

THE DANCE OF DEFLECTION

Tension is expected during conflicts of interest. But, when you are caught off guard by a verbal snipe, wounds can cut especially deep. Rude remarks may come from misguided efforts to enhance self-esteem by making others look bad, cries for attention, generalized anger that is spewed at the nearest recipient, or impossible demands for perfection and control. Attempts to understand others and requests for change may do little to squelch a sniper's fire. When dealing with these potshots, it is necessary to take communication to a place where few people have traveled before—to learn a verbal aikido that can neutralize the worst insult. Instead of responding to a verbal attack with an anticipated retaliation, defense, or withdrawal, a technique called bully busting gives you at least 16 ways to turn insults inside out.

TURN KILLER WORDS INTO KINDNESS WITH PUT-UPS

Change put-downs into put-ups and act as if nothing offensive is happening. This is based on the idea that it is worse to take offense than to give offense. Cruelty can be turned into kindness when you:

1. Agree in fact, in theory, or hypothetically to stop power struggles.
2. Give compliments to make it difficult for someone to continue being rude.
3. Act as if you've been complimented: "Thank you. What a sweet thing to say."
4. Find golden nuggets or some actual truth in the worst insult: "Thanks for trying so hard to help me. I know I could (possibly) be more . . ."
5. Dramatize the very insult that has been given: "Am I really a baby (whining)?"
6. Use a mean tone to say something harmless with a tone twister that releases frustration and adds confusion: "Your opinion is none of my business!"
7. Use reverse psychology to encourage people to change their course: "That was quite a put-down. Let's see what you can do with the zit on my nose or the scab on my ankle."

ELICIT THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF INTIMIDATION

Intimidators need to be encouraged to focus their attention inward instead of blaming or ridiculing. This is essential when cutting remarks are an expression of anger. You can help people discover the source of their distress when you make statements or ask questions that:

8. Label feelings to recognize troubling emotions and help the other person let them go.
9. Sympathize to kill insults with understanding: "You must have had a hard day to be so upset."
10. Focus on the process (of what someone is doing) and away from the content of the remark: "I wonder why you would want to make me feel bad?" "How disappointed are you in me?"
11. Express your own feelings and limits when a comment hurts too much to deflect: "Now I feel thoroughly rotten. I'll talk to you later when you can be a tad kinder."

GROUND INSULTS WITH LIGHTNING RODS OR "POWER WORDS"

In moments of confusion, people can be redirected to change negative habits. You can apply confusion and subtle suggestion to promote desirable behavior by using hypnotic wording:

12. "Try" blocks people from continuing what they are doing—"You're trying so hard to be upsetting. I hope it isn't too tiring."

13. “Dare” pushes people to do something they are reluctant to do: “I just dare you to say something pleasant!”
14. “But” erases everything that proceeds it. It is especially effective when followed by an unexpected compliment: “Well I may be . . . , but you look great!”
15. Unrelated comments (non sequiturs) help people disconnect from troubling remarks and add confusion: “When the carcass is ripe, you can pick it (crazy tone).”
16. Humor shows that little importance should be placed on cruel comments by using the absurd, silly, and ridiculous.

Examples of the above methods are generic one-liners that can defuse any insult. Memorize them! Specific responses below show how to have fun with the worst remarks:

Remark	Bully Bust Responses	Technique #
• You’re such a b_____!	You say that like it’s a bad thing.	(3, 16)
• You’re becoming quite the big girl!	Well you’re not becoming quite the big boy. You must be one of the new weight monitors we hired.	(2, 6) (16)
• I wouldn’t be caught dead with you in a bathing suit like that!	You’ll have to look good enough for the both of us. You’re right, this suit doesn’t quite do my figure justice.	(2) (1, 3)
• I can’t believe you missed that parking space!	I wonder if you really just need time to yourself. I know. My tunnel vision never ceases to amaze me.	(10) (1)
• You can just go to H_____!	Does that mean I have to do time-out in the parking lot? You can just go to Disney World! We have been having a bit of a cold spell lately.	(16) (6) (3, 16)
• You’re just trying to show off your cleavage.	Oh, heavens no—I charge \$2 for cleavage peeks. You sound thoroughly disgusted with me.	(5) (8)
• That therapist isn’t helping you a bit!	Could you try just a little harder to discourage me? It must be hard for you to feel so hopeless about me.	(7, 12) (9)

WHY BOTHER?

Defusing abuse exercises your mind and is more fun than simply ignoring nasty comments. Children are often advised to pay no mind to bullies. Such tactics can leave scars on bitten tongues. Standing up for yourself by making requests of people with whom you are not in a relationship can inspire them to do the opposite. Even family members and your closest buddies may not have the energy to resolve conflicts when they are feeling grumpy. Bully busts add considerable variety to your repertoire of verbal skills. It may be necessary to lighten the mood before you can have your needs met. Any comment that takes tension out of the air is sure to be a bully bust. Blaming, sarcasm, complaining, advice, and orders perpetuate a vicious cycle. With bully busts, you can bring random acts of kindness into the very cradle of cruelty.