

SereneScene

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INTERVENING ON UNACCEPTABLE ADULT BEHAVIORS

By Andrew Martin, MBA, CADIC II, SAP

Recovering addicts are probably more susceptible to acting out in unacceptable ways than someone that does not experience the disease of addiction. But, recovering addicts are not alone by any means, it is commonplace for those in the family system surrounding the recovering addict to be inclined to act unacceptably from time-to-time as well.

The primary factor driving these unacceptable behaviors is a long history of acting out. As an individual acts out repeatedly in similar ways, eventually a habit develops. Habitual behaviors become the default actions when someone finds himself or herself placed in a stressful situation that resembles an earlier stressful situation. In a simplistic way, it becomes automatic for an individual to act out with unacceptable behaviors because that is all they know to do in an immediate way.

In order to efficiently change the unacceptable behaviors from recurring, willingness is required by the person exhibiting the unacceptable behaviors, and

assistance is required of those around the individual. However, it is also possible to affect change in someone's unacceptable behaviors without their willingness as long as they are able to be compliant, which implies some minimal form of willingness.

When adults have absolutely no willingness to change their behavior, there is little anyone can do other than point out that the behavior is unacceptable. People who are acting out need to be aware that the behavior is not acceptable, however it is not your job to change their behavior: it is their job to do so. That said, perhaps the most powerful tool in intervening on unacceptable behaviors has nothing to do with the person acting out, but has more to do with yourself not accepting the unacceptable behavior. Calmly letting the person know that their behavior is not acceptable to you, and then assessing how to take care of yourself is the best way to protect one's self from the impact of another person's acting out.

Scenario 1: The person acting out does not intend to change behavior.

When an individual does not accept the unacceptable behaviors of another, the responsibility for taking action is placed on the individual witnessing the acting out. If you calmly and firmly let the person know that their behavior is not acceptable, and they continue to act out inappropriately, they are sending you a message that they have no intention of changing. If you continue to nag them about the behavior it will only cause frustration for yourself and will not have any positive impact on the person behaving unacceptably.

Often there is no reason to attempt to speak to someone about their unacceptable behavior because experience has demonstrated that the individual acting out has absolutely no intentions of addressing the behavior. In these instances, the person acting out has not motivation to change, and it is therefore futile to attempt to influence them to change. In this scenario, any energy put forth to get the unacceptable behavior to change is wasted. Instead, try a different approach: do not accept the behavior and focus on one's self instead of the person acting out.

Focusing on taking care of one's self is often a foreign concept to someone that readily accepts unacceptable behaviors. Usually, people are trying to figure out how to get the other party to change their unacceptable behavior. The next time someone is acting out and they have absolutely no intention of changing their behavior, try an experiment. Try letting them know in a calm and direct voice, that their behavior is not acceptable to you and that you will be discontinuing your interaction with them immediately – then leave. This type of response is usually a great surprise to the individual acting out, and they will often become upset and try to pursue, so be able to be firm with your intention, and always follow through on leaving. After a few encounters such as this, the person acting out will begin to get the message that they need to change if they want your attention in their life.

Sometimes individuals feel as if they are being punished for someone else's unacceptable behaviors, and sometimes there may be partial truth in this perception. However, not accepting unacceptable behaviors produces a sense of self-worth and self-respect, and will provide a model of healthy behavior for those act-

ing out. By setting the expectation that you will not be a party to unacceptable behavior, you are making a statement that you care about your health and your persona, and that your wellbeing comes first. In time, taking care of one's self will serve to create a better environment for all parties.



Scenario 2: The person acting out desires a change in their behavior.

Many people are fully aware that their behavior is unacceptable and wish to change, however find it difficult to learn new habits. For this type of individual, there are many methods for assisting them in their change management effort. Pre-emptive behavioral interventions are highly effective in creating alternative behavioral responses to acting out in unacceptable ways. Below is a listing of popular behavioral interventions.

Proactive Help can assist the individual that habitually exhibits unacceptable behavior by offering to that individual an acceptable form of behavior prior to the acting out. In this instance, you might let the individual know how an appropriate behavior would look in a particular situation that normally would inspire unacceptable behavior. For example, someone who gets very excited when they see a close friend and starts yelling across a crowded room to get their attention may be told that it is likely they will see someone they know, and it is appropriate to walk over to the person and say hello without calling their name across the room.

Expectations and Rules are often helpful if clarified in advance of the situations that would normally trigger unacceptable behaviors. Reminders of behavioral expectations in certain settings can be helpful for the

individual attempting to remember how to act acceptably. For example, an individual who chain smokes and continually excuses themselves from the room to have a cigarette may be reminded that once seated at the performing arts theater, it is courteous to stay seated until the intermission or the end of the performance.

Offering Choice is an excellent method of creating capability and practicing self-control in scenarios where unacceptable behavior often occurs. If the individual is given a meaningful choice, they are more likely to act with responsibility. For example, if an individual usually speaks out of turn when engaged in a therapeutic group, a choice could be given prior to the group that allows them to speak at appropriate times, or they can write down their thoughts and pass them to the therapist and wait to be called on.

Model Acceptable Behavior so the individual can personally observe how the behavior looks. Sometimes it is difficult for an individual to visualize acceptable behaviors, so they turn to old unacceptable behaviors in the absence of an alternative. For example, if someone is habitually late for appointments, you can start and end on time regardless of their attendance.

Pause for a Moment before acting out in any way. This tool is often one of the most important for those who impulsively act out in unacceptable ways. By simply taking a breath before acting, the individual may have enough time to consider how their behavior will be perceived, and then modify their behavior appropriately.

Scenario 3: The person acting out desires a change in their behavior, but continues to act unacceptably.

Many people are impulsive and do not think to attempt to modify their behavior until they have already acted out unacceptably. For this type of individual, there are many methods for assisting them in their change management effort. Below is a listing of popular real-time and after-the-fact behavioral interventions.

Positive Reinforcement can be as simple as letting someone know that their behavior is appreciated, to providing rewards or prizes when the alternative preferred behavior is exhibited. For example, telling someone that you very much appreciate that they arrived on time and participated appropriately.

Apologies are used to repair the social fabric between human beings after some damage has been caused by the unacceptable behavior. Insisting on an apology can help the individual understand how their unacceptable behavior negatively affects others around them. Be careful that the individual is genuine about the apology or this intervention does not work.

Restitution and Amends are used to actually and/or symbolically restore the environment and dynamic when unacceptable behavior causes damage. This intervention requires the individual act proactively and in a restorative way, therefore reinforcing acceptable behaviors while emphasizing consequences for the unacceptable behaviors. For example, the individual who has put graffiti on the walls of the park may volunteer to clean up the park.

Negative Consequences for unacceptable behaviors can range from a verbal reprimand to incarceration by the law. It is clear that positive reinforcement is far more effective than negative consequences, so negative consequences are used sparingly.

Behavioral Contracts are used to solidify expectations and commitments between all parties involved. Often behavioral contracts will outline specific behavioral expectations along with rewards for acting out preferred behaviors and negative consequences for acting out in unacceptable ways. For example, an individual who is violating curfew on a regular basis may cooperate in developing a behavioral contract that states the terms of being on time in the future and the consequences should violations continue to occur.

Ignoring unacceptable behavior can be affective if the individual is already substituting acceptable behaviors and every so often slips into unacceptable behaviors while acknowledging the slip. For example, if the individual is aware that they speak too loudly in public places and is making a concerted effort to bring their voice down and occasionally speaks too loudly and then promptly adjusts.

Over-Correction involves requiring the individual to repeatedly practice acceptable behaviors in the hopes of developing improved responses to recurring situations. For example, if the individual habitually lies about insignificant daily details, the person would intentionally focus energy to speak the truth in all conversations throughout the day.

Redirection can interrupt an unacceptable behavior and channel the individual's behavior in another direction which is more appropriate. For example, an individual who starts to make a lewd gesture to someone who bumped into them in a crowd, could be redirected into considering how extremely crowded it is.

With all the tools and scenarios listed, it is imperative that expectations are set appropriately for all parties involved. If the individual acting out has been behaving unacceptable for years, it will likely take a significant amount of time for those behaviors to completely change. Likewise, if you are helping an individual to modify their behavior, and you are not a behavioral specialist, you are likely going to make mistakes and get frustrated and angry at times. The expectation that unacceptable behavior can simply be stopped, without a tremendous effort on the part of all parties involved, is false. This type of change management effort requires diligence, discipline and patience. The results are worth the effort. **SS**



Andrew Martin began his entrepreneurial approach to business in 1982 at the age of fifteen. Throughout his career, Andrew has fulfilled his duties as a senior executive in viable business ventures in various industries including; health care, sound reinforcement and lighting, electrical safety equipment, commercial catering, specialty metal

shapes manufacturing, and the entertainment overhead suspension industry.

Andrew's current business efforts are encompassed by Serene Recovery Network, a group of branded organizations with a common vision of helping people in early recovery to help themselves to a long-term rewarding quality of life without addiction. The individual businesses include Serene Center, a 36 bed transitional sober living facility in Long Beach, CA which also conducts outpatient counseling services, drug testing and monitoring, and outpatient detoxification. Serene Connections, a publishing and professional educational conference production company catering to the field of addiction treatment. Serene Directory, an online directory of professionals and organizations affiliated with behavioral and mental health. Serene Foundation, a micro loan lender providing funding for the continuum of addiction care.

Andrew has authored many articles related to addiction treatment, health care agency productivity, industry specialties, as well as business approach and leadership and has been published in Serene Scene, Behavioral Health, Freedom Newspaper, Sound & Video Contractor, Western Wall and Ceiling Contractors Association Bulletin, Connections Magazine (Australia), dB Magazine, EQ, Lighting & Sound International (Canada), Sound & Communications, Live Sound International (UK), Recording-Engineering-Production. Additionally, many patents and trademarks have been awarded to Andrew Martin for various business related products, brand names, and service marks.

Andrew is also very active in the California Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors (CAADAC) Board of Directors and Sober Living Network. Andrew also keynotes for many organizations.