

The assertive person can accept and learn from criticism. It may at times be painful but it is necessary for any self improvement. People who are predominantly passive very often do not hear, or benefit from, constructive criticism. Rather, their reaction is to readily agree with the criticism – ‘Yes you’re right, I’m hopeless’ – and then emotionally drown in a sea of self-reproach. People who are locked into an aggressive communication style are also often impervious to criticism as they tend to see it as a personal attack. Their reaction is ‘how dare you’, and their response is to fight and defend themselves to prove that they are winners. They do not actually listen or learn from the criticism at all.

How we react to criticism is largely based on our early experience as children. If as a child we experienced criticism as a hurtful rejection we may find it hard to take as adults. If as a child criticism was carried out lovingly it will be easier to accept. Perhaps as a child the person did not experience any criticism at all and therefore as an adult finds it devastating.

It is very important to differentiate between a person’s behaviour being criticised, and the person as a whole being criticised. So for example, if we are told, ‘You are stupid’ – that is negative labelling of the whole person and tends to be experienced as rejecting. However, if we are told ‘that was a stupid thing to do’ – that is a comment on our behaviour, and implies that we have the power to change that behaviour. There is a big difference.

## ■ Coping with Constructive Criticism

### ① Accept the criticism

The simplest response to realistic criticism is to accept it without expressing any guilt or other negative emotions. We all have faults, make mistakes. If we can accept this reality we can learn from it. So the response to, ‘you are always so untidy’, might be, ‘Yes, I am sometimes untidy, and I’m trying to be tidier’. Do not be afraid to say, ‘sorry, I made a mistake’.

### ② Ask for information

This also involves accepting the criticism, if we feel that it is soundly based, but also actually asking for clarification from the person who is criticising us to try and pin down the precise

nature of the criticism. So, the response to, ‘You made a mess of that’, might be, ‘Yes, what was it that was particularly bad?’

## ■ Coping with destructive criticism

① **Disagree with the criticism:** This involves a straight forward, calm assertive disagreement, ‘No, I’m not always late’.

② **Ask for information:** This involves asking for more information from your critic to expose whether the criticism is constructive or destructive. If the criticism is constructive the information from the critic will be useful and your relationship will be enriched. If it is destructive the criticiser might be put on the spot. For example, ‘In what way do you think that I am hopeless?’

③ **Fogging:** This skill helps us deal with destructive criticism and put downs designed to make us feel bad. It involves agreeing with anything which is obviously true in the criticism but neither agreeing nor disagreeing with other aspects of the criticism. If, for example, somebody describes you as being dreadfully lazy and untidy, your response might be ‘Yes you’re probably right, I am sometimes untidy’. By using fogging you merely aim to stop the manipulative criticism, by refusing to reward the put-down. Your attacker wants you to feel bad, and if he or she does not get the sought response eg, a fight, but gets smothered in the ‘fog’, it is not rewarding and they are less likely try again.

## ■ Giving Constructive Criticism

① Choose the right time and place.

② Stay calm and speak slowly.

③ Focus on a specific behaviour, avoid sweeping generalisations and other items from the past and avoid undermining the person.

④ Acknowledge the positive first. Sandwich a negative comment in between two positive comments.

⑤ Do not use labels, stereotypes or insults.