

## Stand Up for Yourself Without Putting Others Down

By Christine Vander Wielen, MSW, CAPSW

Dr. Brent Atkinson is a widely known educator and therapist. Through years of research and experience, Dr. Atkinson has developed the “Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners” that he teaches to couples. These habits help each partner to attend to their own needs and desires while being respectful of the other. It is this therapist’s opinion, that some of the habits he teaches are so powerful; yet, so basic that they can be applied to other types of relationships. Dr. Atkinson’s Habit #2, which is “Standing up for yourself without putting your partner down” can be altered slightly to state “Standing up for yourself without putting others down” while still maintaining the integrity and intent of his work.

In times of intense conflict, people typically respond in one of two ways. One way is to internalize the hurt and anger the conflict evokes. Outwardly, the person may seem calm, but inwardly they are seething. When an individual routinely internalizes conflict, he increases his risk for depression. A second way of handling intense conflict is to lash out in anger. This response can also be called the “scorched earth response” because the lashing out is significantly out of proportion to the actual offense or is misdirected. The principle of “standing up for yourself without putting others down” seeks to help individuals to assert themselves while being respectful of others. Dr. Atkinson summarizes Habit #2 as “move over and make room for me.”

In this article, two real life examples of “Standing up for yourself without putting others down” will be discussed. Permission was granted to use these examples; however, names have been changed in order to protect privacy.

Rita was a bright, energetic, sensitive, eight-year-old girl. She was often teased at school and would respond to this by either withdrawing from other children or lashing out in anger. One day in the school cafeteria, while Rita was eating her lunch, another eight year old girl sat down and told Rita she did not like the way her lunch smelled and that Rita would have to move to another table. Feeling hurt and rejected, Rita moved and finished her lunch by herself. Tearfully, that night, Rita told her parents what had happened and her father gave her advice on how to handle the situation the next time it happened. He suggested that Rita tell the other girl, “I like sitting next to you because I think of you as a friend, but if my lunch bothers you, you can move and maybe we can sit together tomorrow.” Armed with this new tool, the next day when Rita was again told to move from the lunch table, she repeated her father’s words. This was an important turning point for Rita, to assert herself without anger while leaving the door open for future contact. The other girl did not move from the lunch table, nor did Rita. More importantly for Rita, the taunting stopped and eventually, the two girls became friends.

Carl is a college student and was assigned a group project. The group decided on a meeting time to begin their project. All members showed for the meeting except for Debbie. After trying to reach Debbie several times and waiting for over an hour, the

group disbanded. Later that day, Carl saw Debbie and said to her “you are an important member of the group and when you did not show up for the meeting, the whole group suffered.” Initially, Debbie tried to explain that she had other studying to do. Carl persisted and said “I realize that you have other studying to do, we all do, but a commitment was made to meet and we need your participation and expect you to keep your commitments.” A few days later, Debbie called Carl and the other group members to apologize.

In both of these examples, Rita and Carl stood up for themselves without putting others down. They did not internalize anger or frustration. Rather, they addressed the problem and did not attack the individual involved. Thus, this skill paved the way for a deeper relationship built on respect, trust and ability to work through conflict.

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