# **6 Ways to De-Escalate a Heated Argument**

Dan Bates, LMHC, LPCC, NCC

Mental Health Nerd

1. Regulate your own emotions. Make sure you approach the other person in a calm manner. Take a moment to collect yourself, take a deep breath, tell yourself that you can do this, then engage. Don’t get caught in the escalation and respond when heated or caught up in the intensity.
2. Acknowledge the feelings of the other person. Don’t focus on if the other person is right or wrong. Just listen and acknowledge their feelings. Validate what they are saying so that they feel heard and understood.
3. Don’t try to fix the situation or problem-solve. When people are escalated, they are not cognitively able to think critically. If you shift into problem-solver mode, this will not be a helpful match to the situation and could exacerbate the intensity.
4. Stay present; don’t remove yourself from the situation unless you need to. Walking away may make the other person feel dismissed or disrespected, which could increase the escalation. Only walk away if you are in physical danger and you have a clear exit strategy. Otherwise, stay present, let the other person know you are there for them, regulate your emotions, and validate their feelings.
5. Model appropriate [emotional regulation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/emotion-regulation) and [self-control](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/self-control). When the escalated person sees you behaving calmly and compassionately, that influences them to do the same. The escalated person will follow your lead.
6. Once the situation is less escalated, then redirect and problem-solve. Redirecting or problem-solving may involve identifying what led up to the point of escalation, clarifying miscommunication or misunderstood intentions, brainstorming solutions, weighing pros and cons, creating a plan of action to correct the problem, and then taking action.

**How To Love Your Enemies** by Pastor Jeffery Curtis Poor

One quick note… When I saw the term “enemy” I mean for it to be as broad as possible. It could be someone who stabbed you in the back. It could be that person that voted differently than you. Or the person that cut you off in traffic. You should think of your enemies as anyone who you find yourself having ill-thoughts against. Whether for a few minutes or many years.

Alright, here’s how to love your enemies.

*1. Pray For Healing From Brokenness and Bitterness (and pray for your enemies)*

Your enemies are probably enemies for a good reason. They’ve hurt you or someone you love. The hurt that our enemies have caused to us is real. Even if it’s a seemingly small hurt, it still leaves a scar.

The first step in loving our enemies is finding healing for the wounds they’ve caused. Prayer is where we start. We should take our brokenness, pain, and bitterness to God. We should ask him to bring healing in our lives.

This isn’t an overnight fix; it will take some time. And that’s okay. Start the process of healing by praying for healing and for those who have hurt you.

Learning how to love your enemies starts with recognizing the pain and seeking healing through prayer.

*2. Practice Empathy (put yourself in their shoes)*

We are increasingly becoming a more and more polarized society. We exist in echo chambers that reinforce what we already believe to be true. This has led to us lobbing stones at those whom we disagree with. Our enemies.

But instead of throwing stones we should extend a hand. To love our enemies, we need to put ourselves in their shoes.

I would bet, that if you actually got to know that person you can’t stand, I mean actually listened to them, not to argue, but to genuinely listen, if you heard their life story and took time to understand what makes them tick, you would see that they have good reason to believe what they believe.

Don’t miss this… even if what they believe is wrong, they still probably have good reason to believe it.

Learning how to love your enemies means you need to practice empathy. Put yourself in their shoes. Let that person become human and not just a target for your attacks. After all, they are created in the image of God and loved dearly.

*3. Find Common Ground*

When we are in conflict, we tend to focus on what’s wrong with the other person. We find all the faults and differences. We focus on the negative. But instead, we should find the positive.

I get it, this is hard. But I bet there is something you can find in that person that you like, that’s admirable. I promise there’s something there. Find the common ground.

I know that can be really tough. But there’s at least one thing you should always be able to find common ground in. Your enemy is created by God and loved. Just as you are. You have that in common. If you can find nothing else, focus on that. God created and loves that person.

To love your enemy, you need to stop focusing on all your differences and instead find the positive.

*4. Forgive*

There’s an incredible amount of unforgiveness in our culture. You screw up once and you are done. We live in a cancel culture. We love calling people out for their mistakes. You make a mistake and gone.

The problem is we all make mistakes. So, if you play by those rules eventually you will be the one that gets left.

Jesus offers a way out. He gives us what we need and not what we deserve. That’s called grace. We’ve been forgiven of much, therefore we should forgive others.

It’s not fair and it’s not easy, it cost Jesus his life and it will cost us too. But when we show grace, when we offer forgiveness, we are showing people a glimpse of Jesus.

In a culture that relishes pointing out others’ failure, imagine the impact a church that pours out lavish grace would make. Even on our enemies.

Part of loving your enemies is learning to forgive them for what they’ve done. Just as Jesus has forgiven us.

*5. Pursue Unity and Peace*

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Matthew 5:9

In Matthew 5:3-11 Jesus lays out the distinguishing marks of His kingdom. One of the marks is that we are to make peace. But it’s so much easier to throw gasoline on the fire, isn’t it? But that’s not what Jesus calls us to do. In a world that is broken and divided we should be pursuing peace and unity.

And that includes with our enemies.

It’s possible to have peace with those who voted differently than you. It’s possible to be friends with someone who views the world differently than you. It’s possible to stand for your convictions in love. It’s possible to love someone with whom you disagree with. It is possible to find peace with your enemies. After all, that’s what Jesus did for us.

Part of loving your enemies means pursuing peace with them.

*6. Be Patient*

All this takes time. It’s not going to change overnight. Be patient.

Be patient with yourself. It will take time for you to genuinely love your enemies. That’s okay. We are on a transformative journey where we are looking a little more like Christ each day. But it won’t happen overnight and it’s going to be hard. Be patient with yourself.

Be patient with your enemies. The same journey you are on is one that they are one. Just as you won’t change overnight, neither will they. Give them time. Jesus is the perfect example for us. He has been far more patient than we deserve. He models for us the posture we should take. We too should be patient with our enemies.

Pope Francis:

## 1. Listen before you judge.

Trump has made enough public statements and sent out enough tweets for Francis to know his position on most important issues. Still, the pontiff says he's reserving judgment until he and Trump speak in person. When they do, he says, he'll begin by [listening](https://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/7-reasons-why-its-smart-to-listen-more-than-you-talk.html) to what the president has to say. "I never make a judgment about a person without listening to them," he said. "I don't think I should do that."

## 2. Start with respect.

You don't have to agree with someone to treat them with respect, and Francis says he will bring that respect to his meeting with Trump. He told reporters, "It's a daily task, respect for the other. To say what one thinks but with respect, walking together, even if one thinks in one way, the other in another."

## 3. Be honest. It's OK if you don't agree.

If you treat someone with respect and honesty, you don't necessarily have to agree on every point, or even most points, to have a fruitful conversation. "I will say what I think, he will say what he thinks," Francis said. And he added, "We have to be very sincere about what each one thinks."

## 4. Find whatever common ground you can.

When dealing with someone who's been an opponent, it's extremely useful to find issues where you do agree, or even ordinary things you may have in common. Those can become starting points for a constructive conversation about the issues where you differ. "There are always doors that are not closed," Francis said. "We have to look for doors that are at least partly open, go in, talk about the things in common, and go forward, step by step."

## 5. Keep at it.

Once you've found some common ground, and maybe a point of agreement, keep working on your relationship, making it as strong as you can. Be patient! Building relationships takes a lot longer than starting fights. "Peace is artisanal," Francis said. "You work on it every day."

# **3 Ways to Speak Up Without Starting a Fight**

The importance of expressing your feelings in an intimate relationship shouldn't be underestimated. Being honest about how you feel allows for [bonding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attachment) and emotional closeness, which improves every aspect of your relationship; withholding how you feel creates distance and disconnection. But even knowing how important emotional expression is, many people [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear) and avoid expressing their emotions—especially when they are upset. The most commonly cited reason: “I don’t want to cause a fight.”

How do you let someone know you're upset or unhappy without causing a fight? These three steps might help you more effectively express yourself.

1. *Don’t assume you'll be met with a negative response.*

Assuming that expressing your emotions will cause conflict is part of the problem. To be fair, most people jump to this conclusion because they've experienced trying to express how they feel and having it turn into a fight. But when you *imagine* something going badly, you *prepare* for it to go badly. When people expect a fight, they avoid expressing negative emotions until they are so upset that they can’t hold them in any longer. Feelings that may have been brewing for many weeks come out in an explosion that feels like an attack to the other person.

Instead of doing this, imagine what it would be like to talk to your partner in a way that would feel calm. When you don't expect a conversation to go badly and can anticipate a *positive* outcome, your approach and energy will be entirely different when you engage with your partner.

2. *Use "I feel" statements without justifying them.*

Expressing emotions can make you feel vulnerable. As a result, most people are naturally inclined to want to *justify* their feelings, often by blaming the other person in some way: "I feel upset because of what you said and did." But blaming the other person by stating that how you feel is his or her fault makes them defensive—and prevents them from hearing what you are saying.

Instead, try to state how you feel—and then put a period after the emotion and wait for a response: *I feel annoyed. I feel frustrated. I feel sad.* Most people find this much harder than it sounds, because putting an emotion out there without a justification can make you feel awkward and exposed. But if the person you are speaking to cares about you, their natural response will be "Why?" That person is now engaged and has invited you into a conversation.

3. *Express what you want before what you don’t want.*

Most negative feelings are generated because of something you don’t like or don’t want. On the other side of what you don’t want, though, is something you *do* want: *"I feel angry because I don’t like being dismissed: I want to be heard."* Or, *"I feel hurt because I don’t like that you are always busy: I want you to spend more time with me."*

Instead, skip over the part about what you don’t want, and go directly to what you *do* want to avoid putting the other person on the defensive. This way you empower the other person to identify what they can do to make the situation better—and you increase the likelihood that your needs and wants will be heard.

Old way:

You: I feel upset because you never spend any time with me. (blaming)

Your partner: What are you talking about? We are always together. (defensive)

New way:

You: I feel upset. (feeling without justification)

Your partner: Why are you upset? (inviting)

You: I love you and want us to spend more time together. (what you want)

Your partner: I would like that too.

Changing the way you express your emotions is harder than it sounds. I encourage you to practice first in your head and then on other people before trying it with your partner. The benefit of getting your needs met and increasing the emotional [intimacy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/relationships) in your relationship is well worth the effort.

I am the director of the Outpatient [Psychotherapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/therapy) Treatment Program at Emory Healthcare, the developer of [Future Directed Therapy](http://www.futuredirectedtherapy.com/), and the author of *Think Forward to Thrive: How to Use the Mind’s Power of Anticipation to Transcend Your Past and Transform Your Life.*