

Is It Mistreatment? Practices for Productive Teacher-Learner Interactions

Michael Ainsworth, MD, professor and senior associate dean for educational performance, and Karen Szauter, MD, professor and assistant dean for educational affairs, University of Texas Medical Branch School of Medicine

Mistreatment is complicated ...

- It is personal and involves perception.¹
- It is not limited to negative feedback or confrontation.
- It can occur unintentionally during interactions.

	EMPHASIZE interactions more likely to be perceived as SUPPORTIVE	AVOID interactions more likely to be perceived as MISTREATMENT
<p>Apply behaviors that are PROFESSIONAL</p> <p>Emphasize interactions that are constructive, appropriate to the encounter, and not shame inducing²</p>	<p>EMPHASIZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing feedback on strategies for improvement—not just faults or weaknesses Focusing criticism on the behavior needing improvement Basing critique on direct observation and performance 	<p>AVOID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing feedback on mistakes without providing suggestions or means for correction Focusing criticism on the learner's faults on a personal level Basing critique on value judgments or inferences
<p>Apply behaviors that are RESPECTFUL</p> <p>Engage learners using methods that allow them to recognize you as their advocate</p>	<p>EMPHASIZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing a calm, measured amount of criticism Conveying criticism in suitable settings—privately when needed Providing input early enough to allow time for improvement 	<p>AVOID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing emotionally charged, rushed, overwhelming criticism Conveying criticism in public when privacy is more appropriate Blindsiding learner with criticism too late for improvement
<p>Apply behaviors that are HUMANISTIC</p> <p>Be deliberate in your sensitivity to learner values, culture, and background</p>	<p>EMPHASIZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrating sensitivity to learner vulnerability Making suggestions tailored to learners as individuals Extending equal learning opportunities and benefits to all 	<p>AVOID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploiting power differential to control learners Making offhand remarks that stereotype learners Discriminating in treatment based on gender, race, ADA* factors, or other protected classes
<p>Apply behaviors of an EXPERT TEACHER</p> <p>Use teaching methods that reflect validated techniques</p>	<p>EMPHASIZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on relevant learner skills integral to the task Focusing on skills that are under the learner's control Providing orientation and direction appropriate to the task 	<p>AVOID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing vague, confusing, or task-irrelevant instruction Focusing criticism on areas (e.g., environmental, programmatic) beyond the learner's control Assuming expectations are obvious to the learner without direction

*ADA, Americans with Disabilities Act

AVOID these unproductive attitudes and strategies

- **Offensive/misinterpreted behaviors:** Touching, vulgarity, or personal errands
- **Overyeneralizations:** Concluding that differences in perception mean someone will inevitably be offended, so why attend to words so closely
- **Personalizations:** Conveying the sentiment that mistreatment prepared you for life
- **Frustrations:** Sharing regrets that learners are simply oversensitive to any criticism
- **Complaints:** Using generational differences or political correctness as a justification for mistreatment
- **Ignoring learners/avoiding feedback:** Sidestepping difficult feedback conversations, which is unhelpful and often viewed as dismissive³
- **Relying too heavily on humor:** Joking as a means to build camaraderie, but which may be misinterpreted, may be at another's or a group's expense, and may be offensive

References:

1. Gan R, Snell L. When the learning environment is suboptimal: Exploring medical students' perceptions of "mistreatment." *Acad Med.* 2014;89:608–617.
2. Bynum WE 4th, Artino AR Jr, Uijtdehaage S, Webb AMB, Varpio L. Sentinel emotional events: The nature, triggers, and effects of shame experiences in medical residents. *Acad Med.* 2019;94:85–93.
3. Buery-Joyner SD, Ryan MS, Santen SA, Borda A, Webb T, Cheifetz C. Beyond mistreatment: Learner neglect in the clinical teaching environment. *Med Teach.* 2019;41:949–955.

Author contact: mainswor@utmb.edu

