

## **The Stress Doc's "Six Strategic 'F's for Mastering Loss and Change":**

- 1) Familiar. Grapple with the anxiety, rage, hopelessness or sadness in letting go of the familiar role or predictable past. The big question: Who am I? Remember, sometimes your former niche of success now has you mostly stuck in the ditch of excess. There's a critical crossroad ahead,
- 2) Future. Clearly the horizon appears cloudy and threatening, lacking direction and clarity. Just because your past or traditional roles and responsibilities may be receding doesn't mean you can't transfer your experience and skills into new challenging arenas,
- 3) Face. Some loss of self-esteem and self-worth is all too common, especially when our life puzzle has been broken up other than by one's own hand. Shame, humiliation, guilt, diminished confidence are frequent early traveling partners on a profound transitional journey,
- 4) Focus. If you can honestly grapple and grieve the first three "F"s, then you are engaged in a productive brooding, if not magical incubation, process. At minimum, you will affirm, "I may not like the cards that have been dealt, but how do I make the best of my reality right now." And you'll likely start hatching a new perspective with, if not crystal clear targets, then an intuitive, crystal ball enlightenment. Suddenly this Stress Doc mantra starts resonating: "I don't know where I'm going...I just think I know how to get there!,"
- 5) Feedback. Now you can share new insights or plans with others. Getting input will help sort out the wheat from the chaff. Or, some TLC (what I call, "tender loving criticism" and "tough loving care") may challenge you to expand or simplify the complexity of the problem engaged. In times of rapid or daunting change, trustworthy feedback helps us remember who we are; that our basic, core self remains intact despite being shaken by unsettling forces.
- 6) Faith. Having the courage to grapple with these "F"s now yields a strength to understand what in your present life rests in your control and what lies beyond. Going through this process means strengthening the emotional muscles necessary for dealing with uncertain and unpredictable twists and turns on life's journey.

Some will call on a transcendent source of faith: a higher power, whether a religious or spiritual force or the group synergy of a team, family or some communal entity. (For example, 12-step groups provide both sources -- turning over one's helplessness to God and, one day at a time, being supported in new beliefs and behaviors by the higher power of collective consciousness and group sharing.)

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## **Managing a Critical Aggressor: Case Example I**

By Mark Gorkin, MSW, LICSW, the "Stress Doc"™

Let's try a mind exercise. You've just given a presentation at an important meeting. As the meeting concludes you turn to a colleague (a casual acquaintance) and ask, "How did the presentation go?" And in a decidedly judgmental and unfriendly tone this colleague declares, "Frankly, you fumbled the data. Obviously, you didn't prepare very well!"

Imagine being the presenter. How would you feel receiving such critical feedback? And what would you say or do in return? (And let's assume that punching this guy in the nose is not a good intervention strategy.) Actually, this is the scenario I pose to attendees of my "Managing Anger and Difficult People" Program. (Also subtitled, "When Going Postal Is Not an Option." And as a former stress and violence prevention consultant for the US Postal Service I feel entitled to my attitude.)

Let me begin this analysis by illustrating **three common emotional and behavioral reactions to this “critical aggressor” exercise:**

**1. Feeling Rejected or Exposed.** If this instance applies, you likely feel hurt and put down by the antagonist’s harsh words. Or you are surprised by the stinging critique; you believed your presentation had been at least satisfactory. Now you may feel exposed. Feelings of guilt (“I could have tried harder or done better”) or shame (“this criticism confirms my inadequacy or worthlessness”) may dominate. Now the only means available to counter the criticism is with hastily conceived self-justifying explanations or face-saving rationalizations.

**2. Feeling Attacked and Becoming Aggressive.** In this scenario you quickly feel defensive and reactive. You might think, “How dare this jerk be so hostile?” Or you might say, “How the hell do you know how I prepared? And what makes you such a hot shot expert (you bozo)!” And while immediately counterattacking and feeling entitled (“an eye for an eye, an ego for an ego”) your reactivity may well indicate wounded pride.

**3. Feeling Fearful or Humiliated and Withdrawing.** Whether lowering your eyes in defeat or turning pale in a state of shock, you now feel intimidated and helpless. Incredulous at the brazen verbal harassment, some sensitive individuals or folks with underdeveloped assertive muscles, become immobilized. A target’s suppressed rage may also add to a sense of impotence. Now you likely sit passively or withdraw ignominiously from the battlefield. (Of course, a tactical withdrawal may be a productive and purposeful step. But more on this shortly.)

### **Positive Limit-Setting Strategic Interventions**

Having delineated three defensive reactions, it’s time to describe a constructive and strategic approach to setting limits on a harsh aggressor. Consider these basic assumptions, attitudes and actions:

**1. Understanding the Difference Between Reaction and Response.** The aforementioned feelings, thoughts and behaviors are defensive reactions. (And “defensive” in this sense does not mean healthfully self-protective.) A target quickly feels attacked and psychically wounded; he or she is being verbally mistreated or abused by the aggressor. And whether lashing out in anger or feeling humiliated and quickly retreating, the “victim” is in reactive mode: “You’ve hurt me” or “You made me upset” or “It’s your fault” or “You caused me to strike back.”

However, there’s a strategic alternative: you can experience and process your feelings and thoughts before behaving in a knee-“jerk” manner. You can acknowledge feelings of pain, shame and anger, and then get centered. You can begin to place this person’s behavior in context: is the critic’s assessment objective (even if his manner of delivery is woefully subjective) or does he have an agenda? Or, might she be jealous?

By processing your thoughts and feelings and by assessing or, at least, questioning the aggressor’s behavior patterns and situational constraints you are now ready to transform a reaction into an assertive and effective “response.”

**2. Metacommunicate.** Here’s my conflict management axiom in dealing with a critical aggressor: before justifying or explaining your behavior comment upon or confront – whether tactfully or directly – the aggressor’s harassing tone and/or content. Using our mind exercise as an example, you might say: “I’m open to feedback, but I don’t appreciate being attacked.” Or, such global and unspecific comments are not useful and, frankly, I find them hostile. Can you be more specific and be professional?

Along with staying centered and non-reactive, you are setting appropriate boundaries. You’ve returned the harsh critic’s verbal hand grenade (as opposed to freezing up or to hurling it back in an enraged or vengeful state).

**3. Use Assertive “I” Messages.** Underlying this tactfully assertive approach to defusing hostility is the recognition that assertive “I” messages, unlike blaming “You” messages, don’t add static to communication channels. “You made me” or “It’s your fault” transfers all the power to the aggressor. In

reality, one-sided blaming often rationalizes an immature reaction or counterattack. In contrast, a constructive “I” message acknowledges your experience as a target: “That hurts” or “I’m angry right now.” Such a message also states what you don’t like or what you do prefer: “I don’t appreciate being attacked and I don’t listen well. I can hear and consider more specific feedback.” “I” messages help reaffirm your integrity while establishing healthy boundaries. So abstain from those reactive “You”s or risk becoming a “blameaholic.”

**4. Take a Time Out.** Finally, if the aggressor’s initial barrage leaves you stunned or speechless, you don’t have to stay in the ring desperately trying to summon up a counterpunch. Basically you can state, “I won’t be a party to this kind of verbal barrage (or “harassment” if encounter is more hostile than just heated). Or, if feeling centered, you can declare: “I need a time out before responding.” You also can say, “I believe we need a time for us to have a professional discussion.”

Remember, it’s okay if you don’t have a perfect comeback to an aggressor’s spewing. Take time to think about and sleep on the problem and a response...Then you’ll nail the jerk tomorrow! Just kidding. ;-)  
Seriously, taking a time out is not a sign of weakness. Basically it is a strategic retreat to help you cleanse a wound, get centered and to formulate an “I” response. Hitting the pause button affirms your integrity while setting limits and boundaries on a charged exchange.

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