**HOW TO RESPOND TO AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Research supervisors need to know how to respond appropriately in response to aggressive behavior for two main reasons. First, supervisors may sometimes need to communicate unpleasant information to research candidates. They might, for example, deliver unfavorable feedback or even indicate they do not believe the candidate will be able to complete the thesis. Although unlikely, candidates may occasionally respond aggressively in these circumstances. Second, while conducting their research, candidates might be targets of aggressive behavior. Their research, for example, could stoke hostility in specific individuals or communities.

Consequently, supervisors should learn how they should respond when candidates, or other individuals, become aggressive. They should also be able to impart this knowledge to their research candidates, when applicable. This document is designed to help supervisors achieve these goals.

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| **When is behavior considered aggressive?** |

When is behavior considered aggressive? Short answer: Depends. Slightly longer answer: Not always obvious.

We know that aggression can be verbal—such as insults or threats—behavioral—such as throwing objects, breaching personal space, or pounding desks—or emotional, such as angry stares. Yet, whether these acts are deemed as aggressive or reasonable varies across cultures and circumstances.

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| **How to respond to aggressive behavior** |

In short, supervisors cannot always ascertain whether some behavior should be designated as aggressive or not. Consequently, they should learn to initiate responses that are suitable regardless of whether the behavior is aggressive or not. The following table outlines some of these behaviors.

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| Responses | Description |
| **Your manner** |  |
| Calm voice | You should speak in a tone that is calm, caring, and gentle. This tone might seem odd in the circumstance. But remember, despite the aggression, the person is possibly feeling uncertain and upset |
| A firm voice | Despite this gentle tone, you should speak firmly and confidently. For example, do not speak too rapidly. |
| Calm mannerisms | If possible, your mannerisms should be calm as well. To avoid fidgeting or abrupt movements, briefly monitor your behavior occasionally |
| Avoid defensive mannerisms | Avoid a defensive body language, such as folded arms or pointing. If possible, do not stand directly in front of the person—but afford this person with some space. When people feel their space is crammed, they often become more hostile. |
| Match their eye level | Sit if they sit. Stand if they stand. Otherwise, the person may feel threatened or will dismiss your perspective. |
| Moderate eye contact | In general, maintain some eye contact but shift your gaze away occasionally—so you do not stare intently. Furthermore, if the person seems uncomfortable with eye contact, gaze away more frequently |
| **Listen to their concerns** |  |
| Prompt explanation | When asking questions, prompt these individuals to describe the sequence of events that transpired or why they feel upset. These questions can diminish the intensity of unpleasant feelings. |
| Listen | Listen genuinely to the concerns of this person, even if some of the comments seem exaggerated. Refrain from interrupting too often. Instead, grant these individuals time to respond. |
| Abstain from challenging | While the person is feeling angry, abstain from challenging the person. For instance, if possible, do not argue at this time. Do not denigrate the person or even the behavior in this moment. Do not restrict their movements either, unless defending yourself. At this moment, they are not inclined to question their own perspectives. |
| Perspective-taking | Imagine how you would feel in their circumstance |
| Abstain from judging | If possible, refrain from agreeing or disagreeing with their comments. Instead, indicate that you understand their perspective—such as “I can understand what you are saying”. |
| Comply occasionally | Comply with requests that you feel are reasonable. You want to confer the person some sense of control, but obviously without compromising your standards |
| **Offering advice** |  |
| Describe how you might feel or act in this setting | Rather than tell someone how to behave, indicate how you tend to act in comparable circumstances. You might say “I know when I was angry last time, I decided that I should…” |
| Impartial observer | Ask the person to consider the issue from an impartial observer. What would someone else, observing the conversation, believe and express (see Ayduk & Kross, 2010)? |
| Valued member | Indicate you feel the person is really liked and valued—a feeling that tends to diminish aggression (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002) |
| **Prioritize safety** |  |
| Response to fright | If you experience a sense of danger or fright, seek assistance as soon as possible. You might calmly say “I think Frank could be more helpful. Let me contact him”. |
| Appraise your surroundings | Appraise whether exits are nearby and whether hazards pervade the environment |

Nevertheless, in the midst of a challenging circumstance, supervisors cannot remember all these principles. Instead

* Skim these principles
* Identify the principles you feel are important but not natural to you.
* For each of the principles that are not as natural to you, repeat to yourself, several times, something like “Whenever a candidate is aggressive, I will speak in a tone that is calm, caring, and gentle”. Imagine these circumstances as vividly as possible. As research shows, when supervisors apply this approach, called implementation intentions, they tend to apply these principles effortlessly.

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| **Conversations after acts of aggression** |

Once the anger subsides—perhaps an hour, day, or week later—you might need to revisit the issue and prevent future outbursts. The following table presents some principles you should follow during these conversations.

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| Responses | Description |
| Values | Prompt these individuals to write about their most important values—and how they plan to achieve these values. This exercise tends to prevent aggression |
| Discuss the significance of their work | After an aggressive exchange, supervisors may feel resentment towards their candidates. Consequently, they might not feel tempted to praise or support this candidate. However, supervisors should highlight the importance and significance of the work the candidate is conducting. When candidates feel their work is significant to the future, aggression tends to dissipate (McGregor, Lieberman, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, 2006). |
| Highlight similarities | Occasionally chat to your candidates about their interests and hobbies. Whenever appropriate, highlight similarities between you and your candidate—especially similarities that are not shared with many other people. An awareness of these similarities tends to foster positive attitudes towards one another (Konrath, Bushman, Campbell, 2006) |
| Overcome uncertainty | Ask the candidates whether they ever feel uncertain about their studies or future. Attempt to resolve some of these uncertainties. Feelings of uncertainty often culminate in aggression. |
| Reflections | Indicate that you feel that both you and the candidate how the conflict could have been avoided. |

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| **Complaints** |

If a candidate breaches the CDU code of conduct—such as the respectful and polite conversation, you may need to pursue some action. Email [complaints@cdu.edu.au](mailto:complaints@cdu.edu.au) for advice.

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| **Interesting scientific discoveries about aggression** |

The following table presents a series of surprising and important scientific findings about aggression. Perhaps skim this information.

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| Interesting findings |
| After individuals are exposed to words that relate to hot temperatures, they subsequently tend to become more hostile (DeWall & Bushman, 2009). |
| If men feel ashamed of their body or masculinity, they are more likely to act aggressively towards women (Mescher & Rudman, 2014) |
| After a fight, if people imagine how they might feel in the future about this conflict, they forgive more readily. |

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