and Nonviolence” under “Conflict Tools” in this handbook, it’s not generally helpful to be submissive or aggressive. Instead, it’s better in the way of peace to be assertive to redirect aggression for a good outcome.

To REDIRECT aggression . . .

R

Respect the Other

Show respect even toward aggressors. This is not just a high-sounding spiritual ideal but a practical response to reduce the risk of escalation. To disrespect, shame, or put down a person provokes hostility. But respect can disarm aggression, because respect expresses the power of love, a spiritual force that can transform aggression.

E

Express a secure stance

Maintain a non-anxious, assertive stance in threatening situations. Do not communicate with your body language an aggressive or submissive stance. Instead, express a firm but calm strength with an open, nonthreatening stance. Keep your hands open, your head up, and maintain eye contact.

D

Defuse hostility

Seek to disarm rather than provoke aggression. Reacting with insults, sarcasm, or threats escalates aggression. But empathy, humor, and affirmation can defuse hostility. Empathy can identify with the aggressor’s feelings. Appropriate humor (not sarcastic or humiliating) can transform heaviness. And affirmation can call out an aggressor’s nobler nature.

Words you can use:

*You’re above this.
You really don’t
want to do this.
This will hurt you, too.*

*Stop!
Let’s calm down
and step back.
I won’t go along
with this.*

*How can we
save a life here?
Seems like
you’re in pain.
You must be pissed!*

I Inquire with questions

Use distractions to draw attention away from a line of attack. Ask respectful questions to draw the person's attention away from their attack. Use questions to engage the other's mind and help you assess what's needed. By using questions, call the aggressor to respond to reason rather than react with emotion.

*What's upset you?
What will happen
if you do this?
Is it worth the
consequence?*

R Refocus on the problem

Neutralize aggression, not the aggressor. In most attacks, the focus often becomes personal, provoking more defensiveness. To shift the attack, refocus on an issue or need. To do this, ask the aggressor what really is needed. Once an underlying issue is identified, then "attack" the problem, not the person.

*What's bothering you?
What's this really about?
What's the problem?*

E Explore solutions

A positive outcome is when we don't come out on top and the other doesn't lose face. So attack the problem by exploring solutions that lead to a win-win outcome. To do this, help the aggressor see the negative consequences of this behavior and what you need to happen. Then state how you both can get what you need.

*What do you
really need?
How can we
resolve this?
That's one way.
What's another?*

C Convey "I" statements

Seeking to deescalate aggression, take a centered stance focusing on what you need. Offensive reactions escalate aggression. Because pointed "You" statements often provoke defensiveness and resistance, use "I" statements to set boundaries and assert yourself. Use phrases like "I need . . ."; "I don't like . . ."; "I will . . ."; "I won't . . ."

*I need you to stop.
I don't want to do this.
I need to leave now.*

T Talk with assertiveness

Maintain an assertive stance to disarm aggression. Reacting out of fear or anger fuels agitation, so respond with courage and self-control. In a nonthreatening stance, speak with a firm voice and communicate a centered strength, respecting both self and other.

*That's enough!
Let's talk about this.
No! Stop!*