

STOP! Turn the Green Light to Red on Verbal Abuse

Tales of abusive communication abound in many a medical facility. Disrespectful communication may feel inevitable, but it doesn't have to be. There are ways to stop the behavior, and you would be doing yourself and others a favor when you create a plan to intervene. Here is a list of recommendations to turn the green light of verbal abuse into a red light that says, "STOP, You have no right to talk to me that way."



1. A plan: plan a time to talk to the person who has been verbally abusive; scheduling a time is best since it ensures that the encounter will actually occur and not be left up to chance, because leaving it up to chance means that it probably won't happen!

2. Preparation: since it often feels scary and intimidating to imagine yourself confronting the person who has been abusive, it is important to prepare yourself regarding what you want to say and how you wish to say it.

3. Avoid defensiveness or anger in your approach: it is best to be very straight forward as you prepare your approach; focus on letting the other person know how it feels to be addressed in an abusive manner and how it impacts your work.

4. Script: develop a mental or written script to organize your intervention; this allows you to be in charge of the situation.

5. Sample Script:

- Address the problem: "I would like to talk to you about the way you yell at me when things are really stressful on the unit."
- Empathic approach: "I know how crazy and stressful it can feel sometimes, with patient admissions up and the shortage of staff; I feel the stress too."
- Taking a stand: "Even though the stress feels really awful at times, it only makes it worse when you yell and ridicule me when you need something. I don't like it, and I want it to stop."
- Type of response you prefer: "What I would prefer is if you simply ask me for what you need and then allow me to finish my sentence and give you a response. It is hard for me to think when I am being yelled at".
- Win-win: "I would be happy to help you or get you some help if I am too busy; just ask me."

The person who has been confronted may be surprised at this intervention, especially if he or she is not used to being addressed directly by a colleague, particularly a colleague who is considered lower in status or rank. The response can vary from defensiveness to a sincere apology or perhaps no response initially, due to embarrassment. No matter your colleague's initial reaction, you want to see a positive change in his or her behavior as an outcome of your efforts. If your colleague's abusive behavior doesn't change, you can always follow-up with your manager to discuss other options.

Finally, if all else fails, think about designing a humorous approach for your abusive team member. One group of nurses I read about responded to the behavior of an abusive doctor this way: they rallied around him and, in unison, shouted out, "code pink", every time his short fuse was unleashed on a fellow team member. That was a funny, disarming way for the doctor to stop yelling and simply ask for what he wanted.

By taking a stand against inappropriate behavior, you have sent a message to the team that you all deserve to be treated with respect and that you are willing to stand up for being treated with respect.

© 2007 SupportForNurses.com. This article is free to distribute provided the PDF is unchanged and these credits remain intact. For more articles, Tips Booklets and Nurses' Toolkits, please visit www.supportfornurses.com.