

The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense: An Overview

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Just as there is a grammar of English for such things as word endings and the order of words in sentences, there's a grammar of English for verbal violence and verbal self-defense. All native speakers of English know this grammar flawlessly, although many factors—stress, nervousness, illness, lack of time, and the like—interfere with their demonstration of that flawless knowledge. The problem is that the information is not available at a level of conscious awareness, and people therefore cannot conveniently make use of it. The Gentle Art system is designed to help correct this problem and to make it clear that every human being is an expert in the use of his or her language.

When you use this system for verbal self-defense, you won't be restricted to sarcastic comebacks and counterattacks. Instead, you will be able to create for yourself a language environment in which such confrontations will be very rare. And when they do occur you will be able to deal with them quickly and competently, with no sacrifice of your own self-respect, and with no loss of face on either side of the interaction.

This is a brief overview of the basic concepts of the system, together with three examples of techniques for putting it to use. (For more detailed information about these and other techniques, please refer to the books, tapes, and videos in the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense series.)

Reference Items

The Four Basic Principles

1. ONE: Know that you are under attack.
2. TWO: Know what kind of attack you are facing.
3. THREE: Know how to make your defense fit the attack.
4. FOUR: Know how to follow through.

The first principle is important - because many verbal victims are not aware that they are victims. Typically, they feel miserable but they don't know why, and they tend to blame not those who abuse them but themselves. For English, the most important clue for knowing that verbal attack is taking place is not the words being said but the intonation of the voice that's saying them - the "tune" the words are set to.

The second and third principles work together to help you tailor your responses. When you learn to recognize language behavior modes (like the Sensory and Satir Modes described below) and to construct responses based on rules for their use, you are applying these two principles.

The fourth principle is often the hardest. There are two barriers to its use:

1. The idea that if you don't participate in the power game of verbal use you're letting the abuser "get away with it"
2. The problem of feeling guilty about defending yourself (especially common among women)

Both of these barriers are based on misconceptions. When you play the role of victim in verbal confrontations, you're training your attacker to be a more skilled verbal abuser - you're providing

the attacker with practice and encouragement. That's not kind or nurturing. And when you allow someone to involve you in verbal violence, that - not the words said - is letting the person get away with it. (We'll come back to this point later, in the section on Verbal Attack Patterns.)

Consider the principle that I call Miller's Law:

In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and try to imagine what it could be true of. (George Miller, 1980)

Notice that you don't have to accept that it's true - just assume, for purposes of discussion, that it is. And ask yourself what it could be true of. Often what we do is use a kind of "Miller's-Law-in-Reverse," where we assume that what's being said is false and then we try to imagine what could be wrong with the person speaking to make them say something so outrageous. This guarantees communication breakdown; apply Miller's Law instead.

Syntonic. Syntonic, in the Gentle Art system, is the science of language harmony.

The name is taken from the term "syntonic," used in radiotelegraphy to describe two radio sets sufficiently well tuned to one another to allow the efficient and the effective transmission of information. When people attempt to communicate with each other, they need to try for a similar syntonic state. When the speaker is using Channel 6 and the listener is using Channel 11, communication is sure to fail. The Gentle Art techniques provide you with methods for making sure that speaker and listener are on the same channel and are syntonic.

Presupposition. A presupposition is anything that a native speaker of a language knows is part of the meaning of a sequence of that language even when it does not appear on the surface of the sequence.

For example: Every native speaker of English knows that the meaning of the sentence "EVEN JOHN could pass THAT course!" includes two more propositions saying that the class is somehow second-rate and so is John. The sentence means: "Even John (who, as everybody knows, is no great shakes as a student) could pass that course (which, as everybody knows, is really trivial)." But the negative comments about John and the course are not there in the surface structure of the sentence: They are presupposed. Most verbal attacks, with the exception of the very crudest ones, are at least partly hidden away in presuppositions.

First Technique - Using the Sensory Modes

Human beings can't survive without information. We need data from the outside environment and from our bodies; we need data from other human beings and living creatures. Without a system for managing all this data, it would be impossible to deal with. Information that's coming in has to be processed. It must be selected, and (if possible) understood; then it must be either discarded, or indexed for storage in memory. Information going out has to be processed also, so that it can be expressed for other people to understand. Our primary tool for this processing is the set of sensory systems - sight and hearing and touch, taste and smell, etc.

Each of us has a preferred sensory system that we find easiest to use, and that helps us the most in understanding and remembering. And when we express ourselves we often demonstrate that preference by using one of the language behavior modes called Sensory Modes. Like this -

SIGHT: "I really like the way this looks."
HEARING: "This just sounds great to me."
TOUCH: "I really feel good about this."
SMELL: "This whole plan smells fishy to me."
TASTE: "This leaves an awful taste in my mouth."

People who hear you matching their preferred Sensory Modes are more likely to trust you and to listen to what you say. They think of you as someone who speaks their language and shares their perceptions. This is the easiest of all the Gentle Art techniques, and one that you can put to use immediately.

Under normal circumstances, people can switch from one Sensory Mode to another without any difficulty. But when they're under stress they tend to get locked in to their preferred Mode. The more upset they are, the more trouble they will have understanding communication in other Sensory Modes, and the more trouble they will have using other Sensory Modes to express themselves. In such situations, you will improve communication dramatically if you match the Sensory Mode the other person is using.

You'll have no trouble identifying the Sensory Mode coming at you. Any fluent speaker of English does that automatically. You can then tailor your own responses for maximum efficiency and effectiveness by following two simple rules:

RULE ONE: Match the Sensory Mode coming at you.

RULE TWO: If you can't follow rule one, use no sensory mode language at all.

For example: asked "How does the new paint job look?", use Rule One and say "The way I see it, it's beautifully done"; or use Rule Two and say "I think it's beautifully done." Rule Two doesn't give you the same advantages as Rule One, but it's a neutral alternative.

Second Technique - Using the Satir Modes

Dr. Virginia Satir was a world-famous family therapist. As she worked with clients, she noticed that the language behavior of people under stress tends to fall into one of the following five categories, which we call the Satir Modes.

Blaming:

"WHY don't you ever think about anybody ELSE's feelings? DON'T you have ANY consideration for other people at ALL?"

Placating:

"Oh, YOU know how I am! Shoot - whatever YOU want to do is okay with ME!"

Computing:

"There is undoubtedly a good reason for this delay. No sensible person would be upset."

Distracting:

"WHAT IS THE MATTER with you, ANYway? Not that I care! YOU know me - I can put up with ANYthing! However, common sense would indicate that the original agreement should be followed. And I am really FED UP with this garbage!!"

Leveling:

"I like you. But I don't like your methods."

Each of the Satir Modes has a characteristic style of body language. Blamers shake their fists or their index fingers; they scowl and frown and loom over people. Placaters cling and fidget and lean on others. Computers are stiff and rigid, moving as little as possible. Distractors cycle through the other Modes with their bodies just as they do with their words. The body language of Levelers is distinguished by the absence of these other patterns, and by the fact that it's not in conflict with their words.

The first four Satir Modes are examples of the lack of a personal syntonic state. People use Blamer Mode because they are insecure and afraid that nobody will respect or obey them. People use Placater Mode - saying that they don't care - because they care so very much. They use Computer Mode - saying "I have no emotions" - because they are aware of an emotion they actually feel and are unwilling to let it show. Distracter Mode cycles through all of these states of mismatch and expresses panic. Only with Leveler Mode (or with Computer Mode used deliberately for strategic reasons) do you have a syntonic state. To the extent that they are capable of accurately judging their own feelings, people using Leveler Mode use words and body language that match those feelings.

As with the Sensory Modes, people can ordinarily switch from one Satir Mode to the other, but they tend to become locked in to preferred Satir Modes in situations of tension and stress. The rules for using the Satir Modes are based on the same meta-principle as those for using the Sensory Modes: ANYTHING YOU FEED WILL GROW. All language interactions are feedback loops. When you match a language pattern coming at you, you feed it and it escalates. The difference between the two techniques is that it's always a good thing to match another person's Sensory Mode - because increasing the level of trust and rapport is always a good thing - but you should only match a Satir Mode if you want the behavior it produces to grow. Here are the results you can expect from feeding the Satir Modes:

BLAMING AT A BLAMER causes fights and scenes.

PLACATING AT A PLACATER causes undignified delay.

COMPUTING AT A COMPUTER causes dignified delay.

DISTRACTING AT A DISTRACTER is panic feeding panic.

LEVELING AT A LEVELER means an exchange of the simple truth, going both ways.

In any language interaction, once you've recognized the Satir Mode coming at you, you have to choose your response. You make your choice based on the situation, on what you know about the other person, and on your own communication goals. Here are the two rules you need:

RULE ONE: If you don't know what to do, use Computer Mode.

RULE TWO: If it would be desirable for the Satir Mode coming at you to escalate, match that mode.

Third Technique: Recognizing and Responding to the Verbal Attack Patterns of English

Many people don't realize that they are verbal victims because the verbal abuse they're subjected to isn't openly abusive. Most verbal abusers don't just spit out curses and insults. (That sort of behavior is usually part of a pattern of physical abuse.) Instead, they rely heavily on the set of verbal attack patterns (VAPs) that are part of the grammar of English verbal violence. These patterns are just as dangerous as shouted obscenities, but much more subtle.

The attack patterns discussed below have two parts. There is the BAIT, which the attacker expects you to respond to. It's easy to recognize, because it's the part that hurts. And then there is the attack that matters, which is usually hidden away in the form of one or more presuppositions. Here's an example:

"If you REALLY loved me, YOU wouldn't waste MONEY the way you do!"

The bait is the part about wasting money; it's what your attacker expects you to respond to. You're expected to take the bait and say, "What do you MEAN, I waste money! I DO NOT!" And then you're off to a flaming row, with is a poor way to handle the situation. The important part of the attack is not the bait, but the presupposition at the beginning - "YOU DON'T REALLY LOVE ME." Instead of taking the bait, respond directly to that presupposed attack. Say:

"When did you start thinking that I don't really love you?"

-or-

"Of course I love you!"

This is not what the attacker expects, and it will short-circuit the confrontation.

Here are some other examples of English VAPs.

"If you REALLY wanted me to get good grades, YOU'D buy me a compUTer like all the OTHER kids have got!"

"A person who REALLY cared about his health wouldn't WANT to smoke!"

"DON'T you even CARE if the neighbors are all LAUGHING AT US?"

"Even a woman YOUR age should be able to cook LUNCH!"

"Everybody underSTANDS why you're so TOUCHY, dear!"

"WHY don't you ever LISTEN to me when I talk to you?"

"YOU'RE not the ONLY person with PROBLEms, you know!"

"You could at LEAST get to WORK on time!"

"EVEN if you DO forget my birthday, I'LL still love you!"

It's important to realize that what makes these examples attacks is not the words they contain. For English, more than half of the information is not in the words but in the body language, including the intonation of the voice. To recognize a verbal attack, you have to pay attention to the intonation - the melody of the voice - that goes with the words. Any time you hear a lot of extra stresses and emphasis on words or parts of words, you should be on the alert. THERE IS NO MORE IMPORTANT CUE TO RECOGNIZING VERBAL ATTACKS THAN ABNORMAL STRESS PATTERNS. The sentence, "Why do you eat so much junk food?" may be very rude and unkind, but it's not a verbal attack. The attack that goes with those words sounds like this: "WHY do you eat SO MUCH JUNK food?"

In dealing with verbal attack patterns, you have three rules to follow:

RULE ONE: Ignore the bait.
RULE TWO: Respond directly to a presupposition.
RULE THREE: No matter what else you do, say something that transmits this message: "You're wasting your time trying that with me. I won't play that game."

Nobody can carry on a verbal attack alone. It takes two people - one to be the attacker, and one to be the victim. People who use verbal abuse do so because they want the fight or the scene - they want your attention - and they enjoy the havoc they create. When you take the bait in their attacks and go along with their plans, you're not showing them how strong and assertive you are, you are giving them exactly what they want. The more you do that, the worse the situation will get.

EVERY TIME YOU TAKE THE BAIT IN A VERBAL ATTACK, YOU ARE PARTICIPATING IN A SELF-REINFORCING FEEDBACK LOOP.

Instead of doing that, use this third technique and break out of the loop. That's not "letting them get away with it." Letting them sucker you into an ugly row, giving them your attention on demand, playing verbal victim for them: That is letting them get away with it.

It's not true that victims of verbal abuse are helpless to protect themselves or that their only defense is to be even more abusive than the attacker. It's not true that verbal abusers can't change their language behavior, or that doing so will mean sacrificing their self-respect. The Gentle Art system is a practical method for tackling the problems of everyone involved in verbal abuse - attackers, victims, and innocent bystanders - with no loss of face or sacrifice of principle. Pollution in the language environment is just as dangerous to health and well-being as pollution in the physical environment; the Gentle Art system is a solution that everyone can put to immediate and effective use.

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For more techniques in the Gentle Art system (and detailed discussion of those introduced above), see any of the materials in the series. For additional information, write directly to Dr. Elgin at the Ozark Center for Language Studies, P.O. Box 1137, Huntsville, AR 72740.