

WHAT NOT TO SAY: PHRASES THAT INCREASE DEFENSIVENESS

Some phrases, even when well-intended, can increase client defensiveness and shut down meaningful conversation. Here are common triggers to avoid—and why they don't work.

CALM DOWN

Telling someone to 'calm down' can often escalate the situation further. It invalidates their feelings and suggests that their emotional response is unwarranted, leading them to feel unheard and more defensive instead of actually calming down.

WHY DO YOU ALWAYS

Beginning a statement with 'why do you always' implies constant blame and criticism, which can make the other person feel attacked. This phrase generalizes past behaviors, creating more focus on defensiveness rather than actual resolution of the current issue.

YOU NEVER

Using 'you never' exaggerates situations and ignores any positive contributions. This creates a feeling that nothing they do is ever good enough, fostering resentment and defensiveness rather than understanding and growth in the relationship.

THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT

This phrase can invalidate how the person interpreted your words, suggesting their response is unreasonable. It often dismisses their feelings and can make them feel judged or wrong, heightening their defensive stance rather than facilitating constructive conversation.

IT'S YOUR FAULT

Blaming someone directly with 'it's your fault' eliminates any chance of collaboration in problem-solving. It positions the speaker as an accuser and the listener on the defensive, closing off any dialogue that could lead to mutual understanding.

YOU'RE OVERREACTING

Saying 'you're overreacting' minimizes someone's emotional experiences and implies they lack the ability to gauge their own reactions appropriately. This often leads to increased defensiveness, as the person may feel misunderstood and disrespected.

WHATEVER

Using 'whatever' dismisses the significance of the other person's viewpoint. It can shut down any hope for meaningful exchange and signifies disinterest in reaching any constructive agreement, potentially increasing the other person's defensiveness.

I DON'T WANT TO ARGUE

Expressing 'I don't want to argue' can shut down important discussions before they start. It comes across as a refusal to engage, leaving the other party feeling unimportant or invalidated, prompting defensiveness rather than meaningful resolution.