



Military Caregiving Communication Series
[Finding Common Ground]

Aikido Communication Style

Caregiving can result in differences of opinions and strong emotions. Misunderstandings can occur with family members, friends, and health care providers. The Aikido communication style uses principles from the Aikido School of Martial Arts by moving or aligning yourself with the other person’s energy, and NOT arguing. This means listening for areas of agreement or common ground regardless of how small they might be. By focusing on areas of common ground or agreement you’ll move the conversation forward positively. Sometimes the common ground is to agree to disagree, which is ok. “I” messages are used in the Aikido communication style and are particularly effective when emotions run high and when “you” messages are directed toward you, the caregiver.

As a caregiver, “you” (blaming) messages can be hard to hear. Your initial reaction may be to argue, become defensive, or withdraw from the situation; however, none of these actions will solve a problem. The Aikido style of communication can help neutralize any “attack” and redirect the conversation by bringing communication back to focus on the issue and problem resolution. At the same time, Aikido involves recognizing the other person’s needs and perspective. By doing this you help the other person feel as though he/she has been heard. When a person is heard they feel validated and are more likely to work with you on finding a solution or common ground to the problem or concern.

Aikido focuses on building harmony through (1) Maintaining your own peace and not giving in to emotions, (2) Helping the other person become calm and remain so and (3) finding common ground or areas of agreement including agreeing to disagree.

4 Steps to Aikido Communication

The Aikido style has four steps:

- Step 1:** Align
- Step 2:** Agree
- Step 3:** Redirect
- Step 4:** Resolve

Step 1: Align

Aligning with someone means that you move with that person’s energy. This requires putting yourself “in the other person’s shoes” and understanding the person’s viewpoint. Although not easy, it’s important to try to relax and stay calm and be in control of your emotions. Once you feel relaxed, ask yourself:

- How would I feel in this person’s position?
- What does this person need from me to feel better?
- Does this person need understanding, sympathy, praise, recognition, or control?

The following statements are examples of Aikido aligning.

“I don’t know exactly what you need. Give me an example of something I can do.”

“If I could do one thing to help you feel better, what would that be?”

In addition to putting yourself in the other person's position, you align with the person in speaking style and mood. This does not mean matching anger with anger. You carefully reflect the serious nature of anger and sadness or other emotions with genuine seriousness.

Step 2: Agree

Identify issues and concerns where you have agreement. Find goals, needs and feelings that are similar with the person so you are able to find common ground.

"I share your concern about John being so depressed about his medical condition and not able to function as he did before his war injuries."

"I agree we have to do something before his depression gets worse and he harms himself or someone else."

Step 3: Redirect

Once you identify areas of shared concern, focus your discussion on those specific areas. The following statements are examples of redirecting your "common ground" toward resolution.

"We both want to do what is best for John. Now all we have to do is _____."

"I agree we have a problem. What can we do to solve this?"

Step 4: Resolve

Using "I" messages, ("I Messages: Strategies for Caregiver Conversations) try to resolve whatever issue or problem you agreed upon in **Step 2: Agree**. Settle that issue by finding agreed upon workable solutions and/or agree to disagree about it.

"I think we should talk with other military families to see what they did to help their wounded warrior deal with depression."

"I think meeting with other military families will be helpful for John in understanding that he is not alone."

Finding Common Ground Isn't Always Easy

In highly emotional situations the Aikido communication style brings balance by helping you listen and gain an understanding of the other person's feelings and needs. Because you are staying calm and not arguing the conversation becomes balanced or neutralized so you can focus on the concern and possible solutions. Aikido is also useful in drawing out the person who feels uncomfortable or doesn't want to express their thoughts and feelings. For example, "I want to understand what is troubling you. I'd like to talk it over."

If you do not get a response, give the individual time to be alone. This may give them time to raise any concerns later.

Using Aikido in a Military Situation

The following is an example of the use of Aikido in providing care to a wounded warrior.

Carl is 32 years old and has recently returned home from his third deployment in Afghanistan. Carl suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and his wife, Tonya is learning to manage her new caregiver role. Carl continues to have flashbacks of the war and has become irritable due to his lack of sleep, his inability to relax and the noise level in the house.

Carl: "You always want me to go do something with you and the kids such as shopping or going to the movies. You know being in crowds and in noisy places brings back war flashbacks so just go without me!"

Tonya: (Align: How would I feel in Carl's shoes? What does Carl need from me?) "It must be difficult to have flashbacks of the war and have to re-live what you experienced in Afghanistan."

Carl: "You're right--You don't understand, I can't sleep, I can't seem to relax and there is so much noise going on in this house!"

Tonya: (Agree) "I'm also concerned about you having flashbacks and your inability to sleep and relax. At times the noise in our house is hard for me to take too. (Redirect) What are some things we can do together or as a family to help you relax or sleep better at night? How can we work together to make the house quieter for both of us? (Resolve) Maybe we could go to a PTSD support group for families who are in similar situations as us. It might help us get some ideas on ways our family can help you relax and sleep better. Maybe we could hold a family meeting to discuss ways all of us could cut back on the noise in our house."

To learn more about family caregiving communication techniques and additional caregiving information go to: http://www.extension.org/family_caregiving

Reference

Schmall, V., Cleland, M., & Sturdevant, M. (2000). *The Caregiver Helpbook: Powerful Tools for Caregiving*. United States of America: Legacy Health System. Adapted with permission.

To access the current edition of the Caregiver Helpbook and to learn more about the self-care education program, Powerful Tools for Caregivers, visit www.powerfultoolsforcaregivers.org