

There are many situations where it's extremely difficult not to respond to someone, like when a person has just pushed your buttons. But intense, problematic circumstances it never makes much sense to respond—or better react—impulsively. What's needed is a moment or two to reflect on whether your instant reaction, if expressed, will make things better—or, more likely, worse.

Following are 8 instances in which you'd be a lot better off not responding (at least not right away) to provocations, despite the clear temptation to do so.

I'd advise you not to respond to another person if...

1. It would likely offend someone, without having any realistic possibility either of resolving the situation or improving the relationship. You may genuinely care about the person, or the relationship may be truly important to you (pragmatically or otherwise). So there's no good reason to risk alienating them by being more candid about, or negatively evaluative of, their behaviour than they can handle emotionally. Some people are kind, loyal, and supportive, but also quick to take offence and highly reactive to criticism. Other people's rigidity makes it virtually impossible for them to appreciate a differing viewpoint. So it's just foolish to say something that would only distress them and accentuate the differences between you. If these individuals say or do something that bothers you, it's generally best to try to overlook it and, internally, find a way to resolve your immediate frustrations with them rather than confronting them directly.

2. It would hurt their feelings. If you want to act in a way that's tactful, considerate, and caring, you certainly don't want to make a gratuitous comment on another person's, say, "bad hair day." Even if they specifically request feedback on their appearance, it's only charitable to minimize how their hair looks and focus on what in their self-presentation is more becoming. If they turn out to have a strong self-image, you'll have that much more latitude to respond frankly, but at first, it makes sense to ponder how answering candidly might affect them. The same rule holds true if someone has said something naive, misinformed, self-contradictory, etc. Would it simply hurt the person—and your relationship—to simply utter the first words that come to mind, without first considering the negative impact your response might have?

My advice might seem to echo the platitude, "**It's better not to say anything if you have nothing nice to say.**" But the reluctance to speak out to avoid hurting another's feelings really isn't about suppressing your expression—which, generally, I don't recommend. It's about not needlessly, imprudently, or harshly responding to someone who has acted in a way that, at the moment, has made you uncomfortable.

3. **It would make you seem defensive, closed-minded, or even cantankerous.** If someone is offering you constructive criticism, it may be important to put your ego aside and conscientiously evaluate the legitimacy of their viewpoint. In such cases, it's much better to remain silent, listen attentively, and only then give a response (if at all). Whether, in the end, you agree with their unfavourable appraisal or not, it's still in your best interest to open-mindedly assess its validity. For while you may be reluctant to hear it, what they have to say might still potentially be beneficial. If you can't resist the immediate impulse to defend yourself, you may miss out on a valuable opportunity to learn something important about yourself.

4. **It would only further intensify someone's anger.** When someone is far too fired up to listen rationally to anything you might say, it's worse than useless to respond to them. Any response will probably be premature and serve only to make matters worse because it's likely to be experienced as an interruption, as though you're not really listening or taking the person seriously. In such cases—if there's to be any hope of ultimately resolving the situation—it's essential to devote all your attention to hearing someone out and giving them every chance to fully air their grievances. Only then might they be open to hearing your contrasting viewpoint, or interpretation.

It's also essential to avoid any knee-jerk, defensive reaction that will probably only heighten the person's animosity. When you realize that the other person is clearly overreacting, the best thing to do is stay present and mindful, look at them directly (non-evasively), and fully attend to what they're so vehemently saying. That way, you'll optimize the chance that feeling heard by you, they'll eventually calm down. Then, and only then, does it make sense—gingerly—to express your alternative perspective?

Besides, you may need to calm yourself down during such a confrontation. The person may be saying accusatory things that feel not simply exaggerated, but unjust and even abusive. Such self-soothing will help you to read between their impassioned lines and get a better sense of how they may, deep down, have been hurt by whatever you did or said. Not that you necessarily intended to hurt the person, but what you did may have (perhaps unconsciously) reminded them of some past experience that's still negatively charged for them. If, on the other hand, you impulsively react to them without understanding something of the dynamic behind their vocal ferocity, such a response may only worsen the situation.

5. **It would only intensify your own anger.** Following your impulse to attack a person who just upset you is only likely to exacerbate things. Emotions—not just anger, but anxiety and depression—are best kept at moderate levels. When they start to become really pronounced, your better judgment may be seriously compromised and you can react in ways you'll later regret. Better to hold your tongue and do whatever is required to calm yourself—deep, abdominal breathing; mindfulness meditation; progressive muscle relaxation; visualization, etc.—than blindly follow an impulse to retaliate against the person who provoked you.

It's simply impossible to respond judiciously in circumstances where you're feeling so disturbed that you're on the verge of "losing it." Carefully monitor what's going on inside you: Can you feel your face beginning to flush? Your heart rate rising? Your hands beginning to tremble or shake? Your stomach fluttering like a butterfly? Or perhaps you're experiencing a thunderous, whole-body energy surge? These are all clues that your emotions are threatening to overtake your logical faculties. Take a deep breath and endeavour to evaluate the rationality of what's going on between your ears.

6. **It would dignify—or give credence to—some spiteful individual's degrading of you.** There's no good reason to respond to anyone whose prime motive is to taunt you. When, out of hostility or malice, another person stridently attacks something you said or wrote, responding to their verbal venom may give their words an authority they hardly deserve. The familiar expression, "I won't dignify that with a response," applies here. Most third parties would grasp that you avoided reacting to someone else's comment not because their defamation was righteous but because what they said hardly warranted a response. Internet snipers, for example, can hurt you only with your consent. Ironically, your power in these situations comes from ignoring their rhetorical jabs. In most instances, you're in no way obliged to respond to belligerent, non-constructive criticism. If someone is gratuitously attacking your character, it's senseless to try to defend yourself or to sneer back at them. The best way to settle the matter is through silence, which leaves yourself much less open to further onslaughts.

7. It could lead you to engage with someone whose goal is to ensnare you. When someone baits you into an unwinable verbal duel, it's probably because it affords them the perverse gratification of acting out their contentious, argumentative predilections. If you get into the ring, it's virtually guaranteed that a TKO will ensue—that is, stooping to their level is already a defeat. As Mark Twain said, "**Never argue with stupid people. They will drag you down to their level and then beat you with experience.**" If someone has already prodded you into responding to them and is pushing for a second round, it's wise to cut your losses and call it quits, recognizing that they're only goading you to partake in an ongoing exercise in futility—or foolishness. Such bullying is best ignored, especially if they're only indulging in mudslinging to feed illusions of being stronger or superior to others.

8. It could reinforce a behaviour that needs to change. To close in a completely different direction, when young children have a tantrum, this is their way of getting attention (however negative) or manipulating a situation to get their way. With few exceptions, it's typically best not to react to such unruly behaviour (in preschoolers or adults) but, tactically, to ignore it, especially since an active response might inadvertently strengthen the impulse. Children need to learn how to deal with the inevitable frustrations of life. If they're acting out of control yanks your chain to the point that you refer to them, you're actually "teaching" them to act that way to maximize the odds that they'll get what they want. And that's hardly in your—or their—best interests.