

# Communicating in the Treatment Room

Anger in Code: Understanding and  
Responding to Attack and Blame  
Part Two



By Anita Simon and Ben E. Benjamin

*This is part two of the second in a series of articles based on SAVI (the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction). SAVI identifies all the different behaviors people use to express themselves verbally and explains how they are likely to affect communication. In part one (August/September 2007), we presented an in-depth discussion of Attack/Blame, a problematic communication behavior that tends to shut down the flow of information and turn any conversation into an argument. We talked about how Attacks come up in a therapeutic context and why they can have such disastrous results for both the therapist and the client. When we left off, we had just taken a quick look at some behavioral options we can use as alternatives to Attack/Blame. (If you missed part one, you can access it online at [www.massageandbodywork.com](http://www.massageandbodywork.com).) Here, we'll continue with a detailed exploration of specific strategies that help to encourage a productive dialogue.*



**A**s we saw in the first part of this article, Attack/Blame behaviors are very difficult to handle effectively because the meaningful part of the message—I'm angry, upset, etc.—comes through only indirectly in the voice tone, and the core of the problem that's generating the upset (e.g., my back still hurts, my boss yelled at me, you did something that feels really bad to me) is not communicated at all. (See the box below for a review of what makes a statement an Attack/Blame behavior.) In part two, we'll discuss three steps you can take to encourage a more productive dialogue: resisting your own impulse to retaliate, taking the remarks less personally, and choosing one of the many alternative responses available to you.

#### What Makes a Statement an Attack/Blame Behavior?

- Blameful, accusatory, or retaliatory remarks
- Hostile voice tone
- Name-calling or negative labeling
- Put-downs
- Threats

#### Resisting the Impulse to Retaliate

**W**e mentioned in part one that in the face of Attack/Blame, most people's habitual response is to counterattack or self-defend. It's the

responder's reaction that keeps a fight going. As the responder to an Attack behavior, you can choose to take a different course, if and only if you can manage your own anger so that you don't join the Attack.

Of course, to resist the impulse to Attack, you need to become aware of it before you open your mouth. If your tendency to use Attack behaviors is deeply ingrained, you may not recognize it until an argument has begun or until it is over; you may be aware only in retrospect by remembering the behaviors you used. (If you habitually use Attack behavior and are unaware of it, you might first learn about your behavior through uncomfortable experiences such as clients leaving your practice, staff members quitting, your spouse seeming more distant, or your kids acting like they don't want to talk to you.) The next stage is realizing you're using Attack behaviors while you're doing it. Eventually, you'll be able to notice the impulse to Attack before you act.

The key here is gaining greater awareness of your anger and your pull to retaliate as those feelings arise; they typically remain outside consciousness until it's too late. If you start tuning in to your physical sensations, you might notice some characteristic signs of anger: teeth clenching, fist tightening, heat in your body, internal trembling, etc. If you listen closely to the thoughts going through your head, you may notice that you're mentally rehearsing

Attacks on the other person. The first clue is the voice tone you're about to use—it may be louder than usual, hostile, contemptuous, threatening, or blameful.

If you're using Attacks in your own internal dialogue, you have work to do before you talk. Remind yourself that angry feelings are natural and that you have choices in how you express them. In this way, you give yourself the training you may not have received when you were younger—consciously separating feelings from action until you have control over your choice of behavior.

When people count to ten, they're doing much the same thing: noticing they are feeling so angry they might say or do something they'll later regret, and then taking steps to calm down. In addition to just counting to ten, we suggest that you use that time to think about what you're feeling and

what your goal is. Consciously reminding yourself of your goal (e.g., to make a decision or to settle a disagreement) helps you focus on what you want to achieve. You can ask yourself, "Will this Attack behavior I want to use take me toward or away from my goal?" and "What behavior might I try that would be more effective in reaching my goal?" This helps you channel your energy into behaviors that help you get what you want.

If you're too angry to refrain from hostile behavior, your only nonhostile option may be to leave the situation for a period of time. You can say that you're angry and call for a time-out, or just say, "I'd like to take a break now, while we think about where we are." Anger involves a strong activation of the sympathetic nervous system, and it can take a while for you to recover your equilibrium. While you're still aroused, you're more likely to become frustrated or irritated again. Take some time to do what works for you to calm down.

Once you've cooled down a bit and you can begin thinking about the content of what has

been said to you, you're ready to take the next steps toward more effective communication—taking the remarks less personally and choosing an alternative behavior.

### Taking Attack/Blame Less Personally

Even when you're not feeling angry, it's extremely difficult to respond effectively to Attack behaviors. Simply finding the appropriate words or the motivation to communicate can be quite a challenge—why would you want to share information with someone who just called you insensitive, selfish, or a jerk, or accused you of

ruining his day? Whenever you feel like you're being criticized by a client (or by a student, colleague, family member, or friend), the key is to learn how to take the comments less personally.

Take the example of someone saying to you, "That tie looks awful with that shirt." First, notice that this is an Attack state-

ment. The primary information expressed in any Attack statement is about the speaker, not about you; it doesn't give you any new information about you or what you've done. (In this case, you don't learn anything new about your tie, your shirt, or your fashion sense.) Remember that an Attack is the speaker's mental picture or opinion of you, not an accurate or objective representation of you.

If your knowledge of yourself differs from the speaker's mental picture, you're less likely to get angry. To take an extreme example, imagine someone saying in an angry voice, "That watermelon on your head makes you look really stupid!" As long as you know there is no watermelon on your head, you're unlikely to take that comment personally and start feeling angry or worrying that there might be a problem with what you're wearing.

You're much more likely to get angered by Attacks that echo your negative judgments or worries about yourself. If you don't feel confident about your appearance, a criticism of your clothing



choices may really annoy you. When you're confronted about anything you are uneasy about, it's a lot more challenging to avoid taking Attacks personally—but it's not impossible. Instead of getting mad at the person who's echoing some of your self-criticisms, with practice you can start to consider where you might agree with him. Then, you can turn your energy toward taking in the part of his information that might be useful.

As another example, imagine a client who tells you in an irritable tone, "You're abrupt with me when I call to make appointments." If you're worried that this may be true—you're uncomfortable talking on the phone and try to get off as quickly as possible—the comment will sting, and you are more likely to launch a counterattack (e.g., "I'm really busy—I don't have time to waste making small talk on the phone."). However, if you're confident you're appropriate on the telephone, or if being abrupt doesn't make you feel bad about yourself, you won't be as strongly affected. You might simply reply, "Yes, you're right. I am frequently short on the phone when I have clients waiting." Or you can tune in to possible concerns he might have: "Have I been cutting off your conversation without hearing the issues you called me about?"

By taking Attacks less personally, you can shift your focus away from what is being said about you and onto what's going on for the person speaking. Get curious about the issues underlying the Attack. This may make it easier to move on to the next step: deciding how to respond.

### Alternative Responses

The way you respond to someone who has Attacked you will depend on your relationship with that person, the context you're in (business or personal), and your goals at the time. The strategy that meets your goals when speaking with your client may not be appropriate for communicating with your boss, your spouse, your best friend, or the angry stranger in the car behind you in traffic. In all of these cases, it helps to take things less personally. In addition, in contexts where you want to maintain or deepen a professional or personal relationship, there's good reason to go a step further: continuing the conversation by getting the information flow going.

In part one, we gave examples of several different behaviors you can use as alternatives to Attack/ Blame. Here, we'll focus on two particularly helpful approaches: paraphrasing and mining for hidden information.

### Paraphrasing

Earlier, we mentioned that Attack behaviors tend to derail conversations by stopping the flow of information; the data needed for mutual understanding or problem solving doesn't get expressed directly and, therefore, doesn't get heard. The way to get things back on track is to get information flowing again. Paraphrasing is an excellent way to do that.

A Paraphrase is an accurate and empathetic reflection of another person's comments. In order to be able to Paraphrase, you need to listen closely to the other person so you know what they are actually saying (not just what you think they mean). When Paraphrasing, you reflect back the exact content of what was said to you—using either the same words or words meaning the same thing—without adding in your own interpretations or subtracting the parts that don't seem important to you.



This is a skill that is particularly difficult to use when under Attack. If someone says to me, "I like your new uniform," I don't have much problem Paraphrasing, even if I don't like the uniform. I can easily say, "I'm hearing that you like this uniform." But if someone says to me, "During my sessions, you're always talking about yourself. You don't even pay attention to me," that's going to be more difficult, because every cell in my body is aroused and bristling to respond. I may be inclined to Attack back ("All I do is listen to you talk about your problems.") or to Self-attack ("I must really be falling down on

the job. I've let my own interests get in the way of helping my clients."'). However, if I can avoid taking the Attack personally and instead listen closely to what the client is saying I can Paraphrase: "I'm hearing you say that I don't pay attention to you—that I talk too much about myself." I can go on to add, "Is that right? Is that what you're feeling?"

To get a sense of the effect a Paraphrase can have on an angry person, just imagine that it was you who had delivered an Attack and been Paraphrased in return by an imaginary (and unlikely) angelic client.

**Imaginary therapist letting it all out:** "I'm fed up with your carping and complaining about how long your treatment is taking when week after week you come in and say you didn't have time to do any of your exercises. You have the same twenty-four hours a day the rest of us have." (Attack statement)

**Imaginary angelic client:** "I really hear how upset it makes you when week after week I don't do the things you recommend, and then I come in and complain about not getting better faster." (Paraphrase statement)

An accurate, empathetic Paraphrase lets you know, in no uncertain terms, that your listener is interested in your point of view and has taken the time to hear what you're saying. Often this is experienced as a real surprise and relief. Using a Paraphrase is good for the Paraphraser as well as the person being reflected: when you provide someone with the unusual and satisfying experience of being heard and understood, you make it much more likely that the person will be able to hear and understand what you say next.

When someone is using Attack behaviors toward you, giving an accurate and sympathetic Paraphrase can be quite challenging for two reasons: 1) it requires you to hear things that you may believe are untrue or that feel provocative without reacting to immediately correct them, and 2) it requires you to remain empathetic to the speaker's perspective.

When you disagree with the content of an Attack, you may be inclined to focus on your disagreement and respond with facts and logical reasoning that explain why you're really right.

For example:

**Client:** "You aren't keeping up to date with all the new advances!" (Attack)

**You:** "Hold on a minute—I just took sixteen credits of continuing education!" (Self-defense)

This type of response to an Attack rarely leads to a satisfying conclusion. Whenever someone is angry

### Key Concept

The plus side of Attack/Blame—it gives you a clue that there is valuable hidden information about the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

and the anger is not being addressed, facts and explanations are likely to be used as more ammunition to continue the fight. For example, the client might respond, "Well, maybe you aren't taking the right courses!"

A Paraphrase gives you something constructive you can do instead of Attacking, Self-defending, or walking away—you can say out loud what you understood the person to be saying, without editing it or adding to it. This reporting back focuses you on understanding what the other person wants you to hear rather than on evaluating whether you agree or disagree with those statements. For example:

**Client:** "You aren't keeping up to date with all the new advances!" (Attack)

**You:** "You're thinking that I'm falling behind in my learning?" (Paraphrase)

**Client:** "Yes, my friend is getting the new XYZ treatment and you're not doing it." (New information)

By paraphrasing the client, you're giving her the space to say more about what's upsetting her. This allows you to get the information you need to talk to her about what's bothering her—the XYZ treatment her friend is getting and she's not.

If you Paraphrase accurately first, you have a better chance of successfully moving to the next step in resolving your problem: mining for hidden information.

### Mining for hidden information

We mentioned in part one that Attack/Blame is a source of valuable information about the speaker. Underlying this behavior are hidden thoughts and feelings that are fueling the Attack and the fight. This cognitive and emotional data can be used as a resource to resolve the conflict and can actually help to make a relationship stronger. There is truth in the cliché that people often feel closer after resolving a huge fight; in the process of working things out, each person can learn more about what the other is thinking and feeling, and that builds deeper understanding and intimacy.

Any use of Attack/Blame indicates that strong feelings are involved—we use this behavior when we have concerns about ourselves, about people we care for, or about other issues important to us. You can tap into that personal information by asking questions about what the other person is feeling and thinking and giving information about your own feelings and thoughts.

Recall the example of a client saying, "You aren't keeping up to date with all the new advances!"

We mentioned that a Paraphrase alone might be sufficient to encourage the person to offer new information. If it is not, you could ask questions to solicit concrete pieces of information. For instance:

**You:** “You’re thinking that I’m falling behind in my learning?” (Paraphrase)

**Client:** “Yes.” (Answer)

#### Asking about their reasons.

**You:** “What leads you to think that?”

**Client:** “My friend is getting the new XYZ treatment and you’re not doing it.”

#### Asking about their feelings.

**You:** “Are you feeling worried you’re not getting the best kind of treatment for you?”

**Client:** “Yes. I was feeling really good about coming here and taking care of myself, and now I’m worried that I should actually be doing something else.”

#### Telling your feelings.

**You:** “I’m grateful you told me about your concern so I can respond to it. I want you to feel confident and knowledgeable about the treatment you’re getting.”

#### Telling your reasons.

**You:** “I am familiar with the XYZ treatment. However, it is not recommended for people with your particular injury.”

Notice how soliciting information from the client enables you to understand the thoughts and feelings driving the original Attack. This makes it a lot more likely that the information you choose to share will be relevant to the client’s concerns and will help you reach a mutually satisfying outcome.

### Bridging the Skills Gap

Although communication skills are not always adequately addressed in massage therapy training, they are essential to our professional success and growth. Our ability to communicate effectively is often as important as our hands-on techniques in affecting our clients’ satisfaction and the pleasure we take in our work. Learning to skillfully handle challenging conversations—particularly those involving Attack/Blame, where information exchange has come to a stop—is not a quick or easy process. The rewards, however, are great and are transferable to many different contexts. If you’re interested in getting a deeper understanding of your own communication challenges, consider continuing your learning in a more interactive way, whether that means working one on one



with a psychotherapist or communications coach or taking a communication skills workshop. As you enhance your ability to work through difficulties with clients, you’ll be better prepared to handle conflicts that arise with colleagues, friends, family members, and others you encounter in the course of daily life. We hope you’ll find the information in this article to be a helpful step in that direction. **M&B**

(For more of the underlying theory explaining what makes communication work, see “Communication in the Treatment Room, Part One,” *Massage & Bodywork*, August/September 2007, page 102, or visit [www.massageandbodywork.com](http://www.massageandbodywork.com).)

*Anita Simon, EdD, is codeveloper of SAVI with Yvonne Agazarian. She has been writing about SAVI since 1965 and has delivered workshops on this and related topics since 1968. Simon is in private practice as a psychotherapist in Philadelphia, specializing in work with couples, business partners, and individuals. She can be contacted at [anitasimon@savicomunications.com](mailto:anitasimon@savicomunications.com). The SAVI website is [www.savicomunications.com](http://www.savicomunications.com).*

*Ben E. Benjamin, PhD, holds a doctorate in education and sports medicine. He is senior vice president of strategic development for Cortiva Education and founder of the Muscular Therapy Institute. Benjamin has been in private practice for more than forty years and has taught communications as a trainer and coach for more than twenty-five years. He teaches extensively across the country on topics including communication, SAVI, ethics, and orthopedic massage, and is the author of Listen to Your Pain, Are You Tense? and Exercise without Injury and coauthor of The Ethics of Touch. He can be contacted at [bbenjamin@cortiva.com](mailto:bbenjamin@cortiva.com).*