

## ● Understanding Aggressive Communication

by Andrew S. Rancer, Ph.D.

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If you review your interactions with the people you encounter from day to day, you will probably recall instances in which your communication was marked by disagreement. In these interactions you and your adversary may have viewed the world in quite different ways. In some of these conflicts, you may have been engaged in an “argument” that you found stimulating, exciting, exhilarating, and possibly even fun. You may recall the excitement you felt upon successfully convincing someone that your position on an issue was the stronger one. These feelings of excitement, interest, and enjoyment may have led you to believe that arguing is a very positive activity.

On the other hand, you may recall instances in which these arguments were anything but enjoyable. That is, the argument led to feelings of anger, hurt, confusion, or embarrassment and may have even led to the termination of the relationship. Perhaps you can recall an example of an argument that became so destructive that it quickly turned into name-calling and may have even ended with the participants exhibiting physical aggression. These situations may have led you to conclude that arguing is a destructive and unsatisfying form of communication that should be avoided at all costs, even if it means suppressing your true feelings and yielding to another person’s wishes. Those of us who research and study human communication behavior are perplexed by the seeming unfavorable attitudes that many people hold regarding the term *arguing*, because our discipline has advanced, since antiquity, that arguing is a constructive, important, and necessary form of communication.

As part of a conflict-management curriculum, we advocate the inclusion of a component on arguing constructively, which includes improving individuals’ attitudes about and skill in argumentative communication.<sup>1</sup> This component makes use of an extensive body of research in the area of “aggressive communication predispositions.” Research and theory-building in the area of aggressive communication was initiated and developed by Professor Dominic A. Infante, Professor Emeritus at Kent State University; myself; and Professor Charles J. Wigley III, of Canisius College.

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**Aggressive Communication and Predispositions**

Those of us who research and study human communication behavior have come to understand aggressive communication as distinguished by a few specific behaviors. Aggressive communication involves one person applying force to another, typically with a high level of arousal. Participants engaged in aggressive communication are usually more active than passive, and they often adopt “attack” and “defend” modes of thinking and action. These types of behavior are essential for successfully resolving a conflict, though they can be used destructively as well as constructively.

Aggressive communication is most often controlled by four predispositions that interact with environmental factors to influence an individual’s approach to conflict resolution. These four predispositions are classified as either constructive or destructive.

**Constructive Predispositions** Assertiveness and argumentativeness are viewed as constructive predispositions. Assertiveness includes characteristics of personal dominance, firmness, forcefulness, and the use of assertive behavior to achieve personal goals. Argumentativeness involves the use of reasoning to defend personal positions on controversial issues while attacking the positions of adversaries.<sup>2</sup> Argumentativeness can be understood as a subset of assertiveness; all argument is assertive, but not all assertiveness involves argument (e.g., a request). The communication discipline advocates the development of these two constructive traits in individuals. Time after time, research has shown that individuals who approach conflict from an argumentative stance are seen as more credible, eloquent, creative, and self-assured and are more likely to be viewed as leaders.

**Destructive Predispositions** Hostility and verbal aggressiveness are viewed as destructive predispositions. Hostility is characterized by the expression of negativity, resentment, and suspicion. Verbal aggressiveness is an assault on the self-concept, rather than the position, of an adversary. Individuals typically engage in verbal aggression in order to inflict psychological pain, such as humiliation, embarrassment, and other negative feelings about the self.<sup>3</sup> Compared with argumentative individuals, those who are verbally aggressive are seen as less credible, tend to suffer more strained relations with others, and resort to physical aggression and interpersonal violence more often.

Aggressive Communication Predispositions	
Constructive	Destructive
Assertiveness	Hostility
Argumentativeness	Verbal aggressiveness

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#### **Causes of Verbal Aggressiveness**

Research has suggested a number of factors that may lead to a predisposition for verbal aggressiveness. One of the factors is repressed hostility. Individuals who were emotionally scarred by verbal aggression and hostility at a young age tend to demonstrate similar behaviors later in life. Because they were too young or lacked the power to reciprocate, they suppressed the hostility and have come to verbally aggress against those who remind them of the original source of hurt.

Social learning is also responsible for much verbal aggression. We learn to be verbally aggressive from various environmental forces, including our culture, our social group, our family, our friends, and the mass media. People reared in an environment of verbal aggression are more likely to exhibit this type of communication behavior.

Disdain is another common cause of verbal aggression. If we severely dislike someone, we are more likely to verbally aggress against him or her. While we generally try to ignore those we disdain, unavoidable (or even intentional) confrontations with them can rouse the ugliest verbal aggression in us.

Finally, many people resort to verbal aggression in order to compensate for a deficiency in argumentative skills. During conflict episodes, these individuals quickly use up their weak arguments only to find that their position is still not accepted. Because they find themselves in the “attack” and “defend” modes, they feel forced to use verbal aggression as a last resort.

#### **Types of Verbal Aggression**

A taxonomy of verbally aggressive messages includes character and competence attacks, disconfirmation, physical appearance attacks, racial epithets, teasing, ridicule, threats, cursing, negative comparisons, and nonverbal aggression (e.g., rolling the eyes, gritting the teeth, looks of disdain, “flipping the bird”). All of these types of aggression are considered attacks on an adversary’s self-concept and contribute little to nothing to the resolution of conflict. Often, in fact, they escalate the conflict, sometimes to the point of physical violence.

#### **Reducing Verbal Aggression and Enhancing Argumentativeness**

If we wish to resolve conflicts harmoniously and constructively, we must strive for a more argumentative and less verbally aggressive approach to conflict management. Extensive research on aggressive communication techniques and behaviors has led communication researchers to a set of recommendations that we believe can facilitate conflict resolution. These recommendations emphasize

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preventing verbal aggression from occurring, developing ways to reduce the effects of verbal aggression when it does occur, and providing some skills that can be used in effective argumentation. D.A. Infante, in “Teaching Students to Understand and Control Verbal Aggression,”<sup>4</sup> offers seven recommendations, shown in the chart below.

#### Conflict Management Techniques

**Avoid** Instruct students to avoid interacting with individuals who are known to be verbally aggressive. We should teach students how to detect behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) that indicate verbal aggressiveness.

**Be Polite** If students are placed in situations in which conflict is apparent, they should allow their adversary to speak without interruption, try to use a calm delivery, use empathy (the ability to feel what another is feeling), allow the opponent to “save face” (stop short of humiliating the individual), and reaffirm the adversary’s sense of competence.

**Define the Argument** Make sure that adversaries understand exactly what they are arguing about. One person may be arguing about one thing while the other is arguing about something else. In order for the argument to be resolved, both parties must agree on the proposition they are arguing.

**Recognize Shifts from Constructive to Destructive** Help students detect when a proposition has changed from an argumentative one into a verbally aggressive one (e.g., “We were arguing about who should wash the dishes, but you changed it to how selfish I am. Which one do you want to argue?”).

**Argue, Don’t Aggress** Teach students that verbally aggressive messages can be turned around and treated as “arguments.” This allows students to use several strategies that are essentially argumentative and therefore constructive in nature. A verbally aggressive message is usually based on emotion, illogical claims and warrants, and insupportable data. It is usually easy to refute verbal aggression (e.g., “You say I don’t know anything about football. That’s not true, and this is why.”). The student can attack the reasoning or evidence of the supposed argument and refute the adversary’s claim.<sup>5</sup>

**Be Aware** Make students aware of situations and behaviors that are likely to stimulate verbal aggression, such as personal rejection, “hitting below the belt,” non-negotiation, and “gunnysacking” (storing up grievances and unloading them all at once). Once a student is aware of these situations and behaviors, he or she can try to avoid them.

**Know When to Stop** Teach students that if the verbal aggression continues, they can simply stop communication (e.g., “If you don’t stop calling me stupid, I’m going home.”).

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#### **Conclusion**

Our research suggests that verbal aggression is a destructive form of communication, while arguing is constructive. We believe that improving individuals' argumentative skills can be employed as a strategy to prevent verbal aggression and to assist in productive conflict management.

In order to accomplish this, students must learn the differences between these two forms of aggressive communication, and they must also learn key behaviors associated with arguing constructively. This brief review has attempted to introduce both.