

Must We Put up with Put-Downs? Taking A Stand

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He that respects himself is
safe from others; he wears
a coat of mail that none can
pierce
Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow

Remember those times in life when you felt belittled by somebody? The feeling may have resulted from a look, expression or shrug. Or someone's words may have provoked a feeling of worthlessness. You feel perplexed. Instead of feeling up, you start to doubt yourself and feel down. Put-downs provoke a cloud of darkness or confusion and may stand out in your mind for years. You say, "Of course there are a lot of put-downs. That's because there is so much to criticize!" Perhaps. People do scowl at looks, dress, lifestyle, manners, work performance, speech. It's easy to come up with ways to let others know they are not ok. Most of us add to the problem of put-downs from others by putting ourselves down as well. If you were traveling to a distant location and remembered enroute that you'd forgotten to bring something you'll need when you get there, what would you do? Some expletive or caustic comment about your good sense likely would be heard, either bouncing off the windows of your car, bouncing through the channels of your mind, if you're in an airplane, train or bus. Let's explore some common put-down behaviors and what to do about them: the direct verbal put-down; the indirect verbal put-down; the nonverbal put-down; and the self put-down. The Direct Verbal Put-Down. This type of behavior is obvious: another person is verbally "blasting" you. Imagine for example, that you are stepping out of an elevator and accidentally bump into someone. That person responds, immediately in a hostile manner: "Damn it! Why don't you watch it! You fool! You could have hurt me!" The intent is quite up front, isn't it? How should you respond to such an over reaction to an innocent posture on your part? There is certainly no need to guess about the meaning of the reaction here are the steps we have found effective in dealing with a direct verbal put-down

- allow the person to slow down or vent feelings
- admit when you are wrong, even in the face of insult
- acknowledge the other person's feeling:
- admit yourself about the way he or she is reacting
- make a short statement to bring the encounter to an end

These steps will help resolve a put-down encounter where the intent is out in the open. In the elevator incident you could first let the person

vent until the angry feelings slow down. As the outburst subsides, you could say, "I apologize for bumping into you. It was accidental. Obviously you are upset, but I don't like to be called names or yelled at. I can get your point without that." This is just one example of a way to apply the steps suggested above.

Indirect Verbal Put-downs - How about this one, from your boss? "You did a nice job on that project you turned in yesterday. All the grammatical errors gave it a folksy quality." Or, what if your spouse says, "I love the way you look when you wear that outfit; old clothes become you." Do you do a double-take? Are you confused? What are the real meanings behind statements of this kind? Such indirect verbal put-downs are indirect aggression. In their book, *The Assertive Woman*, Stanley Phelps and Nancy Austin describe indirect aggressive behavior by ~~obs~~ observing: "... in order to achieve her goal, she may use trickery, seduction, or manipulation." They note that others react with confusion, frustration, and a feeling of being manipulated. Indirect aggressive behavior comes out as a conceded attack: Phelps and Austin label the person who behaves in this manner as "a mad dog in a lamb's suit." Handle an indirect verbal put-down first by asking for more information. In either of the situations given above, you might reply with, "What are you saying?" or "What do you mean?" Such a response tends to help clarify the person's true intent (you may have misunderstood), your second response will depend upon the other person's answer. Part of your goal in the situation, however, is to teach the person a new way of behaving toward you. If the boss indicates on the second exchange that, "Oh, I think you did a good job," you might still want to say, "Well, thank you, but I was a little confused. If you're really concerned about my errors in grammar, I hope you'll say so directly. I couldn't really tell if you thought the project was good or bad." You're trying to teach the boss to be straightforward ~~with~~ with you. In marriage relationships, some good-natured teasing can be fun too often, however, underlying hostilities come out in the guise of teasing. Your spouse may have been kidding you all along, but there are more straightforward and less destructive ways to do so. What if your spouse isn't kidding? Imagine that her next response is even more aggressive. We suggest that you remain assertive following the steps given above for direct verbal put-downs. Be prepared to go further with your assertion if the response to your inquiry is another put-down. On the other hand, when you ask for clarification, you may get some valuable information about your behavior. Remember that a major goal of assertive behavior is that both people can express themselves openly and honestly. It's different for most of us to give direct feedback about another person's upsetting behavior, so we often camouflage our comments by an indirect put-down style. Digging further may help your

future relationship with that person. Nonverbal Put-downs "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is a taunt children long have used to rebuff name-callers. Unfortunately, no reply has yet been invented for our adversaries who put us down without words. What is the best way to respond to an obscene gesture or a dirty look? How should pouting and silly grins or smirks be dealt with when the person uses no words to help you verify the meaning? Nonverbal put-downs are much harder to deal with because there are no words in the first place, and the person may not even be consciously aware of the put-down. Moreover, you cannot be certain you accurately read the nonverbal message. Nonverbal put-downs are much harder to deal with because there are no words in the first place, and the person may not even be consciously aware of the put-down. Moreover, you cannot be certain you accurately read the nonverbal message. If another person aims an obviously aggressive nonverbal put-down toward you, try to get the person to use words instead of gestures. You might say assertively, "Could you translate that look (gesture) into words for me? I have trouble knowing what you're feeling unless you tell me directly." Be prepared for a verbal put-down at this point and respond accordingly to the suggestion given above. The nonassertive nonverbal put-down is the least direct of all. Aggressively shaking a fist in your face, but if you're making a request of someone who begins to stare off into space or grins inappropriately, the intent is not so obvious. There is a good chance that the person who responds with an indirect nonverbal put-down is doing so automatically, out of habit. We all have mannerisms which take the place of words. Imagine you are about to pay for a purchase when the cashier looks at you grimaces, and sighs in an exasperated way. You may wish to write it off as nothing personal or merely assume the cashier is having a bad day. If you're bothered by the incident, however, why not deal with it directly? Ask him to explain: "I didn't understand your expression," or "I'm not sure what you mean by that," or, "Did I do something you didn't like?" This places the nonverbal response out in the open, to clear the air. If you have done something that bothers somebody else you deserve to know. Your next response will depend on what happens then, but we think it is a good idea to point out to others it's difficult to interpret their nonverbal messages. The Self-Put-Down - Outer Conflict, such as that described above, is only half of the picture. Inner conflict can also result in put-downs. The offender in this case

is yourself. Put-downs are generated by conflicts, external or internal. The solution is the same - be assertive. You can behave nonassertively or aggressively within yourself as well as toward others. Be careful about how you deal with yourself. Try not to (nonassertively) take flight and neglect or escape your inner put-down behavior. Don't be too (aggressively) caustic and condemning with your inner thoughts and feelings either. Take the middle ground: deal with yourself assertively. Be honest, open, straightforward with yourself. Don't condemn or run away from put-downs, your own or another's.

Summary

No one like the conflict generated by put-downs. By risking an open and straightforward clarification, with the other person or yourself, the ~~dis~~ discord can be resolved.

It does take some ~~constant~~ constraint to avoid feeling hurt and withdrawing or lashing out. The rewards of honest communication are usually worth the effort.

The upset caused by put-downs can be resolved if you will put your (assertive foot forward.) Be persistent in clarifying the situation with yourself or the other person. You'll reap the benefits of clearing the air, expressing your feelings, gaining new information about yourself and your relationships and resolving the real or imagined conflict.

I encourage you to go out in buy

This book your perfect right

A Guide to Assertive Living

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