



Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

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Interpersonal effectiveness skills cover two topics here. The first is “assertiveness”, which is all about asking for what you want and refusing what you don’t want, effectively. The second topic is “defusing emotional explosions”, which is the skill of managing the self-serving manipulations of the people in your life, family, friends, or co-workers.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is all about asking for what you need/want, or saying no to refuse what you don’t want. Often people’s eyes roll back in their heads when I mention assertiveness. “As if I need assertiveness; I’m very assertive”, she says aggressively. Ok, just demanding what you want or refusing what you don’t want is not necessarily being assertive, particularly if you are not effective, and particularly if you are merely being aggressive or a bully. It’s not about being right it is about being effective.

Much of the following information comes from the skills manual developed by Dr Marsha Linehan (Linehan, 1993a). There is no other way to put this, but I have pinched her ideas on assertiveness, only because I have found that they are the best ideas I have come across. Apart from that, Dr Linehan herself admits to pinching the ideas from someone else for the same reason.

Linehan (1993a) presents two parts to assertiveness. One is the level of intensity (firmness) at which you pitch your request or refusal. The other part is how you pitch your request or make your refusal.

Level of intensity involves three points that require immediate attention...

1. The *objective*, this is what you want or what you don’t want
2. The *relationship* that you have with the person who has what you want or who you don’t want to give-in to
3. Your *self-respect* is how you feel about yourself in relation to getting or refusing or not getting or giving in

Assertiveness requires a good sense of proportion and occasion. For example is having something, or refusing to do something, more important than the relationship that you have with the person to whom you are making the request or refusing something? In simpler terms, is the objective greater than the relationship? If I get what I want or refuse what the other person wants, how will the other person feel about me? Also, how will I feel about myself if I get what I want or refuse what the other person wants? Can I get what I want, or refuse to do what is wanted, maintain the relationship, and feel good about myself all at once? These points make the first factor to consider when setting your level of intensity.

Level of intensity has nothing to do with the level of your voice or how emotionally intense you might be at the time. It is all about how firm you are in asking or refusing. Linehan (1993a) suggests seven levels of intensity.

Levels of Intensity

Level	For Asking	For Refusing
6	Firm, insist, don't take no	Firm refusal, don't give in
5	Firm, resist no	Firm refusal, resist giving in
4	Firm, take no	Firm refusal, but consider
3	Tentative, take no	Express unwillingness
2	Hint openly, take no	Express unwillingness but say yes
1	Indirect hint, take no	Express hesitation, but say yes
0	Don't ask, don't hint	Do whatever other person asks

One of the most common mistakes that I come across with assertiveness, or at least the lack of it, is that people who want to be nice start at a low level of intensity. They hint then hint, then hint, it never happens, and then pow, they explode to 12. Of course the other common error is starting at 12. As you can see the highest level of intensity in the table above is six. 12

is a joke. But do you get the point? Clearly 12 is either an emotional explosion or it is down right aggression or bullying.

Being assertive is not about being nice nor is it about being nasty. It is about being effective. In other words it is about giving yourself the best chance to keep off The Button (triggering the flight or fight response) as much as possible in interpersonal situations.

Now let's do some mental experiments on the topic of "level of intensity".

Scenario 1:

You're the boss and you know that one of your employees is short-changing your customers. In this case you are the boss and your relationship with the person is defined under the Industrial Relations Act. You can go in at the top level of intensity without fear of anything. You would not, for example, hint to this employee that she should give the correct change to the customers. You would be very firm and not take no for an answer. As a matter of fact you could even follow up with a letter or notification.

In the example here the level of intensity would be six.

Scenario 2:

Your teenage child is not keeping up his end of the bargain with doing his chores in relation to receiving his weekly allowance. You have noticed a decline in the tidiness of his room and the lawns are getting shabby. It's the weekend and you see the ideal window of opportunity for him to mow the lawn and tidy his room. He on the other hand wants his pocket money and he wants to play footy with his mates. You know that if you are firm with him, he does tend to comply. So you can be firm in your requests and you can resist no.

In scenario two you would use five as your level of intensity.

In these two scenarios the relationship is well defined and the requests are both within the responsibilities of the person making the request. Every employer has the right to operate within the industrial laws and the right to expect that employees will act honestly in their work. Likewise parents are responsible for guiding their children toward becoming reliable and responsible adults. There is no need to get on your button (get stressed) when you are taking this type of proactive approach to potential stressors of an interpersonal nature.

Linehan (1993a) suggest 10 factors to consider when you are choosing your level of intensity. These 10 examples cover the situation where you are asking for what you want, or refusing to do something that is asked of you.

1. Priority: If the objective is very important then go for a firm level of intensity. Go for a more tentative level, or hinting level of intensity, if the relationship is tenuous or at risk. If your self-respect is on the line because if you give in you would compromise your values then consider a firm level of intensity; or if not giving in would compromise how you feel about yourself, then consider a more tentative level of intensity.

2. Capacity: Is the person able to do what I'm asking or give me what I want? If so, be firm in your asking. Or if you haven't got what the person wants then refuse firmly.
3. Timeliness: Have I got my timing right? Is this the right time to ask, if it is then be firm about it. Or if this is a bad time to say no, then hold off firmly.
4. Homework: Do I know what I'm talking about? Have I done the research and got the facts, if you have then you can be firm. Or if someone is requesting something from me, is it clear what he/she is asking of me, if not then firmly say no.
5. Authority: Am I the person who should be asking this of the person? If yes then ask firmly. Or does the person making a request have the authority to ask? If no then you can refuse or say no firmly.
6. Rights: By making the request am I infringing on the person's rights? If no then consider a firm level of asking. Or if I refuse the request am I infringing on anybody's rights? If no, then consider a firm no.
7. Relationship: Is my request appropriate to my relationship with the person I want something from, if yes you can be firm about asking. Or is what the other person wants appropriate to your relationship, if no be firm in refusing?
8. Reciprocity: What have I done for the person I'm asking something of? Is it always me doing the asking, if no then be firm in asking? Or do I owe the person a favour? Does this person who is asking me for something do all the giving, if not then be firm with refusing.
9. Long versus short-term: Will being submissive now, by either not asking for what I want or by giving in, get peace in the short-term but leave me feeling resentful in the end? If yes then be firm now about asking or refusing.
10. Respect: Is this something that I can just do for my self, or can I just simply do what is asked of me? If no, then you can be firm in either asking or refusing.

These 10 factors to consider, when setting your level of intensity for asking or refusing, are intended to get you to choose the highest level from the outset. In other words, if the objective is very important, you are certain about your relationship with the other person, and your request or refusal does not compromise your values, with all other factors being equal, you can be quite firm from the beginning. There is no need to beat around the bush.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest mistakes that people make is to pitch their request at a hinting or tentative level, it never happens, then POW they're on their button and suffering. In other words, not being effectively assertive will cause stress (suffering) in you.

This approach to assertiveness requires practise. Then it requires practise. Then it requires one more thing. This would be practise. Don't just read this material and say "oh yeah, that's easy". You need to do it.

I ask my clients to memorise the seven levels of intensity. I give them the handout that contains the seven levels of intensity and the ten factors to consider. I say "next week I'll ask you to recite the seven levels of intensity." Sometimes the client says "really?" I say "yes, really."

The beauty of the levels of intensity is that it draws your attention to being firm about what you want or what you want to say no to. Most people are scared of this idea of firmness until they see the levels of intensity. It's no longer a black or white affair. It is no longer all or nothing. There are degrees of freedom in the idea of firmness.

Now we can look at how to ask or refuse. Here Linehan (1993a) has provided the acronym DEAR MAN.

DEAR MAN

- Ψ Describe what you want, the facts, paint the picture. Make sure that you make clear what you want or what you are refusing.
- Ψ Express what you want with clarity without confusion. Do not assume that what you want or don't want is obvious. Say what you want or don't want. Don't pussyfoot around with euphemisms.
- Ψ Assert what you want without assuming that the other person knows what it is. The other person is not a mind-reader. The other person will not figure it out unless you are clear.
- Ψ Reinforce the rewards for the other person in advance or make them aware of the consequences. Tell the other person how he/she will benefit by you getting what you are asking for, or make it clear what the consequence will be if you give in on something you don't want to give in on.
- Ψ Mindfully keep to the point, do not be distracted or diverted, be a broken record, ignore attacks that are intended to get you off your point. Keep going back over the describing, expressing, asserting, and reinforcing, and stay on track. Do not be diverted off by attacks. Often other people will use attacks to get you off your point. When you are dealing with the attack, you are off your point.
- Ψ Appear confident even if you are not, look straight at the person, don't fidget or fumble. The other person will not know that you are not confident. The other person is not a mind reader.
- Ψ Negotiate last, give to get; you can always come down in your level of intensity. Don't give anything away until all "the cards are out on the table", as it were. Turn the tables if necessary. For example, "what do you think we should do?" "You seem to want me to give in on this, you know I can't do that, what do you think we should do?" Quite often emotions can run hot during negotiations. By getting the other person to think rationally, you are helping him/her to cool down.

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I give the client the DEAR MAN handout. I say to the client "next week I'll ask you to recite the DEAR MAN in full." Again the client might say "really!?" I say "yes, really."

The beauty in the DEAR MAN acronym is that it provides you with an easy way to structure how you're going to go about putting your request or making your refusal. A normally unassertive person or uncertain person can rely on the structure. It's easy to remember DEAR MAN. It is easy to remember what each letter means. It only takes a few rehearsals to get it down pat. It's easier to appear confident when you have a structure to work with that makes sense.

Sometimes clients surprise me from time to time. I once had a client who was having a lot of trouble with her husband. She could never get him to do things with her. I had met them together and he seemed reasonable and plausible enough. He didn't seem like a nasty person. Yet she had this difficulty getting him to do things. So I did a session on assertiveness with her. At first she was resisting. When I first mention "assertiveness" her eyes rolled back in head. "Assertiveness, I teach assertiveness to my clients as part of their training program" she said to me.

We got to the "mindfully" part of the DEAR MAN. I talked about sticking to her point, whatever it might be at the time. I got to the bit where I say "don't be distracted from your point by dealing with negative attacks from the person you want something from. Ignore the attacks". She said to me "has my husband done this training with you? This is how he gets me off the track every time. He starts throwing in negative comments and subtle abuse. I get off the track every time because I end up defending myself from his attacks." She stared at me for a moment then said "that's how

he does it." When the session was over and she left my office, I got the feeling that things were going to change around her place.

Defusing Emotional Explosions

Emotionally unstable people are prone to emotional explosions every now and then. Being in the presence of someone who is prone to doing this can become stressful. Being the target of an emotional explosion is a stressor. For example, you might have a partner who has borderline traits, or you might be the parent of a teenager. If so, you have a stressor in your life. There is no way around this fact.

You will find various books on the subject of borderline personality disorder. They have titles such *Sometimes I act crazy* (Kreisman & Straus, 2004), *I hate you don't leave me* (Kreisman & Straus, 1989), *Stop Walking on Eggshells: when someone you care for suffers borderline personality disorder* (Mason & Kreger, 1998), and *Cognitive-behavioural treatment of borderline personality disorder* (Linehan, 1993b).

The first two books by Kreisman and Straus are written from a medical perspective, by medical practitioners. From that point of view these books might make an interesting read but they don't seem to have much practical value for dealing with this psychological problem. The last two books by Mason and Kreger, and Linehan are very useful for understanding emotional instability. Mason and Kreger give you a good understanding of the problem, what to expect, and how to survive when you are with someone with borderline traits. Linehan's book is a text for clinical psychologists and from this point of view I found it very useful. Linehan provides a very deep understanding of emotional instability and how it functions.

In the book *Stop walking on eggshells* (Mason & Kreger, 1998, pp.111-138) there is some very good advice about how to defuse an emotional explosion. This is not to say that everyone who explodes emotionally in front of you is a borderline, or has a borderline personality disorder. Sometimes some people explode out of utter frustration. Or the exploding person might be a teenager who is testing boundaries or who is still to learn self-regulation. It is best not to simplify other people's problems to a category. The label of "borderline" does not explain anything about the person exploding in front of you.

I am describing the behaviour and what to do about it. It doesn't matter really why the person is exploding. You still need to deal with the fact of it happening. It's just that if it is a common pattern in someone then the behaviour of emotional instability is probably part of his or her personality. If this is the case then your responses are going to be crucial in whether or not you suffer, and continue to suffer in the end.

Just as a point of accuracy, the term "disorder" is misused quite a bit. I would like to clarify the use of the term. If you have an emotionally unstable person in your life, you might just say that, the person is emotionally unstable. You might say that the person has "borderline traits" if you feel that there are other diagnostic factors present. For this reason I commend the book *Stop walking on eggshells* (Mason & Kreger, 1998) for the details it gives you on this subject. Then, and only when the person attracts the attention of the police, Mental Health Acute Care Services, doctors, ambulance services, etc, would you use the term "disorder". In any case, it's best not to apply the label. It is best to describe the behaviour.

In order to be effective in defusing an emotional explosion it is vital to understand what you are dealing with. The first observation is that someone who explodes emotionally, as a regular pattern of behaviour, is probably suffering internal stressors. Where the emotional exploding is a pattern of behaviour for a person, then the stressors are ingrained in that person's personality. Such a person's personality was developed over a lifetime from early childhood. So asking the exploding person to "just grow up" or "snap out of it" is not a workable strategy. Also, the emotionally exploding person most likely has only denial and blame as strategies for dealing with his or her

internal stressors. What is more, this is not your business to tell them this unless you want to make your life even more difficult for yourself.

Linehan (1993a, 1993b) theorises that emotional instability develops out of two factors, which she puts together as her biosocial theory. These are an "invalidating upbringing" and "emotional sensitivity". In this context Linehan is saying that the emotional sensitivity is the biological component. In other words it's in the person's personality from a biological point of view. It's not necessarily inherited. It is a variable like being short or tall, fat or thin, blond or brown hair, etc. An emotionally sensitive person is not necessarily going to develop into an emotionally unstable person if he/she is raised in a validating environment, the social context.

An emotionally sensitive person in the right environment can learn self-regulation. A validating environment for an emotionally sensitive child is one where the social interactions match the inner experience of the child. For example, the child might say "I hurt myself". A validating parent would say "Oh dear, let me have a look". An invalidating parent would say "don't be such a cry-baby."

An emotionally unstable person is thinking emotionally, not rationally. Linehan (1993b) describes their thinking as "hot" and "reactive". These people have an emotional lability or emotional vulnerability. Linehan (1993a, p.2) describes emotional vulnerability as "(1) very high sensitivity to emotional stimuli, (2) very intense response to emotional stimuli, and (3) a slow return to emotional baseline once emotional arousal has occurred".

When something goes wrong for an emotionally unstable person, he/she is over reactive and over sensitive. Such a person might have a range of internal stressors that could be labelled "abandonment", "failure", "defectiveness", "entitlement", etc. As an observer you might not necessarily be aware of the triggers for the stressors. You might not even fully understand the triggers or the stressors. In *Stop walking on eggshells* there are many interesting vignettes that describe emotionally unstable behaviour. For example...

The wife says to her husband in an angry and emotional way, "take the kids and just get out here for a couple of hours to leave me alone. I can't stand it the way you and the children close in on me." He says "ok". He loads the kids into the car to take them off to the park for the afternoon. He is backing out of the driveway when his wife comes screaming after them "that's right. Just leave me here on my own." When he gets back after a couple of hours it was like nothing had happened.

Another example...

The husband phones his wife to say that he'll be home late this evening because he and his colleagues are finishing off a job for a big client. They will present the work to the client and have a couple of drinks after, and then he will come home. When he gets home he finds his wife is very emotionally upset. She is crying and very angry. She accuses him of being an alcoholic and of having an affair.

When an emotionally unstable person is in full flight, you might be surprised at how quickly his/her mood change. You might be surprised at the self-destructive extent the person is prepared to take it. You might also be surprised at the way in which the emotional explosions and blackmail escalates. You might be absolutely floored by the angry and hurtful things that are said to you and the extent of emotional blackmail that is used against you. For example, "If you come home late one more time you might just find me dangling from the end of a rope".

To look after yourself in the face of an emotionally explosive person there are a number of do's and don'ts.

Things to do...

- Ψ You do need to set boundaries. In order to do this you need to know how far you are prepared to go. What are your limits? At what point must you just walk away? But don't be fooled by the walking away strategy. You can only use it once. But if you stay and you

set boundaries, you do need to be firm and consistent. If you waver or show any sign of weakening, or inconsistency, then you're gone.

- Ψ Keep track of the triggers. If you know what will set off an explosion, then don't do it. You will have to balance this against the first point of setting boundaries. If for example you know that you will be home late one night, don't just spring it on your emotionally unstable partner. Tell him/her about it weeks in advance and keep reminding him/her. At the same time you don't want to be tip-toeing around and not living your life.
- Ψ You need to sort out your own vulnerabilities. People who are emotionally unstable have grown up in an invalidating environment. The invalidating environment most probably had some element of danger whether it was physical or emotional. As a result, an emotionally unstable person usually has a good eye for changing moods in other people. As a result your emotionally unstable partner is probably able to read your vulnerabilities. It is not as if an emotionally exploding person **might** use your vulnerabilities against you; most definitely he/she **will** use your vulnerabilities against you.
- Ψ You will be blamed for the most horrendous deeds by an emotionally explosive partner. You could begin to doubt yourself. You can always get feedback from other people who you know that you can trust.
- Ψ Do the poker face: When in the presence of an emotionally exploding person, the poker face is a good defuser. A negative emotional response from you will most likely escalate the emotional explosion. The emotionally exploding person will be reading you for signs of weakness. Or you can take-on a look of interest. Watch the exploding person's body language and facial expression. If the exploding person is going red in the face, in your mind try to match the colour up with something near by. Look curious and interested.
- Ψ You cannot control what the exploding person is thinking and the reasons for the explosion even if you do think you understand. Take responsibility for your thoughts and actions.

Here is a list of don'ts (Mason & Kreger, 1998, p.135)...

- Ψ Don't Defend: Trying to prove to an emotionally exploding person that you haven't done anything wrong can leave you feeling foolish, childish and guilty, even if you haven't made a mistake.
- Ψ Don't Deny: You may use denial because you really haven't done anything wrong, or you certainly are not responsible for whatever it is you are accused of. But repeated denials can also make you feel like a child ("Did not!" "Did too", etc).
- Ψ Don't Counterattack: You might strike back at an emotionally exploding person to try to win an argument or vent your feelings, but when you do this you are probably falling for the trap to label you as the bad guy. You win the game in this situation by not playing.
- Ψ Don't Withdraw: When you've defended, denied, and counterattacked and they haven't worked, it is common practise to withdraw either by clamming up, leaving physically, or tuning out. Of course if you are in physical danger, then you must leave. But the danger is in you remaining passive and silent while your sense of personal power and self-esteem deteriorates.

There is a skilful strategy that gives you the best chance for defusing an emotional explosion. I often use the analogy of the "bomb squad" here when explaining this skill to my clients. I often remind my client that sometimes the bomb squad do get blown up in spite of their skills. So don't throw out the skills just because you don't succeed every time. Nevertheless the bomb squad do their training. They know which wire to cut. "Is it the red one or the white one? I don't know. Quick it's about to blow any second now." Well maybe this is more like the bomb squad in the movies. But you get the idea. It's your level of skill that will make the difference.

The defusing skill must have two elements. The first is the point of validating the emotionally exploding person's point of view. The second point is to firmly put your view forward. The following is an example of a husband with an emotionally exploding wife who wants him to stay home rather than work late...

He validates: "I can see that you're very upset. It is clear to me that you don't want me to stay at work for drinks with my colleagues."

Then...

His requirement: "But you know what is required of me in this job. You know that I am able to earn this level of income because of the sacrifices I have to make by working after hours sometimes."

The emotionally exploding person is likely to escalate this argument by saying something like "well quit. Ring them up and quit. I didn't ask you to make these sacrifices. I want you home with me."

He validates: "I know you want me home with you. I know you don't want me to do this job."

Then...

His requirement: "But I do have a sense of responsibility toward my boss. He does pay me well and I do like the work. I cannot just phone him up a quit. That would not be the responsible thing to do. I would not be able to do that."

The emotionally explosive person might escalate the manipulation further and say "you don't love me. You never have loved me. All you care about is your bloody job. Why don't you just pack your bags and go and live with your boss?"

He validates: "I know that you're not happy about me working late and you seem to think that I'm abandoning you."

Then...

His requirement: "I will be home late tonight. It's only for tonight. Have you forgotten that we have a special night this Saturday?"

You might think that this hard work. Well what choice do you have? You have the choice of abandoning the relationship or you have the choice of skilfully defusing the emotional explosions. Here is another example...

A client arrived at my office. He looked emotionally drained. He said that he had just about had it. His wife was far too demanding and that she had taken it too far this time. He explained that she is ill. She is bedridden. He was about to leave the house for his appointment with me. She announced that she needs a prescription filled "now". She expected him to go to the chemist straight away. He knows that it can wait until he gets back in an hour and a half. He told her that he didn't have time now and that he will do it when he gets back. She exploded.

In this instance the wife has a "particularly nasty tongue". She wants it "now" and if he won't do it now, then she will throw everything she has at him, verbally. She calls him "everything under the sun". She says that he's lazy, selfish, uncaring, an idiot, lame, you name the insult she has it for him.

Why doesn't he just leave her? Good question. There might be a reason for him to stay other than his stated reason. He says that he's been close to leaving many times. He said that he's probably packed his bags 30 times so far. He says that he's already chalked up three failed marriages and that he doesn't want to fail again. Apart from that he feels obliged to stay and to look after her and her two children. If this is the case, and he is committing himself to stay, then he needs to develop skills for defusing emotional explosions. By now he has to realise that his wife's emotional explosions are part of her personality. They will go on either forever or until she herself develops some insight into her own suffering and gets help for herself. This is what he needs to do NOW...

He validates: "I can see that you want me to get your medication now."

Then...

His requirement: "But I have an appointment in 15 minutes. I can get your medication when I get back in one and a half hours."

She says: "You're a lazy good for nothing selfish bastard. I want you to go and get my medication now. Can't you see that I'm ill?"

He validates: "Yes I can see that you're ill. I can see that you want me to get the medication now."

Then...

His requirement: "I will be back in one and a half hours and I will get it then."

She says: "I hate you. You're always thinking about yourself. You have no concern for me at all. It's all you, isn't it? It's always all about you."

He validates: "I know that you want me to get it now. I can see that you are not able to do for yourself."

Then...

His requirement: "I can also see that it's not urgent for you to have it now. I will be back in an hour and a half. I'll get for you then." (Even tone, no rising of the voice)

In this example, you can see the requirement for repetition in the validation and in setting the boundaries. This woman has pushed this man to his limits in the past and now she is confident that she knows how to get her way. He says that after a bout of abuse from her, she apologises and admits to being demanding. These apologies are not good enough because the behaviour keeps on keeping on.

The one thing that has paid off for the emotionally exploding woman in this example is that her husband has paid far too much attention to her verbal abuse toward him. He took all the insults personally. This is perhaps because he believes these things she says about him are true. Perhaps he has an internal stressor. In terms of Jeffery Young's schemas, perhaps this man believes that he is defective in some way and that his wife is on the verge of exposing him to the world, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. The fact of the matter is that when she is hurling the abuse it is all about getting him to do her bidding. Therefore the abuse has nothing to do with him at all. Only he can't see that at the time. He does, however, need to ignore the abuse and to see it as her feeble strategy to get him motivated to do her bidding.

By ignoring the abuse in this context, two things happen. One is that it helps to defuse by not fuelling the explosion. In other words, do not DEFEND, DENY, or COUNTERATTACK. Secondly, it does not create a diversion away from his point. He needs to get on with going to his appointment; he doesn't need to hang around denying her self-serving accusations, defending himself, or attacking her.

The validation of the exploding person's point of view is crucial to defusing the explosion. It may also be the most difficult part to understand from the point of view the person who is the target of the explosion. "Why should I validate her, that's just agreeing with her isn't it?" Or, "Why should I give an inch? She's just plain out of order."

To "validate" means to authenticate, confirm, endorse. It does not necessarily mean to "agree with". If I can see that you are angry at me, I might not agree with it, but I can validate you by saying, "I see that you are angry at me". The validation is merely stating the obvious fact. It is not a denial, it is not a defence, nor is it a counterattack. If someone is angry at you and you validate him by saying, "I can see that you are angry at me", you are likely to see his head nod, "yes, I am angry at you." You can see that you have validated someone by his/her head nodding.

Validating an emotionally exploding person is a strategic skill. An emotionally exploding person is in pure emotional-thought. This is a hot mind. If you do something that forces the exploding person into reasoning, then you will help him/her change into a cool mind. Chances are the exploding person is looking for a way to resolve his/her frustration. On one level the exploding person knows that he has "lost it" and that he may not get what he wants, but he also knows that he knows no other way. The emotionally exploding person needs to find a dignified way out of the mess that he has just created for himself. By validating him or her you are providing the way out, the dignified escape.

Here is another brief example...

You validate: "I can see that you are very angry at me."

Exploding person says: "Too right I am."

Your requirement: "You seem to want me to agree with you on this point, you know I can't do that, so what do you think we can do about it?"

To defuse an emotional explosion you will need the skill like the bomb squad. Even so you might get blown up in any case, but this is no reason to throw out the skills. The skill is something that you will need to practise. Have I mentioned before that there are three things that you need to do to develop a skill, (1) is practise, (2) is practise, and (3) is.... Yes, you're right, it's practise.

WARNING

For very serious psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, specific phobias, addiction, conduct disorder, or personality disorders, I strongly recommend that you seek out a local psychologist to tackle those problems in face-to-face consultations. For serious psychiatric disorders such as psychosis or bi-polar or schizophrenia you will need to consult with a psychiatrist face-to-face about suitable medication.