Reviews

Surviving Aggressive People

Shawn T. Smith

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(234 pages, \$15.95)

Reviewed by Claire Lawrence

On initial examination, this book looks to be an extremely promising examination of strategies to avoid becoming a victim of violence. Indeed, somewhat ambitiously, the words highlighted on the back cover read: 'This truly is a book that could save your life'. Consequently, it has a lot to live up to.

The author is an ex-Guardian Angel, ex-barman, ex-counsellor in a troubled teenagers' facility, and the founder of Peaceful Paths, a company providing violence prevention training. As such, he has personal experience of aggression and violence. This experience is drawn upon to a great extent throughout the book in order to highlight a variety of dangerous situations and the wisdom of well-chosen words and actions when facing an aggressor.

To be positive about the book: it is extremely easy to read, with case studies and repetition of main points helping the narrative along the way. It correctly emphasises the need to plan ahead when going into situations where violence could be a possibility (prepare back-up and escape routes, maintain vigilance and listen to one's intuition). A section discussing the usefulness of listening to potential aggressors, showing empathy and providing them with options is particularly well done, and the book as a whole is written with good humour and in an easy writing style.

However, I had some quite significant problems with the book. First, there is the air of scientific evidence for the claims made throughout the text (for example, discussions of the chemistry of the adrenal response, brain mechanisms and animal studies). Such 'scientific' information is often taken from studies conducted many years ago, and more recent work, which would have informed this book more effectively, is not alluded to (for example Anderson and Bushman's 2002 review of human aggression). In addition, martial-arts-derived wisdom, of dubious usefulness, informs much of the book, such as: 'Sun Tse tells us that if we know our enemies as we know ourselves, then even in a thousand battles we will never be in peril'. Given this theme and the repetitive emphasis on 'trusting one's intuition', there is a 'mystic' element to the book which, I think, clouds rather than clarifies the issue.

There is a more important problem with the book, however. It is organised into three parts: the Ground Rules; the Desperate Aggressor; and the Expert Aggressor. The Desperate Aggressor is typically an individual who has become chronically or acutely frustrated by negative circumstances and who reacts aggressively as a means of regaining mastery over the situation. The Expert Aggressor, however, is a bully who uses aggression and manipulation to achieve some other end (material or sexual gain or power). These two types of aggressor need to be dealt with, according to Smith, in very different ways. The Desperate Aggressor needs to be listened to, treated with empathy, and given back some degree of control, in order to arrive at a mutually beneficial outcome. The Expert Aggressor, however, needs to be dealt with by setting boundaries, taking control, escaping, and establishing oneself as a force to be reckoned with. Incidentally these

groups are not established categories of aggressive individuals and, as far as I am aware, no research has been conducted distinguishing between these two types. The validity of such a categorisation, therefore, remains to be examined. Although Smith recognises that at times a person who initially appears to be Desperate may in fact be Expert, and vice-versa, the result of a victim incorrectly categorising an aggressor could be catastrophic. For example, if a person is genuinely distressed about a negative situation where he/she has lost control, then according to Smith he/she should be treated very carefully—as saying the wrong thing could lead to an escalation of aggression. If the victim decides that the aggressor is in fact Expert (perhaps because the categories may not be so clear-cut as the book suggests) and reacts by establishing boundaries and by a lack of empathy, the result could be extremely costly. For this reason, I believe that the ability of individuals to make such crucial distinctions should have been tempered with considerably more caution.

In addition, the advice given is often contradictory. In one case study a woman feigns sexual interest in (ie bluffs) her potential attacker (a work colleague), asks him to call her later to arrange a sexual encounter, before driving away—we are told—never to return to her job again. The author maintains that this was a good example of how to get out of the situation, although he mentions that it would not always be an effective strategy. It is interesting that none of the *male* targets of aggression in any of the other (numerous) case studies throughout the book are applauded for leaving their source of employment as a means of avoiding a future aggressive situation. Later in the book, the author advises *against* bluffing one's aggressor (but then goes on to describe a further incident where bluffing worked).

However, there are some very good parts of this book. It is rare and effective to see such attention to the examination of case studies from a variety of 'what if' scenarios, and as such it is useful to see how the behaviour of a 'victim' can alter the course of events. However, the book has the capacity to engender over-confidence in one's ability to use one's intuition during conflict situations, and incorrect identification of the 'type' of attacker one is facing could lead to a precarious outcome.

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