

Chopped Broccoli!

Lessons About Safety from People With Mental Health Challenges

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Some of our workshops serve people struggling with severe, chronic mental illnesses. These students have given me profound insights in learning to teach personal safety more effectively to people of all abilities. Their honesty and courage have added depth to my understanding of what it means to be safe and have showed me how, with a little imagination, People Safety skills can be adapted to help address all kinds of problems. Here are a few stories about working with these very vulnerable people.

Useful in All Worlds

In one workshop, I started the session by asking, "What concerns do you have about your emotional or physical safety?"

A very kind tired-looking woman said earnestly, "I am **terrified** that evil people from my Lower or Upper Worlds will attack my therapist and the other people who are helping me here in the Middle World."

"Well," I said, "We're going to practice many different ways of protecting ourselves from people who might want to harm us. You can tell me what you think might work best for your situation. And think of it, **you** can teach these personal safety skills to your therapist and other people you care about, so **they'll** be safer no matter **what** world someone who wants to bother them comes from. Okay?"

I grinned at her and she grinned back.



Welcoming everyone to the table

Rude Voices on the Bus

In another workshop, we were talking about mistakes, and a large, formidable-looking woman said contritely, "I made a really big mistake on the way over here. I was riding the bus, and the voices in my head were bothering me, so I jumped up and yelled at them to, 'SHUT THE FUCK UP!' Only I yelled out loud, and everybody on the bus stared at me. What should I do when that happens?"

This took a little thought. We brainstormed some options and decided that the best thing to do if your behavior was alarming to the people around you would probably be to sit down quietly and say in a clear, calm voice, 'Excuse me. I didn't realize that I was talking out loud.' And then to say **silently** to yourself some things like, 'Nobody's perfect ... mistakes are part of learning ... I'm a good person even if I have problems.'

NOT Getting Into Fights

A large, tough-looking man suddenly said, "I need to learn how **not** to get into fights. When I was in the store, somebody bumped into me and said, 'Watch where you're going, you stupid jerk!' I got really mad and almost got into very bad trouble."

I demonstrated with my teaching partner what happens when you react aggressively to someone who is rude. Everyone could see how dangerous escalating the situation might be. We then showed how it was possible to say, "Oops, excuse me!" and walk away, even if the person was saying and doing rude things to try to pick a fight with you.

Everyone practiced being shoved, apologizing even though it wasn't true or fair, and then moving away with awareness, calm, and confidence. Each person then practiced throwing away the words, "Stupid Jerk" and saying to herself or himself, "I am a great person, and it takes more courage to not fight than to fight."

Practicing the "Oops, excuse me" self-defense tactic has become a standard part of many of our teen and adult workshops, because learning to leave with kindness even when others are mean while you protect your own feelings combines many useful skills.

Ella's Story – "What you teach could hurt someone's feelings!"

I taught occasionally at a day treatment program, and "Ella" came to every class. At first, Ella would peek in for just a few minutes and then run out as soon as she heard me say the word, "No." If anyone used a loud voice with her, she would bow her head and scuttle away in a perfect victim posture. Over the years, Ella started to stay longer and longer and would even occasionally say "Stop" herself or do some of the practices.

Ella explained repeatedly to me and to everyone who would listen that she was so horribly afraid of rejection that it upset her to be told "No" or to stop, or to have to set boundaries with anyone else. "I just want to know that if I do something wrong, I will still be loved and forgiven," Ella mourned. "Couldn't you teach us about peace and love instead of about self-defense and boundaries? What you teach could hurt someone's feelings!"

Ella called our office periodically to leave some interesting thoughts for me on our voice mail, handed me books about social justice, and peeked at the *Wake Up* video I gave her, showing children practicing Kidpower, in much the same way that she used to peek into our workshops. "Those children say 'No' a

lot!" she said in a mixture of fascination and fear. She was a big fan of Pete Seeger and showed us a letter from him encouraging Ella to "Never give up!"

The first day in one round of workshops, we were sitting at the lunch that this program provided as an incentive to get people to come. Ella sat next to me to tell me once again about her longing to be forgiven if she hurt someone. A couple of the other people there said that they also wanted to be forgiven, because they knew that they had done things sometimes in their illness that were hurtful to people they cared about.

Suddenly, I had an inspiration. I turned to the person next to me on the side away from Ella and said, "Please forgive me for hurting you." I coached her to answer me, "I forgive you!" and then to ask for forgiveness from **her** neighbor. We went around the circle asking for forgiveness and being forgiven.

When it was Ella's turn, she looked at me beseechingly and said in a shaking voice, "Please forgive me. I am **really** sorry I hurt you!"

I paused for a moment to really take Ella in with her round tall body, shaven head, book and papers falling off her lap, mustard and bits of hot dog smeared around her mouth, and big, anxious, brave brown eyes. I then said, with a great deal of affection and truth, "Ella, I forgive you and I will always, **always** love you, no matter what!"

For about twenty seconds the whole room including Ella basked in a rosy glow of universal forgiveness and unconditional love.

The spell was broken when Ella said in a worried voice, "Thank you, Irene ... But what about all the **other** people?"

"Ella," I said firmly, "Everyone in this room could say they forgive and love you, and everyone in Santa Cruz could say they forgive and love you, and everyone in the **whole world** could say they forgive and love you, but it won't be enough unless you forgive and love **yourself!** Remember the practice we did about stepping too close into each other's boundaries? When you demand that people feel a certain way and they don't, you are stepping too close into their boundaries, and they are likely to want to move away from you."

The next session, Ella brought a stuffed animal, a lioness, and introduced her to my teaching partner and me. "She says she is my mother, and she gives me lots of love." Clutching her lioness protector, Ella stayed for almost the whole class.

"Have you noticed, Irene," Ella asked me in the break, "That I have much less fear in this class than I used to?"

Boundaries at the Doctor's Office

We often work on applying the skills learned to a wide variety of problems and practice not getting triggered in order to be effective in setting boundaries. For example, one woman, who I'll call Rosa, needed her x-rays from a doctor's office so that she could take them to court on a domestic violence case. Rosa's trigger was that busy people in offices don't listen. We talked about how one can stay centered and respectful while being persistent and powerful, and how people are more likely to do what you want if you sound firm but not upset.

I pretended to be a totally insensitive, overworked office clerk at the doctor's office. With a little coaching on the words to say, Rosa repeatedly spoke up for herself in a calm, centered voice, "I see that you're busy,

but I need this information for my court case ... your office said that it would be ready ... I took the bus to get here ... I'll just wait right here until you can help me ... if you can't help me, I want to speak to your supervisor."

Chopped Broccoli

A man sat down to join us in one workshop and suddenly started talking in a way that at first didn't seem connected with what we were working on. "Yesterday I was making the meal," the man explained with a serious face. "There was only a little broccoli. There wasn't going to be enough for everybody, so I chopped the broccoli and chopped the broccoli until it was in very small pieces. That way everyone could have some."

I smiled at him. "Making sure everyone can have some broccoli is a very good way of helping people to feel safe."

"Yes," the man said seriously. A few minutes later, having imparted his wisdom, he got up and walked away.