

FIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Here are five easy-to-remember skills that will help you solve problems, especially in relationships. The five skills will allow you to be problem solvers and will improve your assertive skills.

1. **I statements:** describe how you feel.
2. **Reflective listening:** accept someone else's feelings, without reacting to them or feeling responsible for them.

3. **Kill-them-with-kindness sandwiches:** say something nice to the person; set the limit or say no politely; say something nice.

4. **Apologizing:** if you see that you have made a mistake, admit it and say you're sorry.

5. **Negotiating a compromise:** discuss the problem with the other person until you arrive at a decision you can both live with.

I Statements

I statements are three part statements that describe how a person feels. The three parts are: "I feel _____ when you _____ because _____."

Example: Trish is angry with her boyfriend Tony because he's on the football team and she never gets to see him. If Trish uses an *I statement*, she might say: "Tony, I feel hurt when you're always with your football friends because I never get to see you any

more." In comparison, if Trish uses a *you statement*, she might say something accusing: "Tony, you are a rude, mean jerk. You're selfish and insensitive. You don't spend as much time with me as you should." A person who hears a *you statement* is likely to feel attacked and may want to fight back. A person who hears an *I statement* is less likely to feel attacked.

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening refers to the ability to listen to what someone else says. Reflective listening enables you to realize that you can accept what other people are feeling without reacting to them or assuming responsibility for their feeling. Trish complains to her boyfriend, Tony, saying: "I'm really mad at you. Your sports are more important to you than I am. You're always at football practice, and you're always doing something with the other guys on the team. I want you to quit the team so you can spend more time with me." If Tony is using reflective listening, he will say some-

thing like: "It sounds like you're pretty angry with me. It must feel pretty bad. Tell me some more about what's going on, and what I've done to make you mad." But, if Tony is not using reflective listening, he might simply react to Trish's anger and get angry back. Then they will both be angry. Or if Tony feels responsible for fixing Trish's feelings, he might quit the team just to make her happy. Then he might lose out on something that's really important to him. Reflective listening allows him to accept her feeling, without taking the responsibility of making it better.

A Kill-Them-with-Kindness Sandwich

A **kill-them-with-kindness sandwich** is a three-part statement: (1) say something nice; (2) set the limit or boundary, or state your position; and (3) say something nice.

Example: Tony listens to Trish's complaints and then says: "Trish, I really like you a lot, and I'm glad you're my girlfriend. But I really like football, too, and I'm glad I'm on the team. I want to

solve this problem so we can keep dating and I can keep playing. I think we're smart enough to come to a reasonable compromise." In this statement, Tony states his position clearly. He does not react to Trish's demands, but he doesn't give in to them either. He states what he wants and his wish for a reasonable compromise so they will both be happy.

Apologizing

Acts of aggression are more likely to occur in situations where there are threats and counterthreats. A simple **apology** can prevent a situation from escalating into a violent one.

Example: Tony says to Trish: "I'm sorry that I forgot about our date on Sunday afternoon. Some of the guys on the team wanted to play football, and I forgot all about taking you to the movies. I

don't blame you for being angry. I really am sorry." If this is the first time Tony has stood Trish up, an apology might go a long way to helping the relationship. However, if forgetting dates is a pattern with Tony, Trish may need to set some limits in a kill-them-with-kindness sandwich herself.

Negotiating a Compromise

Negotiating compromises is an important skill in a relationship. The process will be more successful if the two parties make a commitment to come to an agreement they can both live with. Each states his or her position, and they keep brainstorming ideas for solutions. Having time to think of different solutions often helps the negotiation process.

Example: Tony and Trish keep talking about how they can solve the problem of seeing each other. Tony states that he wants to

keep playing football. Trish states that she would like to have at least two dates with him a week, and to talk with him on the phone at least once a day. Tony looks at his calendar and says that he will probably only be able to go on one date a week during the football season, but that he would love to have two dates a week, or more, after the season is over. Tony responds to Trish's feelings, without reacting with anger, and without overreacting by giving up football, which is important to him.