



# *Affective Center for Therapy*

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## Verbal Aikido

**A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1**

What does a soft answer sound like? Is King David talking about not raising your voice and not yelling? In Eph 4:25 Paul tells the church to “Stop lying to each other and be angry.” I am not sure how to be angry and still be believable without raising my voice. Or, is King David talking about speaking in a way that does not escalate conflict with name calling, putdowns, threats, sarcasm, demanding, controlling, blaming, and guilt trips. I believe that none of these responses would fall into the category of a soft answer. In fact, all of these responses would, no doubt, escalate a conflict.

You know from your own experience that putdowns get putdowns back, name calling will get name calling back, and threats will get threats back thus escalating the conflict.

There is an alternative. In Aikido, both physical and verbal, you do not attack your opponent, nor do you defend or block the other persons attack on you. When attacked, you simply sidestep or co-opt the attack by taking their energy, blending with it while moving out of the way.

For example, “You are useless; you never help around the house.” A verbal Aikido response could be, “You’re right, I don’t help around the house as much as you would like me to, and I hear that you are feeling used. Let’s talk about our expectations for each other.”

In verbal Aikido, you learn to use the communication rule of:

1. **To listen does not mean that I agree.** “But if I don’t say something, won’t they assume that I agree?” Once I have listened to all you have to say and there is a pause or quite spot, I may simply add, “I see it differently,” and just let it end there. If the other person is interested in how I see it, they will probably ask, “Well how do you see it?” Then I will share how I see it. If however, they start to argue again, I will just stop and start listening again without defending or arguing.

2. **Difference does not make wrong; it makes it interesting.**

This helps by helping me not to take what they are saying personally. It also helps the other person by showing interest in what they believe, thus opening the door for them to be interested in what I believe. The opposite of making things interesting is judging them and the problem with judging others is that you will assume that others are judging you!

3. **Acceptance does not mean approval.** Acceptance starts with me accepting me. I need to accept myself for where I am now and for what I have done in the past. This does not mean that I approve of all my past behaviors and/or words. I must be able to accept myself, without judgment, before I can accept someone else. Acceptance simply means that where I am, is where I am until I can be somewhere else. Once I have learned to accept myself and others, then I will quit blaming others or myself.

Let me give you an example. My daughter was 13, it was Easter vacation and she and I were sitting at the kitchen table. She was telling me how school had been going for her that year. It had not been an easy time for her. "Dad, I feel like I just don't fit in. Nobody accepts me. I tried everything I could think of." She had a lot of energy stored up and talked with a lot of passion, as if she was afraid that I would not listen or accept her. For the most part, I sat there quietly and only occasionally would reflect back to her what I was hearing. "I can understand; that must have been very hard for you."

She went on, "I did everything I could think of. For a while, I dressed up like the popular kids but they wouldn't let me in. Then, I dressed like the stoners but I didn't fit in there. I even dressed up like the teachers and wore stocking and high heels but that didn't work either. Finally, I had sex with this boy!"

I do not think she was expecting that to come out because she swallowed hard, then I swallowed hard and kept listening. In my whole life, this was the hardest listening that I have ever done. I wanted to yell at her, who was this guy, tell me his name. I'm going to get him! But, I managed to hold on, keep listening and support her with my comments. Then I heard her saying, "That wasn't a very good experience and I don't think I will do that again for a long time."

I thought to myself "Wow, what a smart lady. I could not have come up with any better way of responding than what she found for herself." If I had jumped in and attacked the boy, she would have felt that she needed to

defend him and herself. As a result, she would not have come up with her own answer.

Another part of Aikido is learning about being well balanced in yourself. That means you must know where you are in relationship to your environment and others. You must be clear about your boundaries and be willing not to let others take advantage of you. You must be respectful of others and their boundaries.

That also means that you have learned to not take things personally. You are able to apply the TO ME rule that, **WHAT SOMEONE SAYS ABOUT YOU SAYS NOTHING ABOUT YOU, IT JUST TELLS YOU ABOUT THEM.** In Verbal Aikido, it is not about winning or subduing someone. In Aikido, you learn to be an actor rather than a reactor so that you end up with a win-win relationship.

Like any new language, there are words and phrases that you will need to learn. It will take some practice to be able to remember them.

Here are a few Verbal Aikido responses:

- *I would be less than honest with you if I don't tell you.* . . (State your purpose or intent at the beginning). Everybody says they want an honest relationship, but few people do. You would rather defend your dishonesty on the grounds that it might hurt others and, as a result, you settle for superficial relationships. By stating your intention first, it makes it easier for the other person to listen and hear what you have to say.
- *If I do what you are asking I would feel resentful and bitter and I love [care about] you enough that I wouldn't want to do that to our relationship.* You have, at one time or another, been asked to do something that, after doing it, you have felt angry or resentful. But, because you did not know how to say no, you did it anyway. When you do not know how to say no without feeling guilty, the result is often resentment. **Resentment comes from the repression of feelings, not the expression of feelings.** When put this way, most people would rather find some other way of getting it done than to have you feel resentful and/or angry at them.
- *I am confused about . . . can you help me understand . . .* Confusion is one of the emotions that you will feel before you get angry. But, it is easier to hear that you are confused than it is to hear that you are angry at me. It is also a way of inviting that other person into the problem solving process with you. I use this approach most often when what a person says and what they do, do not match up. *I am confused, you say that you love me and want to spend time with me, but you are gone six days a week!*

- *Would you be willing to . . .* Ordering, demanding and commanding can increase the conflict. There is usually resistance when someone is feeling controlled. Would you be willing, is a way of asking for what you want without sounding controlling.
- *How do you want me to respond to you when you . . .?* By starting with this phase, you are bring the person into the problem solving process. One important difference between punishment and consequences is that you know what the consequence will be ahead of time. And, if you are disciplined by the consequences that you have set and agreed to, you will find it much harder get angry at the person who is administrating the punishment that you chose.
- *Never-the-less. . . Or regardless. . .* These are great words to keep the conversation focused and on subject. Whenever someone tries to divert the conversation or bring in spurious information, it is easy to bring it back to topic by saying, never-the-less. “But you let sis stay up to 10.” “Never-the-less, you have school tomorrow and need to be in bed by 9.” Saying it once often is not enough because the person may throw in other arguments. It is then that you may need to become the broken record and keep saying, “Regardless, you need to be in bed by 9.”
- *That is not acceptable.* There are some things/behaviors that are not acceptable in my home or office. I do not have to debate or argue my boundaries with you. This does not mean I am the policeman for the rest of the world. What you do on your own time and in our own space is up to you. However, I would not have a problem saying, “That is not acceptable” if you wanted to bring illegal or street drugs into my house or if you wanted to stay up way past my bedtime when I have to work the next day. There does not have to be a discussion about this; a simple “that is not acceptable” would be enough. If you wanted to continue the argument I still have never-the-less to fall back on.
- *I feel\_\_\_\_\_ when/about . . .* You will often confuse what you feel with your judgments. Judgments are debatable, feelings are not. If you find yourself in an argument, then you know that you are not sharing your feelings. Judgments are often camouflaged as feelings, “I feel *that*. . .” Whatever follows the word *that* will be a judgment and will probably end in an argument or the person becoming defensive. Feelings are internal reports, “I don’t feel loved. You may love me very much but I don’t feel loved.” Sharing your feelings is important, but I would advise you do it with people who care about you. If a person does not care about you, then they surely will not care about your feelings! Your feelings are the

one thing that you have in common with all other men and women. If I know what you are feeling and I am willing to allow myself to identify with your feelings, that is when we will really feel connected.

- *I hear you saying that you are feeling.* . . . Some people love to share their stories. Sharing your story is one way to avoid what you are feeling and thereby avoid being able to make changes in your life. By paraphrasing a person's feelings (even though they may not have said their feelings) you can help the person get off their story. By becoming aware of your feelings, you can discover what you are feeling so that you may change your destructive behaviors. (Behind every behavior is a feeling.) Secondly, paraphrasing is a way of letting you know that I am really listening to you and that what you are feeling is very important to me. If you want someone to know that you really love them, listen to their feeling; that often means listening to what is not said.
- *If you do that, then I accept your decision that you do not want our relationship.* Nobody likes to be the bad guy. But, when you are not willing to make the hard decision to end a relationship, the results are feelings of powerlessness, resentment and anger. There are consequences for your behaviors. It is important that people are made responsible for what they do or do not do. In a job situation, you do not need to fire someone. You can say, "You have not show up for three days or contacted us, therefore, I accept your decision that you do not want this job!" Or, "Since you are not willing to go to counseling, I will accept your decision that you want the divorce."
- *May I suggest.* . . or *Would you consider . . . ?* or *Would you be willing to . . . ?* Ordering, commanding, demanding usually feels to the person you are talking to like you are trying to control them. This is a sure ways to create resistance and get the person to not listen to you. Entreating someone with "Would you be willing. . ." is a way to give them a sense of having options. This approach will not only help you achieve your ends, but it will also strengthen your relationship.
- *How is that working for you?* ...is a way of allowing the person to put his/her own judgment on their behaviors. If you put judgments on someone's behaviors, they will become defensive and try to prove that they were right. Most of you know when what you are doing is not working or was a dumb move. When what you are doing is not working for you, you have two choices, do it harder/louder OR do something different. This approach allows you to acknowledge the error and move to correct it.

- *How long do you want to keep doing that?* The inference here is that you are in control of your life and behaviors and you can stop doing what is not helpful and/or destructive to your life and relationships. You always have a choice. You may not like your choices, but knowing that they are there gives a sense of power in your life. When you acknowledge that what you are choosing to do is what you want to do, then you have become responsible for your irresponsibility. At that moment, you will stop blaming others. Hemingway said it this way, “Everything is your fault. . . . if you are lucky.” If it is your fault, then you can change it. If someone else is doing it to you, then you are indeed unlucky.
- *That is a hard way to learn about.* . . This approach shows empathy and caring without any putdown or discount. Nothing is a failure if you learn from it. Some lessons are harder to learn than others, but all lessons are important if we are to develop good judgment. I have a friend who tells me that his second marriage is a success because his first marriage was a failure. It is said that, Good judgment comes from experience and well, experience comes from making bad judgments.
- *You’re right; I do seem to have a way of screwing up from time to time.* This is a form of co-opting someone who loves using the absolutes, “you always” or “you never.” Nobody is so perfect that they can always be wrong. You do not have to get into an argument about “always” and you do not have to agree with them either. *You’re right, I am sometimes not as thoughtful as I could be.* Do not try to defend the indefensible. Many people have this belief that if they are perfect, people will not leave them or get angry with them. And, how is that working for you?

Verbal Aikido is a soft answer that can help you turn away wrath. Many people inflame situations by their use of name calling, putdowns, threats, sarcasm, guilt, demanding, commanding and controlling.

Learning to use Verbal Aikido is like learning a new language. At first, you will have to stop and think, “How do I say that using Verbal Aikido?” Do not expect to do it right every time. You do not even use English correctly every time you speak.

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