

CALMING UPSET PEOPLE WITH EAR



the missing peace

By Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

An EAR Statement™ shows Empathy, Attention, and Respect. This is especially helpful when you are dealing with someone who is really upset – possibly they are angry with you or someone else or they are sad, feeling helpless, or frightened.

EAR Statements touch people where they need to be touched when they are extremely emotional. These are especially effective with people who have high-conflict personalities because they are often terribly afraid or terribly angry. They can help you connect with such a person, so that you can then shift to problem-solving.

What's An EAR Statement?

Essentially, an EAR Statement includes words and body language that show empathy, attention and/or respect for the listener. Ideally, these are done in-person or over the phone, but they can be put in writing as well. Here's an example. Let's pretend you're talking to Cathy, who could be a family member, a friend, a co-worker, a client, or a customer:

"I can see how frustrated you are by this situation, Cathy, and I want to help. Let's talk about it so that I can really understand what's happening. I have a lot of respect for the efforts you have made to deal with this problem."

Let's break this down:

Empathy

"I can see how frustrated you are by this situation, Cathy, and I want to help." This shows that you are connecting with the feeling that the person might be having, and also that you want to help. This shows empathy: caring and support, which high-conflict people especially are looking for. With high-conflict people, you need to go beyond reflective listening (repeating back the essence of what you heard) and give them something of yourself, such as your interest in helping them. You want to create a sense of "us" working together on a problem, rather than seeming to dispassionately distance yourself from the other person.

Attention

"Let's talk about it, so that I can really understand what's happening." By indicating that you are willing to pay attention to them and the problem, most people immediately calm down because they don't need to persuade you to pay attention. This may be the opposite of what you feel like doing, but the more interested you are, the less amount of

time this usually takes. Of course, this is where your body language comes in. You need to look interested, perhaps leaning in, nodding your head slightly while you listen, keeping good eye contact and having relaxed (rather than tense or angry) arms and body. When we do this in our training for High Conflict Institute, the feedback we get is that the listener's full attention is felt more because of their body language and tone of voice, than by the actual words they say.

Respect

"I have a lot of respect for the efforts you have made to deal with this problem." For a lot of people, this is what they really want: to be respected as a person and to be taken seriously when they have a problem. Whether you are a customer service representative, a friend or a stranger in a tough situation with an upset person, communicating your respect is often the key to moving forward to solve the problem. This can be really powerful if the person is upset with you, such as with high-conflict people who often attack those closest to them.

Any of these Three

A good EAR Statement doesn't even need to communicate all three of these. Just empathy is enough sometimes. Just paying attention often calms people down. Sometimes just giving a statement that shows respect is sufficient. Mostly, try one or more of these three types of statements (Empathy, Attention and/or Respect) and see how it comes across. From our experience, 90 percent of people calm down within 30 seconds of hearing an EAR Statement. Of course, this often takes some practice, but for many people, it works right away.

Some Words of Caution

Of course, this doesn't work for everyone. Some people just want to stay angry and others are so overwhelmed it takes them several minutes of empathetic statements, concentrated listening and lots of respect to calm down. You can move on to using other methods if this one doesn't work.

EAR Statements also don't mean that you believe the person or agree with them. Some high-conflict people won't let go until you say you believe them or agree with them. Don't say that unless you really do. Otherwise, you will forever be held accountable for once saying you believed them or agreed with them. And they will tell the world that you are on their side, when this may be totally untrue. So, just say something like this: "I wasn't there, so I'll never know what exactly happened. What I do know is that I want to help you, so let's see what we can do now."

If you are in a dangerous situation, such as domestic violence or workplace bullying or sexual harassment, it may be best for you to just walk away and not even try an EAR Statement. Just get away! Safety first!

Conclusion

From parenting, to coaching, to leadership, using a simple EAR Statement can usually calm an upset person enough to talk about solving a problem or help an upset person feel better. You

can use it when setting limits on misbehavior or a difficult conversation. You may have to use these statements more than once in a difficult conversation, but they can become quick and easy. They make your life easier. We have had success with EAR Statements for over a dozen years in several different countries and cultures. It's a very human way of connecting.

An EAR Statement™ can be very brief and doesn't cost you anything. It can help you connect with almost anyone. It's even helpful when delivering bad news, such as a parent, a manager or a judge. You can use one in a business meeting, while managing a difficult relative, or when ending a relationship. It can be used to keep situations from escalating in the workplace or in the neighborhood. If more people would regularly use EAR Statements—even in response to hostility—it might just make the world a better place for all of us.

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq. is a lawyer, therapist, mediator, and the co-founder and Chief Innovation Officer of the High Conflict Institute, a training and consulting company focused on helping professionals and individuals learn better ways of handling high conflict disputes. For more, www.HighConflictInstitute.com.