Aikido Communication

Caregiving can result in differences of opinions and strong emotions. Misunderstandings can occur with family members, friends, and health care providers. The Aikido communication style uses principles from the Aikido School of Martial Arts by moving or aligning yourself with the other person’s energy, and NOT arguing. This means listening for areas of agreement or common ground regardless of how small they might be. By focusing on areas of common ground or agreement you’ll move the conversation forward positively. Sometimes the common ground is to agree to disagree, which is ok. “I” messages are used in the Aikido communication style and are particularly effective when emotions run high and when “you” messages are directed toward you, the caregiver.

As a caregiver, “you” (blaming) messages can be hard to hear. Your initial reaction may be to argue, become defensive, or withdraw from the situation; however, none of these actions will solve a problem. The Aikido style of communication can help neutralize any “attack” and redirect the conversation by bringing communication back to focus on the issue and problem resolution. At the same time, Aikido involves recognizing the other person’s needs and perspective. By doing this you help the other person feel as though he/she has been heard. When a person is heard they feel validated and are more likely to work with you on finding a solution or common ground to the problem or concern.

Aikido focuses on building harmony through (1) Maintaining your won peace and not giving in to emotions, (2) Helping the other person become calm and remain so and (3) finding common ground or areas of agreement including agreeing to disagree.

4 Steps to Aikido Communication

The Aikido style has four steps:

Step 1: Align
Step 2: Agree
Step 3: Redirect
Step 4: Resolve

Step 1: Align

Aligning with someone means that you move with that person’s energy. This requires putting yourself “in the other person’s shoes” and understanding the person’s viewpoint. Although not easy, it’s important to try to relax and stay calm and be in control of your emotions. Once you feel relaxed, ask yourself:

- How would I feel in this person’s position?
- What does this person need from me to feel better?
- Does this person need understanding, sympathy, praise, recognition, or control?

The following statements are examples of Aikido aligning.

“I don’t know exactly what you need. Give me an example of something I can do.”

“If I could do one thing to help you feel better, what would that be?”
In addition to putting yourself in the other person’s position, you align with the person in speaking style and mood. This does not mean matching anger with anger. You carefully reflect the serious nature of anger and sadness or other emotions with genuine seriousness.

**Step 2: Agree**

Identify issues and concerns where you have agreement. Find goals, needs and feelings that are similar with the person so you are able to find common ground.

“I share your concern about Dad not being left alone.”

“I agree we have to do something before he forgets something serious, like not remembering that he lives with us.” Or, “I share your concerns about____.”

**Step 3: Redirect**

Once you identify areas of shared concern, focus your discussion on those specific areas. The following statements are examples of redirecting your “common ground” toward resolution.

“We both want to do what is best for Dad. Now all we have to do is_____.”

“I agree we have a problem. What can we do to solve this it?”

**Step 4: Resolve**

Using “I” messages, (“I Messages: Strategies for Caregiver Conversations) try to resolve whatever issue or problem you agreed upon in Step 2: Agree. Settle that issue by finding agreed upon workable solutions and/or agree to disagree about it.

“I think we should explore if there is an agency or organization that has staff we can hire to come and be with Dad when no one can be with him."

“I feel a family meeting will be helpful in figuring out how to involve everyone so dad won’t be left alone.”

**Finding Common Ground Isn’t Always Easy**

In highly emotional situations the Aikido communication style brings balance by helping you listen and gain an understanding of the other person’s feelings and needs. Because you are staying calm and not arguing the conversation becomes balanced or neutralized so you can focus on the concern and possible solutions. Aikido is also useful in drawing out the person who feels uncomfortable or doesn’t want to express their thoughts and feelings.

For example, “I want to understand what is troubling you. I’d like to talk it over.” If you do not get a response, give the individual time to be alone. This may give them time to raise any concerns later.

**Using Aikido in an Older Adult Situation**

The following is an example of the use of Aikido in providing care to an older adult.

Kim is 72 years old and was recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Kim’s husband, Steve, is learning to manage his new caregiver role. Kim has tremors and physical movement is becoming increasingly difficult. Yet Kim gets angry with Steve when he tries to do everything for her.

**Kim:** “You always want to do everything for me. You know I can still manage to walk; it just takes me a little longer than normal. I wish you would just leave me alone!”

**Steve:** (Align: How would I feel in Kim’s shoes? What does Kim need from me?) "I’m sorry that I don’t take more consideration of your need for independence when it comes to moving around the house. I just want to take care of you."

**Kim:** “You don’t understand. I used to be the one who took care of you and everyone else, not the other way around!”

**Steve:** (Agree) “You’re right. I don’t understand what you have been through and how difficult it must be not to be independent. (Redirect) Realizing that your independence is important to both of us, what are some tasks that you would like help with? (Resolve) Let’s agree that I will provide assistance when you need my help and you will let me know when you are unable to do certain tasks.”

To learn more about family caregiving communication techniques and additional caregiving information go to: http://www.extension.org/family_caregiving.

**Reference**


To access the current edition of the Caregiver Helpbook and to learn more about the self-care education program, Powerful Tools for Caregivers, visit www.powerfultoolsforcaregivers.org