



## Tips for Teaching AIKIDO Communication

By Kathy Miller, Extension Family Living Educator, Bayfield County

One of the communication methods that is emphasized in the *Taking Care of You: Powerful Tools for Caregiving* curriculum is the Aikido style of communication. Aikido communication is particularly helpful when people find them-

selves in a very emotional situation, i.e., one that is filled with strong feelings and differences of opinion. Families involved in caregiving may sometimes find themselves in emotional situations where the words that are being said are blaming, hurtful, and difficult to accept. Aikido communication helps to “calm” the emotion, and move dialogue into a more positive direction, rather than having it result in fighting or bad feelings. It is based on the principles of the Aikido School of Marshal Arts which involves “aligning yourself with the other person’s energy”. In other words, it helps the other person to feel that their feeling or point of view is understood. When a person feels heard, or understood, they are more likely to work in a cooperative manner to solve problems.

I have found Chart #42, AIKIDO COMMUNICATION, to be very useful in guiding the discussion on this topic. I have also developed a separate visual that simply (and boldly) states the four words (or steps) of Aikido: **Align, Agree, Redirect, Resolve**. It helps to reinforce the key points. I use the extra visual to point to the words as they are demonstrated either by myself or by one of the class participants.

When speaking about **Align**, the concept of “placing yourself in the other person’s shoes” is especially helpful in understanding the meaning. I emphasize the question, “What does the person need or want from

me to feel better?” I ask participants to think of a time when they were involved in an emotionally charged communication. I then ask them to think carefully about each of the bulleted questions on Chart #42 under the *Align* heading. I repeat each question slowly asking them to think about how it relates to their own example. I then emphasize that in this first step, it is of utmost importance to **remain in control**. If time allows, talk a little bit about how to do that, i.e., count to ten, take a deep breath, or other suggestions that may be offered. I also emphasize that in this step, it is very, very important to **pay close attention** to the other person and practice good listening skills - even when it is difficult to hear the words that the individual is saying. The listener might need to say things like . . . .”Help me to understand. . . .”, or “If I could do one thing to help. . . .”. It is also important to have participants think about their **tone of voice** in this step. If they are “in control”, their tone of voice will reflect that! It is usually helpful to remind people that they are **not sacrificing their own needs, thoughts, or opinions** during this type of emotional interchange.

The **Agree** step is next. This involves looking for areas of agreement, no matter how small they might be. While listening carefully during the emotional exchange, try to identify what concerns, feelings and needs might be the same. The listener might need to say things like . . . .”I share your concern about. . . .”, or “If that happened to me. . . .”, or “If I were in your shoes, I might. . . .”. Take note of the “I” language used here, reminding the participants of that tool.

During the third step, **Redirect**, the individual is trying to move the conversation in a positive direction, in search of resolution or change. The Aikido response would be: “We both want to do what is best. Now all we have to do is. . . .” or “I believe we agree on. . . ., now how can we proceed?” Basically the conversation is being redirected to those areas of agreement or common ground that were identified in step two.

**Resolve** is the final step of Aikido communication. It generally results in one of three actions: finding a middle ground or compromise that both parties work on, or agreeing to disagree.

It is very important to also use “I” language at this stage. An example of a resolving statement might be: “I can learn from your experience. What would you do about. . . .?” The message conveyed here needs to be one that reflects the ability to work together or meet the other person halfway.

It is important to remind class participants that Aikido communication is not easy. Patiently aligning yourself with someone else can certainly be a challenge. It is however, well worth a try, as it has been shown to reduce conflict and create calmness and harmony during difficult times. I have found it very beneficial to give class participants whatever time they need to practice this skill. I have presented Aikido to other types of groups who sometimes face emotional communication. Aikido is a valuable communication tool beyond its use in caregiving relationships. If you have a teenager in the house, it provides a perfect opportunity for practice!

## Helpful Hints on DESC

by Betty Quinn, Psychotherapist,  
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Thank you, class leaders, for your continued feedback regarding the Powerful Tools curriculum. It seems the more we teach the class, the more comfortable we become with the material.

One tool people are challenged by is the DESC model of assertive communication. Feedback ranges from its value and application to everyday life to being too cumbersome, intimidating and too much material for one class.

While the DESC material is a challenge for class leaders and caregivers alike, it is also an extremely valuable tool for all of us, both in our daily lives and our challenging caregiving situations. It’s important to keep in mind that assertiveness does NOT come easy for many people, especially if an alternate mode of communication has been learned and practiced for many years.

Here are a few ideas that may be helpful as we work through the DESC model in our caregiving classes:

- Be forthright with the class members that this may be a difficult shift in communication style
- Share with them the benefits that can be derived from such assertive communication:
  - \* Open and honest communication
  - \* Reduced stress, frustration, anger and guilt
  - \* No need for people to try to read your mind (the impossible task)
  - \* Builds respectful and helping relationships
  - \* Is solution focused (gets important needs met)
- Explain they won’t become experts at DESC in one day—but rather it is a tool to practice and build on (sometimes it’s just a seed planted)
- Reinforce the use of “I messages” immediately as class members begin to work through the DESC model together as a class.
- Encourage use of the DESC handout (filling it in) as they work through a personal situation with a class partner.
- Refer them to the Caregiver Helpbook as they begin applying DESC in their own lives—it has some additional, helpful information on the benefits and application of assertive communication.

Keep up the good work—we’re all getting better as we continue the important job of working with caregivers throughout Wisconsin.