

Balanced Living – July 2021

Positive Ways to Accept Criticism

Do you hate being criticized even when you know you've made a mistake? If so, it's no wonder—criticism can make people feel incompetent, angry, and just plain awful.

How do you, personally, respond to criticism? Do you make excuses or lash back with criticism? "This fight-or-flight response is natural and common, but it isn't very productive. It cuts off communication, often just when it's needed most," says Jean Lebedun, Ph.D., author of the video program *The Art of Criticism: Giving and Taking*.

Many supervisors don't give criticism in a tactful manner. Nevertheless, you should accept criticism so you can learn from your mistakes. But don't fret; it'll be easier when you use Dr. Lebedun's "4-A Formula: Anticipate, Ask questions, Agree with something, and Analyze."



Ask Questions

Many times, people who criticize are letting off steam and may be exaggerating the problem. This is especially true when the criticism contains the words "always" and "never." Therefore, it's important to pinpoint the criticism by asking questions like these: "What part of the report didn't you like?" "What aspect of my attitude makes life at work difficult for you?" "Could you give me an example?"

Asking questions accomplishes two things: It gives you specific information on how you can improve, and it teaches people they'll have to be specific when they criticize you.

Agree with Something

When faced with criticism, most people focus on the part of the negative feedback that may not be true and ignore the rest. This doesn't solve any problems, and you don't learn anything.

When you agree with one part of the criticism, you become open to learning. An easy way to agree is to say something like this: "You might be right; my report doesn't have all the details."

"You don't have to agree with everything; even agreeing with one small aspect of the criticism will create an atmosphere of teamwork," says Dr. Lebedun. "The focus then can become how you'll work together to solve a problem, which will lessen your feeling of being attacked."

Analyze

Finally, take a break and evaluate what you've heard.

You need time to process the information, determine if it's a valid criticism, and decide what you'll do to solve the problem or correct the mistake. If this is a complaint you've heard repeatedly, you should think about what you can learn from the situation so it doesn't happen again.

The benefits of the 4-A Formula are that you'll look for solutions rather than excuses and you'll be in control of your emotions, Dr. Lebedun says. "You'll also appear more professional."

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Seek Success, But Skip the Stress

As if being a single mother of two weren't enough, Krista Kurth was a high-powered consultant at a major accounting firm who was taking night classes toward a degree in organizational development. But when her body shut down with chronic fatigue syndrome, she realized that no motor could keep running without a pit stop.

Her two-year quest to recover taught her a lesson. The formula for success, she learned, must include mental and physical rest.

Millions of Americans have yet to grasp that fact. They believe that longer hours at work, combined with less recreation and relaxation, will lead them up the corporate ladder. The truth is that unchecked stress hinders more than it helps.

"People have the sense that they're important and successful if they're busy," says Dr. Kurth (yes, she went on to earn that Ph.D.) She also co-authored *Running on Plenty: Renewal Strategies for Individuals*, which offers advice on staying energized despite work demands.

Machines can run around the clock. But Dr. Kurth and co-author Suzanne Adele Schmidt, Ph.D., emphasize that people are living organisms who must stop and refuel to work properly. By not taking brief, hourly breaks, they say, you could take up to five times longer to complete tasks and grow more likely to make mistakes.

Research backs them up. In one study, 69 percent of people who reported feeling highly stressed on the job said the stress made them less productive, workplace stress expert Charles Spielberger, Ph.D., wrote in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*. About half of those stressed-out people said they had suffered burnout, job-related medical problems or both

A State of Alert



Overwhelming paperwork, deadlines, meetings, phone calls and e-mails cause your brain to order the production of hormones that put your body in a state of alert. Whether you know it or not, your body pools its resources to deal with the threat causing the stress. Your muscles tense, you breathe harder and your heart beats faster.

If this keeps up too long, your body cracks under the pressure. The result? Headaches, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, short tempers, upset stomachs and lower morale. All are early warning signs of job stress, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Some studies suggest this stress can lead to heart disease, depression, anxiety, muscle pain, cancer, ulcers, a weakened immune system and even suicide.

"It's a big problem and it's growing," says Dr. Spielberger, director of the University of South Florida's Center for Research and Behavioral Medicine and Health Psychology. "The world continues to change faster and faster, which puts more pressure on people to try to keep up."

Companies face more foreign competition. Downsizing increases workloads. Some employees feel less secure in jobs. New technologies were meant to make jobs easier. But cell phones, e-mail, pagers, the Internet, mobile

handheld devices and laptops have instead increased the pace. "We're expected to be available all the time," Dr. Kurth says. "People are expected to give an immediate answer."

Setting boundaries and learning how to take "productivity pauses," she says, will help you get more done, stay healthy and keep a positive attitude. These hourly mini-breaks can be as simple as taking three deep breaths or doing simple stretches. Gently roll your shoulders backward, move your head from side to side, elevate your arms to shoulder height and rotate at the waist.

Left Brain Break

Dr. Kurth suggests you take a break from using the left side of your brain, the half that handles job-related tasks like analysis and communication. You can do this by immersing yourself in acts that tap the right brain's creative power. For example, you can take a brief mental vacation by closing your eyes and thinking about your favorite place. "Use all your senses." If you like tropical resorts, "imagine what the sand feels like and what the ocean smells like," she says. "Do it for a few minutes and you come back feeling refreshed."

A great way to make breaks part of your day is to find a "renewal buddy" who will encourage you while benefiting from your support. If you're a supervisor, you can create an office environment that allows for "play," such as throwing Frisbees or knitting.

The worst stress is having a difficult boss who may be too critical or doesn't provide enough support, Dr. Spielberg says. Changing your boss's management style isn't usually possible.

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