

# Handling Criticism

"THE ONLY WAY TO AVOID CRITICISM IS TO SAY NOTHING, DO NOTHING, BE NOTHING."

"You're a slob." "Your dress is, uh, interesting." "Is that all you were able to come up with?!" Being criticized is an experience most of us would prefer to avoid. After all, criticism does not typically consist of genuine, useful, or respectful feedback.

Criticism is "the art of evaluating or analyzing with knowledge and propriety." Unfortunately, criticism is often delivered when someone perceives that we have failed them, not lived up to their expectations. The result is that we find ourselves on the receiving end of words spoken out of frustration, disappointment, anger, envy. Typically, our reaction is to respond in the same manner - with anger, sarcasm, defensiveness. When two people communicate with each other in this fashion, a healthy, respectful relationship is not possible. Therefore, it is important to understand how to deal with criticism within our relationships - whether they are intimate, casual, work or school-related.



## TWO TYPES OF CRITICISM

There are two different types of criticism: valid and unjustified.

### Valid:

Valid criticism can also be considered constructive. It is based on accurate perceptions of events or behavior. The person doing the criticizing is motivated by a desire to help and provides solid suggestions for change.

You know it is valid criticism when you:

- have heard the criticism from more than one person
- the critic knows a great deal about the subject
- the critic is generally known as someone who has and applies reasonable standards of behavior

### Unjustified:

This type of criticism is often delivered by someone when you don't live up to their expectations. The critic might nag, recite your failures as a person, try to appear smarter, better, etc. than you, or criticize what you are doing to get you to do something else.

## RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

The best way to respond to criticism is to use an assertive communication style. In this way, you are showing respect for yourself and your critic, without attacking or surrendering. Your intention in responding assertively is to resolve misunderstandings, acknowledge what may be accurate in the criticism, and nip in the bud any unjustified attack.

### TECHNIQUES FOR RESPONDING TO CRITICISM

There are communication techniques that are effective in responding to criticism. Three that will be discussed and practiced in this Idea Sheet are:

1. Acknowledgment
2. Disarming
3. Probing



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When someone criticizes you and the criticism is accurate, an appropriate response is simply to agree. This technique allows you to accept your mistake without apologizing or "beating yourself up" about it.

There are four basic steps involved in this technique:

1. Say "You're right".
2. Paraphrase criticism, so the critic is sure you heard him/her accurately.
3. Thank the critic, if appropriate.
4. Apologize or explain yourself, if appropriate.

For instance...

**Criticism:** "Can't you be more careful when you put your dirty clothes in the wash. You left a tissue in your pocket again so now I have to wash everything over!"

**Response:** "You're right. I should have checked my pockets first. Thanks for washing my clothes again."

**Criticism:** "You said you would get Joe's gift! Now we don't have time to get a gift before his party! Thanks a lot!"

**Response:** "You're right. I was going to write myself a reminder note and I didn't. I'm sorry."

**Criticism:** "Where have you been?! You were going to meet me at the mall at 10:00 and you never showed up!"

**Response:** "You're right. A crisis came up at work as I was leaving. I tried to call you, but you had already left."

## DISARMING

This is one of the most difficult, yet powerful, techniques for responding to criticism. Disarming allows you to defuse the situation, without acknowledging that you actually agree with the criticism.

1. Find something in the criticism that is accurate and acknowledge it.

**Criticism:** "You're such a slob. You **never** clean up after yourself."

**Response:** "You're right. I did leave the dishes in the sink yesterday." (This acknowledges that indeed you left the dishes in the sink, but you don't agree with the exaggeration that you **never** clean up after yourself or the global judgment that you are a "slob".)

2. In your mind, there is no reasonable chance that the critic is right. But, you acknowledge the critic's feelings.

**Criticism:** "I can't believe you don't lock your car doors. It's an invitation to have it stolen. Some day you're going to walk out and your car will be gone"

**Response:** "You may be right. I appreciate your concern."

**Criticism:** "You are never home. I have to do all the work!"

**Response:** "I know I have been gone a lot lately."

David Burns, M.D., states in his rule of *Law of Opposites*: "If you disagree with a criticism which is untrue and unfair, you will immediately prove that the criticism is entirely valid. In contrast, if you genuinely agree with a criticism which is untrue and invalid, you will instantly put the lie to it. This is a paradox." (1989)

## PROBING

This technique is effective when you can't tell if the criticism is valid or unjustified because the critic is vague. Probing allows you to gain enough information from the critic to determine his/her intent. Using *where, what, when, how, and why* questions allows you to elicit the information you need to judge how to respond to the criticism.

**Criticism:** "You don't seem like yourself anymore."

**Response:** "What do you mean? What am I doing?" Or: "Why do you think I don't seem like myself?" Or: "When are you observing that I don't seem like myself?"

**Criticism:** "You're really treating Margaret lousy. You must not like her anymore. "

**Response:** "What did I do that makes you think I don't like Margaret?"

**Criticism:** "You don't work well with the customers."

**Response:** "Was there a recent situation that concerns you?" Or: "Would you give me an example of what I do that you believe is "not working well" with the customers?"