



## Hot Words and Trigger Phrases

Trigger or Hot Words and Phrases are what we typically say within our normal vocabulary that mean something positive to us, but that mean something negative to a person in crisis.

In most cases, just being with the person who is in crisis is both all we can really do and all that they really need from us. Nothing we say typically makes anyone feel any better. The best thing that we can do for the person in crisis is just to be there and sometimes saying that you don't really know what to say and to thank them for trusting you enough to tell you. But, if you feel compelled to say something, these are a collection of Trigger Words and Phrases not to say and at least a better way to replace the Trigger Words that we sometimes say without thinking.

- **“No”**

- Saying “No” to someone who is agitated, destroys the possibility for any sort of de-escalation process as it stops any hope for a negotiation and instead initiates a power struggle.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I’m not sure, but we’ll check on that and see what we can do for you that might help with what you’re wanting or needing.”*

- **“Stop”**

- Saying STOP is the same as saying NO, just in a more aggressive way. It may startle the aggressor momentarily, but it will usually prompt the aggressor to retaliate in a defensive manner, either verbally or physically. Although it is our right to demand that someone to stop what they are doing to us and in some case, it is perfectly appropriate, but yelling at, and demanding an attacker to STOP often creates what’s called a “Physical Power Struggle.” A physical power struggle is a physical action that occurs from the attacker after the victim yells and this sometimes can be perceived as a physical response which then triggers a reactive physical response from the attacker. An example of a much better dialogue would be:

An example of a much better response would be: *“I’d like you to not to say those things to me while I’m trying to help you with your treatment.” “You know that it’s inappropriate and if it happens again, I’ll just inform your doctor that you’re not cooperating and that you have been verbally abusing to the staff and that probably will affect your discharge date.”* Now, if an individual is physically touching you in an inappropriate fashion, then no one will fault the staff for instantly telling the individual to “STOP” and pursue assistance from staff to instill consequences for the action.

- **“What’s Bothering you?”**

- Asking this to a person in crisis, triggers something psychologically inside of them that causes them to assume that you’re perceiving them as a “bother”, so they will often react defensively, accusing you of thinking that they are bothering you.

An example of a much better response would be: *“What seems to be upsetting you?” or “Is there something that you’d like to talk to me about that might get to the reason why you’re upset?”*

- **“What’s the Problem?”**

- Asking this to someone in crisis, causes them to believe that you feel that they, their behavior or their needs are the problem within the encounter, so they will again react defensively and often times aggressively accuse you and their experience at the facility as the real problem.

An example of a much better response would be: *“Is there something specific that’s upsetting you?” “If you sit here with me and explain, then I might be able to understand what I can do to help you.”*

- **“What’s Wrong?”**

- Asking someone “what’s wrong,” communicates to the person in crisis that someone here is right and someone here is wrong and being that the staff are the ones in control within the facility setting, they will usually assume that you are the right one and they will always be the wrong one, setting up a downward-spiraling power struggle so there will be little hope for any sort of negotiation.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I can see that you’re upset, and I’d like to find out what we might be able to do together to help.”*

- **“Why?”**

- Starting out questioning with “Why,” such as, “Why did you say that? Sparks a defensive reaction from the person in crisis and will often cause them to shut down emotionally, providing little hope for them to listen enough for you to even to even find out how you might be able to help them.

An example of a much better response would be: *“Was there a reason that you said that comment to Doctor Smith?” “If there is, I’d like to hear it so that we might be able to find a solution so that we can help.”*

- **“Come Here.”**

- No one likes this, not even you, so as you know, when someone either tells, or even asks someone else to “Come here,” especially when they use a finger gesture in association

with the comment, we all experience a negative reaction of dread and fear, like being called out of a meeting by the boss, afraid that we're in trouble. If we feel that dread and fear, a person in crisis feels it ten times worse and they will react with a psychological fight or flight response.

An example of a much better response would be: *"Hi, James...Would it be okay if we sat and talked for a moment?" "I have a couple questions for you."*

- **"You Need to..." or "I need you to..."**

- This is one of the worst things to tell someone in crisis, but we tend to say this to others every day. When we say things like, "I need you to step away from the nurses station" or "I need you to take your medications," this instantly creates an automatic conscious or sub-conscious reaction among humans of any age to now resist or defy the wishes of the person who has told them this. But a person in crisis often becomes aggressive when told the same thing. An example of a much better dialogue would be:

An example of a much better response would be: *"Can I get you to step away from the nurse's station for a minute?" or "Mrs. Randall, can I ask you to take your medications while you're here?"*

- **"What is it Now?"**

- When anyone asks this of another person, that person will immediately feel demeaned, small and unimportant. Asking this of someone in crisis will make them feel this and that you do not care and that their very presence is inconveniencing you. At the very least, they will act out passive-aggressively and at the most, they might want to show their control and power by harming you. An example of a much better dialogue would be:

An example of a much better response would be: *"Yes, Mr. Wilson...How can I help you?"*

- **"Because those are the rules"**

- When anyone says something like this to a person in crisis, it sets up an instant power struggle and makes them feel like the person who said this is an uncaring, power-hungry authoritarian is not interested in finding out what they can do to help, only to assert their power onto people that they can dominate. The person in crisis will feel powerless and so will now often have to assert their aggression in order to "save face."

An example of a much better response would be: *"I'm sorry Mr. Bell, but the facility rules are requesting that you not bring in cigarettes."*

- **"I'm not going to say this again"**

- Saying this to anyone instantly establishes an authoritative and adversarial tone and never promotes an effective dialogue between two people. Saying this to a person in crisis however will escalate the event into a higher level of aggression, reading this as a threat and having to fire back verbally or physically, fearful that there might be emotional or physical consequences next.

An example of a much better response would be: *“Ms. Denny, I’ve mentioned several times that we’re trying our best to discharge you as quickly as possible.” “Raising your voice is a little distracting and isn’t going to help us go any faster so how about we…….”*

- **“What do you want me to do about it?”**

- Anyone asking this of someone is usually feeling defensive and overwhelmed themselves and should probably remove themselves from the situation or person immediately. Otherwise, they will most likely make the situation much worse by their confrontational attitude and inability to remain objective. Asking this of a person in crisis will make them feel defensive, dismissed and disrespected and often times raise their aggression level with the person asking them as the target for their anger.

An example of a much better response would be: *“Is there something that you can think of that might help me to help you better?”*

- **“You Always…” or “You Never…”**

- When someone opens the statement up with “You…” the receiving party will quickly feel that they are in some way responsible for the issue at hand, like, “You always screw things up,” “You never could do anything right,” etc. When someone says this to a person in crisis, that person will become defensive and will often escalate into a much higher level of aggression as they will now feel persecuted with nothing else to lose.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I’m thinking that you might not realize that you’re supposed to attend the group today.” “Can I help you find out where you’re supposed to be?”*

- **“Don’t Say That.”**

- Saying this to someone is first, telling them what to do and no one likes to be told what to do. Telling anyone this also invalidates them, what they are feeling and what they just told you. People will feel badly about sharing what they told you and following your comment, most likely will not trust to tell you anything else and even others for fear that someone else might have the same reaction.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I understand why you would feel that way. How about if we explore where this is coming from and different ways to look at it?”*

- **“It’s going to get better.”**

- Maybe it won’t get better. It might, but it’s not our place to say whether it might or not and it just communicates to the person that your listening to that you don’t really get it and that you also don’t have much empathy. This is something to say to someone when you’re not that invested and usually right before you excuse yourself to something else, so the person you’re listening to will know that you don’t really care.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I hear you when you believe that it’s not going to get better and I understand that you feel that way, but you will get through this and you may just surprise yourself at your own strength when you do.”*

- **“You need to be more positive.”**

- That’s about the fastest way to react negatively to you and your superficial and unwanted comments.

An example of a much better response would be: *“I realize that you’re feeling like you’re in the darkness at the moment and it may seem that you’ll never be back in the light, but you’re strong and with help, you can pull yourself back up to where you want to be.”*  
*“Everyone needs some help sometime.” “I understand how you’d feel this and we’re just here to help when and if you want it.”*

- **“It could be a lot worse.”**

- Whether it could or couldn’t, it’s not our place to say, suggest or infer and will instantly create a wedge between you and the person you have just said it to as the comment doesn’t make anyone feel better and it communicates that you don’t have the skills to create empathy.

- **“I know how you feel.”**

- That will always be the quickest way to have someone fire back to you that you **DON’T** know what or how they feel. No one does and they will immediately know you don’t get it and then will tune you out, but not before yelling at you for saying it.

- **“Everyone feels that way.”**

- This is when they will snap back at you that **they** are not **everyone** and any opportunity for a quality interaction has just been lost.

- **“That’s crazy.”**

- This is one the most insensitive comments a person can make. It communicates that you are unprofessional and that you have little to no experience, or that you are a staff who has been in the industry too long and that you are burned out too much to even feel empathy.

- **“At least....”**

- Saying this to a person in crisis, serves to minimize the person and the crisis they are experiencing. Anyone in crisis that you say this to will immediately know that you have no idea how to communicate empathy and will feel that you feel sympathy for them and that will just make them feel that you feel sorry for them. Empathy fuels connection, where sympathy drives the connection away from them and their situation.

- **“I can’t do that”**

- This is the same thing as saying “No.” You’ve just said it with a few more words.

- **“I don’t think so.”**
  - This is saying “No” with a sarcastic attitude.
- **“That’s not going to happen.”**
  - This is saying “No” with an authoritative attitude and will set up the relationship to be nothing but a power struggle from then on.
- **“Sweetheart, Sweetie, Baby, Darlin’” or any other Pet Name**
  - This is a case-by-case situation and some clients will respond positively, especially older ones, but the majority of clients and just people will not see this as appropriate and especially within the #MeToo movement, will likely end up with at the very least a complaint, all the way up to a law suit against you and the organization, so it’s something that should always be aware of and to find better and more respectful ways to communicate yourself that will put clients at ease.
- **“Listen!”**
  - This is a very aggressive and directive way to demand that someone listen to you instead of finding out from them what they have to say.
- **“Oh, yeah?!”**
  - This is a very challenging way to communicate that you and the client are just about to get into an aggressive power struggle so there’s no hope for any negotiation.
- **“No, I’ll tell you why you’re here, it’s to…….”**
  - Anytime you tell a person why they are doing anything that they are doing, sets the stage for an instant power struggle and usually a verbal fight will occur and sometimes it lays the groundwork for a physical power struggle and so it could even turn into a physical fight as the person will have to show you who the more powerful person is.
- **“Yeah, you don’t want to do that”**
  - This is a great way to communicate that you are the one in control and that there will no doubt be consequences for whatever the client is doing, saying or threatening. This at the very least will usually turn into a verbal altercation and often times a physical one as well.
- **“What are you going to do about it?!”**
  - This is something a bully would say and so if you say this to anyone, especially clients, they will immediately feel that you and the organization are the bullies and they are set up to be the weak person, so they will either back down and never trust you or the organization or will have to fight, verbally or physically to defeat the bully.
- **“Hey!...”**
  - Anything followed by “Hey” is a failure and will not communicate anything but a power struggle and disrespect. Once you put “Hey” in front of anything you say, the conversation is over and they will escalate from that point, on.

- **“You know what?!...”**
  - A person says this when they feel powerless and must lash out at the person that they are in the confrontation with, usually with one of their fingers up to communicate power and control. This is a very aggressive action and will quickly escalate the situation into more of a power struggle and perhaps even a fight.
- **“Oh My God, Really?!”....”Seriously?!!**
  - Many people in every workplace out there say this. It’s very popular and even humorous to us and to those who hear us say it to people, but it communicates an instant disrespect, sarcasm and passive-aggressive message to those we say it to. It makes the receiver feel stupid and unimportant.
- **“Do you want me to call somebody?!”**
  - Which is usually Security, Code teams, Police or other resources of authority. End Game.
- **“And of course, CALM DOWN!”**
  - Everyone knows that telling this to anyone doesn’t work, especially when that anyone is angry or escalated. Saying this to a person in crisis will almost assuredly escalate the situation, raise the aggression level and they will most likely tell you just as loudly, not to tell them to Calm Down. Saying this to anyone is an auto-response based upon repetition, the need to gain control and trying to calm ourselves when faced with an aggressive situation, so we all should take a breath and let our brains engage the critical thinking area of our brains before spouting out something that makes things worse.

An example of a much better dialogue would be: *“Is there something I can do for you to help you feel calmer so we can talk and find out what you need?”*

- **TRY NOT TO TELL PEOPLE WHAT TO DO...INSTEAD ASK FOR THEIR COMPLIANCE**
  - Try to resist the urge of telling people what to do in order to instill control when you’re faced with a situation where you’re not feeling in control.
  - If you tell people what to do, then they will feel compelled to prove why they do not have to do what you want them to do.
  - Try to ask for their compliance instead. It avoids a power struggle and you have a much better chance of their cooperation rather than a fight.
  - **Compliance Through Guidance, Instead of by Force or Control.**
- **A few more positive questions you could ask that might work:**
  - That’s very interesting...I’d really like to hear more about that.
  - I’m so sorry that you’re going through this...Let’s see what we CAN do to help.
  - What are you experiencing that might be causing your frustration?