

## De-escalating Confrontational Situations.

As a therapist, I am used to seeing and dealing with conflict in couples and in groups. What works in couples also works with groups. What escalates conflict in individuals are the same things that escalates conflict between groups.

We are a divided Nation. The more divided we become, the more conflict we will experience. Most of my clients are in conflicts with others (mates, children, parents, bosses, neighbors, etc.). We have tools to help resolve conflict in all these situations, **If**, both parties are willing to do things differently. A conflict cannot exist unless both people agree to the conflict. If one person chooses not to fight and the other person chooses to fight, what you have is not conflict, but a case of battery. The same therapeutic interventions that we use with **couples**, work equally well with groups of people.

A few years ago, I was hired by the Fresno Unified School District to deal with a conflict that looked like it was going to develop into a major strike. The teacher's union suggested to the school district that a third-party would be very helpful in resolving the conflict. The result was that there was not a teacher strike for that contract, even though there were a lot of very hateful and cruel things said on both sides at the start.

There are situations in which both parties have a vested interest in escalating the conflict. In these cases, de-escalating the situation will not work. We saw this repeated many times in the Vietnam war protests. You can also see this occurring in economic summit meetings. And, we saw it most recently in Charlottesville. It really doesn't matter what the issue is if both sides see that escalating the conflict is going to get their desired result of media attention and publicity for their cause. Then, there is no way of de-escalating these types of situations. The result of allowing situations to escalate is that people are hurt and and/or killed. This is often seen as collateral damage by one or both sides.

On the other hand, if both parties see that de-escalation is in their best interest, de-escalating volatile situations can work. De-escalating a confrontational situation starts with at least one of the parties not taking what is said personally. If you take what is said personally, then you will return a putdown with a putdown of your own. The rule is: Putdowns get putdowns back! Putdowns just escalate the conflict. How is it possible to not take what someone you care about, says about you, about your children, or what you believe? **That is possible if** you know and remember the **To Me** rule when your emotions are high. The **TO ME rule says**: What somebody says about you, says nothing about you. It only tells you about them. . . But, if it is not about you that they are talking about, then who is it about?

1. What you are learning is about the other person. You are learning about their expectations, their beliefs, and their values. It's not about you!
2. I know hundreds of people who intellectually know and believe in the **To Me** rule, and yet their feelings get hurt when someone is unloading on them. The problem with these people is that there is a small part of themselves that believe that what they are hearing

is true. These people have not accepted that they are not OK, and that is OK. When somebody is unloading on you, it is their stuff, not yours, that they are unloading.

When was the last time that you got your feelings hurt by what someone said or did? So, how did you manage to take what somebody is telling you about themselves and get all bent out of shape?

3. When someone tells you that there is a God, and you are going to hell, what are they saying about the existence of God? **Nothing.** But, what have you learned about them? What they told you was only their belief/conclusions based on their life experiences. If the person says there is no God, again what have you learned about God. **Nothing.**

If your mate tells you that you are a danger to the family, you cannot be trusted, and that you are delusional, what is your mate telling you about you? **Nothing.** Okay, then what are you learning about your mate? That he/she is a danger to the family and needs a psychiatric evaluation? **No,** your mate is telling you about himself/herself and that he/she is very angry at you because you are not living up to his/her expectations of you. Your mate is telling you that he/she feels powerless to get you to change. He/she is using overstatements in hopes that you will listen and change. You learned nothing about yourself, but you did learn about your mate.

When Bernie Sanders tells you on CNN that “Donald Trump is a danger to America and that he is delusional.” What is Bernie saying about Trump? **Nothing.** And, no he is he not saying that he is delusional and is a danger to America. Okay, then what do you learn about Bernie Sanders from what he said about Trump? Again, it is about Bernie’s values, beliefs, and fears. It is about how Bernie sees the world. What I learn about Bernie is that he is very angry because there were so many people that believed in Trump and that so many people did not believe in, or like Hillary. I learned that Bernie may feel powerless and threatened by Trump’s beliefs. I can also guess that he is trying to scare other people so that they will not vote for Trump again and that the Democratic party can get back into power.

4. In your relationship with your mate, are there words, beliefs, values that are so horrendous that you must attack the other person both verbally and physically? That is what domestic violence is about. That is what riots are about. How does that work for you?

Does attacking people bring people together, or does it serve to further divide us? Did what happened in Charlottesville resolve the conflict, or did it further increase the division between us? According to the Alt Right, they were excited because they could get their message out and get many new recruits. And, at the same time, they get to be the victim. According to the Alt Left, they were excited because they stood up against “evil” and showed it for what it was. At the same time, they could see themselves as victims, as well as the defenders of Truth and Right. In this situation, both sides saw themselves as having won and as having gotten what they wanted. This sounds like it is a set up for many more clashes to come. This scenario leaves no chance for de-escalation! Who benefits from deliberately escalating conflicts? Both sides benefit, as does the media. Who then is responsible for driving our Nation apart?

5. When I hear people say that they want to bring us together, my question is, **is what you’re doing, getting you what you want in the long run?** **AND,** if the answer is no,

then you have two options, you can do it harder with more strife and violence **or** you can do something different! So, what does doing something different look like?

If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. Do you wish to escalate the conflict, or do you want to de-escalate the violence that you see around you?

If you would like to be part of the solution to a conflict, the first step is to figure out what the person or group is saying about themselves. Put yourself into the other person's shoes. If it was you saying what you just heard, what would you be feeling? What would be your expectations? What would be your beliefs?

If you are a workaholic husband whose wife is increasingly getting angry and withdrawing, put yourself into her shoes and see if you can feel her feelings of anger, feeling unimportant and feeling used.

If you are a male white supremacist, what would be your sins? Your grades are as good or better than the women and Blacks in your class and yet, you cannot get into the college of your choice because of your race and gender. What would be your expectations since other groups have been given Preferential Status? These groups include: blacks, women, illegal immigrants, gays, lesbians, Indians, transsexuals, transgender, etc. who get preference in hiring, education, and getting promotions. What major group is excluded from the Government's Protected Status? It is young, white males. What must this group be feeling?

As a non-Jewish person, I have been invited to a few synagogues. My overall impression in leaving was an over whelming sense of guilt and fear that seemed to permeate the sanctuary. As a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, is it safe to say that you might have an overwhelming fear "of it all happening again," and a determination not to let it happen again? "This time I will fight. I will resist. I will not let these fascists do it to us again."

If you are of African descent, what do you feel when you see a swastika, a torch light parade or a Caucasian policeman? Have you been rejected from getting an apartment or not gotten a job because of the color of your skin? If I were in your skin, I would feel angry, resentful, and carry around a chip on my shoulder. There would be a part of me that would not believe that I could ever get a fair shake in the US.

If you fit into one of these three groups, your feelings are real. And, no one can take them away from you. However, you have just set yourself up to be used in the game of identity politics.

*You aren't what you think you are,  
But what you think. . . you are.*

Identity politics is where a Political Party chooses groups of people from out of the general population and promises them special privileges not allotted to the rest of the public. This is done with the goal of

having these groups support them through voting and money. Examples of Protected Status Groups include, but are not limited to: [religion](#), [disability](#), [ethnicity](#), [language](#), [nationality](#), [sex](#), [gender identity](#), [race](#), [sexual orientation](#), [urban](#) and [rural](#) habitation, and [veteran status](#). Wikipedia

If you are in one of the Protected Categories and in an Alt Left counter demonstration, what are your beliefs that propel you to demonstrate? What are you afraid of if people do not demonstrate? What do you think could happen to our Nation if someone doesn't confront these "lunatics?"

If you can put yourself into another person's shoes, then the question becomes, are you willing to listen to the other person without arguing or disputing their point of view? You may have trouble agreeing, or even seeing their point of view, BUT, you are not going to change someone's belief system with logic! If you're willing to accept that, then maybe you can be part of the solution. Now, is the time to listen.

**To listen does not mean I agree.  
Acceptance does not mean approval.**

Acceptance simply means that you accept where the person is, their beliefs, and that they are where they are, until they can be someplace else. After listening for a while, without interrupting or questioning, there will come a time when the person falls silent. Now is the time to respond. Be sure that you know what you want to accomplish in your response. (Is the way I am responding going to get me what I want in the long run? Is it going to escalate or de-escalate the situation?) If you would like to be a part of the solution, here are some ways of responding:

- a. **Validate the persons' feelings, not their reality.** "If I believed that, I would probably be as upset as you are."
- b. "Isn't it interesting. It sounds like you are very upset and angry. Tell me what makes you so angry about this?"
- c. After the person has vented, there will be another quiet space. (This could take up to 15 to 20 minutes of intense listening.) That is when you can quietly and simply say, "I see it differently." After your response of validating their feelings, not their reality, allow the quiet to set in. It will be at that point, that the person is most likely to say, "Well, how do you see it differently." Now is the time to share your feelings, fears and beliefs. If the person starts to interrupt you, simply stop, and quietly respond with, "Do you really want to know how I see it differently?"

## **Verbal Aikido**

**This** concept can be utilized when responding to anger/rage. Verbal Aikido is based on the martial art of Aikido and on a verse from Proverbs 15:1 - "***A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.***" Aikido is a martial art in which you never strike the other person

or block the other person's strike! Aikido is performed by blending with the motion of the attacker and redirecting the force of the attack rather than resisting it head-on.

For example: in responding to somebody who uses always and never, you can say: ***“You’re right. I sometimes don’t pay enough attention to you.”*** The goal of Aikido is to create a fighting style that practitioners can use to protect themselves while not doing damage to the attacker.

Verbal Aikido can be used with individuals or groups to strengthen relationships, help resolve conflicts and bring others emotionally closer. Let’s say someone is venting big-time, and because you are not taking what was said personally, you can begin to use Verbal Aikido. Start by responding with your voice just a little under his volume. You may initially raise your voice briefly to get his attention. ***“Wow, if that had happened to me, I sure would be angry also!”*** Other responses could be: ***“It sounds like the whole world is coming apart right in front of your eyes. No wonder you are angry. If this had happened to me, I would be angry too.”*** Or, ***“Life is really feeling not fair right now. I would feel powerless and controlled if I saw the world the way you see the world. Hit this pillow and show me how angry you really are at this moment.”***

The timing of what you say and your volume level are both very, very important. Be careful not to sound like you are in opposition to the person’s anger when you respond. Wait for that ever so slight pause in his yelling and slip in a ***“Yeah, I would be angry too.”*** At first, use very short comments. As his pauses become longer, you can add a couple more words to your Aikido responses. You are not challenging his anger, you are validating it. This is the purpose of coming in under his anger volume.

### Verbal rule:

**Feelings expressed verbally as strongly as they are felt,  
reduce in intensity and are free to change**

A response that is not helpful could be: ***“The world is not all bad, you are just being emotional, calm down.”*** Saying this would likely escalate the person’s reaction. And, he will feel like he must raise his volume and intensity to ‘prove’ that the world *is* that bad! But if you are listening and he feels heard, he does not have to raise his voice and scream. He is more likely to feel: ***“Wow, at last, someone who can hear and understand me.”*** This is Verbal Aikido and the Verbal Rule in action at the same time.

*Myron Doc Downing PhD*

Specializing in Building Relationships, Depression,  
Anger Management & Anxiety Disorders

[DocDowning103@Gmail.com](mailto:DocDowning103@Gmail.com)