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Words of Power

A Guide for Ordinary People to Calm and
De-Escalate Aggressive Individuals

SPECIAL EDITION

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Introduction

Why does anger disturb us so much? Of course, some of us may have experienced real violence, a horrible but thankfully relatively rare event in modern societies, but the far more common experiences of being shouted at, cursed, or enmeshed in an argument can also be incredibly upsetting.

To understand why even angry words make us fearful for our safety, we must go back in time. Humanity developed in a very dangerous world, and we have retained a brain that is still primed to perceive it that way. We humans spent most of our evolutionary history in small bands of probably no more than fifty, and often far less than that. We maintained loosely held territories, followed game and gathered foodstuffs, invariably meeting other bands, who had different gods, and different customs. As much as we humans sometimes delight in novelty, we also fear what is strange because, unknown, it is unpredictable. Throughout human history, our response to those who are different has often been violent. In fact, our ‘pre-history’ is a chain of uncountable mini-genocides: one tribe destroying, or at best, defeating and absorbing another.

Until modern times, each tribe saw themselves as the only humans in a world of beings fundamentally different from themselves; they were surrounded by a world of ‘others.’ In other words, there were only thirty, forty, sixty people in the entire world. What happened in our own community was all we knew. They were not only irrelevant to us; for the most part, they were unheard of, unknown. The only exception was occasional meetings to trade goods, or more frequently, raids and wars. We only cared about what happened to ‘humans’—the members of our tribe. What that meant is that if one of our tribe were killed, it was a

devastating loss. For example, in a band that had ten adult men, one man dying was the loss of a tenth of the entire male population, who were essential as hunters and often as warriors. Even if we, the other members of the tribe, didn't like him, his loss was incalculable. Our brains are still wired to see the world in the same way, even though the world and society around us is vastly different. We respond to news of violence, of tragedy or the like, however far away it might be, as something that happened right next door, to someone with whom we have had a life-long connection.

With the advent of civilization and our explosive trajectory upwards into this modern world, our knowledge of others is now worldwide. We tap online and read an article about a woman in Pakistan, blamed for her own rape by the elders of her village and forced to marry her rapist; of blood-diamond wars in Sierra Leone; harassment and violence against gay men in Chechnya; of pensions promised, yet unpaid in Greece; of a mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida, or Newtown, Connecticut. In all of these cases and infinitely more, the victims are a world away, yet our brains respond as if they are right next-door. On the one hand, this is wonderful; we are all becoming one human family, and our empathic connection to others spans the globe. On the other hand, given that media defaults to writing about tragedy and atrocity, the world seems to be a hellish place.

With such background noise, is it any wonder that when we are confronted by someone who is verbally aggressive or threatening, our brains are primed to expect the worst? When our daily news is filled with stories of terrible things that we are helpless to stop, part of us, at least, believes we are also helpless to stop what is right in front of us. A cross word may seem to bear the potential of injury or even death. Even though almost all aggressive interchanges are not violent, each still takes a small piece out of us, particularly when we do not know what to say or do. When the angry customer or family member slams

her hands down on the front desk, yells and then kicks the door open on her way out, you may have been unhurt. But if you sat there not knowing what to do or say, you experience yourself to be a victim, with the sense that the only reason you are physically unhurt was due to your assailant's choice, not yours.

This book, therefore, is for people who may occasionally potentially interact with emotionally unstable or hostile individuals: in other words, it is for all of us. It is not a physical self-defense book: truly, such books can be a useful supplement to actual training, but if you really wish to learn to physically protect yourself against violence, you must be taught, in person, by someone expert in self-defense and furthermore, expert and trustworthy as a teacher.

This book is also not a 'specialty' book for people whose profession or circumstances require them to regularly interact with potentially violence or emotionally disturbed individuals. As you can see on the introductory pages listing my published works, I have written a number of books specific to the needs of police, mental health professionals, security officers and a variety of other professions. These books go into much greater depth in a number of areas than need to be covered here—because these individuals have a professional responsibility to stay (or in the case of families who live with a mentally ill loved one, must stay) in circumstances that we should escape.

This work is a guidebook for ordinary people who, while simply living their lives, occasionally encounter aggressive people. They can be customers or fellow employees, strangers on the street or elsewhere, or even family members.

A primary focus of this book will be the recognition of potential aggression, and the verbal de-escalation of such unstable individuals before violent acts occur. You will become skilled in assessing if someone

is truly dangerous. In many situations, you will have the ability to calm them as well. You will then embody a trait that can be termed ‘grace under fire,’ that ability to become the center of gravity within a crisis situation so that it coalesces into an ordered system around you. In a surprising number of situations, aggressors will become willing to comply with directives, even anxious to meet your approval or gain your respect.

Let us refer back to points I raised earlier in this section: when you have a sense of power and control, when you know how to recognize potentially aggressive individuals and how to respond to their verbal violence and aggressive behaviors, that ‘background noise’ that the media creates, rumors of wars and troubles far and near, will no longer have as much influence upon you. When we do not feel powerless in our personal life, the things we hear about people far away will evoke pity and compassion, but not fear and helplessness. When one feels more powerful, one can greet life in all its aspects with a sense of spacious confidence.

**Sometimes You Need to Escape, Not De-escalate:
Why This Book is NOT The Answer For People
in Domestic Violence/Intimate Partner Abuse
Situations**

I must underscore that this is NOT a handbook on how to de-escalate a perpetrator of domestic or partner violence. In that kind of situation, you are essentially a prisoner of a terrorist: you cannot make things better with better communication strategies, guiding that man or woman to treat you with kindness and respect. The solution is to escape. I urge anyone in such a situation, be you male or female, young or old, to contact a local organization that supports victims of abuse and intimate violence—in many cases, your best avenue is to start with the police.

CHAPTER 2

The Development Of A Safety Mindset

It's All About Attitude!

No matter who you are, there is always a possibility that you may find yourself in the midst of an unpleasant human interaction. This is not to say that you must go through your day in a state of hyper-vigilance, constantly on guard against an attack. Instead, you must develop a relaxed general awareness of your surroundings while always being prepared to protect yourself and others. Although I could make this dramatic, using terms like 'the mind of the warrior,' this would only serve to put the concept out of reach. Rather, consider two parents, in the middle of a conversation, ready but relaxed, as their toddlers climbs up the ladder on a jungle gym. Another example would be driving down a highway at high-speed, listening to music, conversing with a passenger, *and* drinking a cup of coffee; nonetheless, you are ready for a car suddenly braking up ahead, or a distracted driver swerving into your lane. If we live our lives the way we drive, or the way we watch over our children, we will have naturally aligned ourselves with the principles in this book. For one final image, think of a cat walking on a fence: graceful, ready for anything, not focused on anything in particular. (And if you can't see yourself as a cat, I'm not talking about physical grace. You can drive your motorized wheelchair; you can maneuver your cane or walker through a subway turn-style, or get up from the cushions of an over-stuffed couch like a cat. It's attitude, not athletic skill I'm talking about here!)

Aggression Doesn't Occur In A Vacuum

Many aggressive incidents develop due to our lack of attention to fundamental safety precautions. They rarely occur without some recognizable precursors. An unfocused mind will impair your ability to notice these early warning signs. Conscious action, taking potential danger into account, is one of the best safety strategies a person can manifest. Consider how you walk when you are aware that the pavement is slippery. You step firmly, look for handholds, and try to keep your knees relaxed, so that you can adapt your posture if you begin to slide. This is no different from how we should interact with strangers, with co-workers or even family members. Regarding the latter, given our fractious political discourse in both America and Europe, can you manage your interactions with family members who hold different political views and still have a good time at the next family gathering? When you are successful, notice how you anticipate when the conversation is getting heated, and how you change the subject, deflect things with humor, even concede a point that is not worth arguing. This is the same type of proactive awareness that we can bring to potentially hostile and dangerous situations.

Finally, such mindful action is not a once-and-done event. It is something you must attend to each and every day, just as you need to check your mirror every time you change lanes.

Reviewing Past Aggressive Encounters

Take some time to reflect on the aggressive and/or violent incidents that have occurred in your life. Think back and try to reconstruct the patterns of behavior that might have preceded the other person's aggression, as well as any actions on your part that were either unhelpful or contributory towards the individual becoming angry. Recall the following:

- What were the circumstances that led to the aggressive encounter?
- What was the *first* sign that indicated that the situation was getting volatile or dangerous?

- What did the individual say in the moments just before the aggressive incident?
- People are generally able to control their verbal expressions better than their non-verbal signals, so remember the individual's body language prior to the incident. Emotional upset can also create a change in the quality of the voice such as rate of speech, pitch, and/or volume.
- Consider what your thoughts were at that time. We very frequently have some advanced warning of an assault, such as a stray thought that we mistakenly discount as being unfounded. Did you minimize, contextualize, or otherwise resist looking at the situation head-on?
- Consider what you felt, physically and emotionally, at each stage of the encounter. The sensations evoked within the context of an encounter with another person are physical expressions of intuition. When you next experience that same sensation be aware that it is an early warning sign that a similar situation may be developing.
- What do you believe you should have done differently? Can you think of something *else* that you could have done (or could do now) to head-off or short-circuit the aggressive incident as it was developing?
- What planning did you do in regard to that individual subsequent to the aggression? How did that plan work?

Figure 2 I should have known . . . In fact, I did

Gavin de Becker, in his great book, **The Gift of Fear**, notes that fear is such an uncomfortable emotion (It is supposed to be uncomfortable!) that we often have a tendency to avoid the *fear itself* rather than the reason we are afraid. Some people talk themselves up (“I’m being silly”); others criticize themselves (“I’m being judgmental,” or “I’m being prejudiced”) to talk themselves out of the genuine perception that someone nearby is dangerous. Your basic maxim should be, “If I am afraid, there is a GOOD reason for me to be afraid. Where/what/who is it?”