



## Evaluate vs. Put Down



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*Abstract:* People often attach an emotional put-down to anything they don't like or have decided against. Put-downs of people are hurtful and have been used to control human behavior for centuries. Put-downs are intended to hurt, and to lower the esteem of the target. However, put-downs are ineffective when the target has high self-esteem. Separating out the hurtful emotion from a factual statement, and accepting any truth while rejecting the put-down emotion, can help avoid being hurt or manipulated by put-downs. We shine the light of truth on our emotions, keeping our self-esteem and helping us to avoid putting down others. Put-downs are emotional weapons to be used with great responsibility and care.

### 1. About Put-downs

When someone doesn't like something, or chooses one thing over another, one often couples one's preference or decision with a derogatory emotion toward whatever one rejects, even if there's nothing intrinsically wrong with it. If a person doesn't like broccoli, they might turn up their nose at it. There's nothing actually wrong with broccoli—the person just doesn't like the taste. But people often literally turn up their nose at something they just don't like, as if the thing itself is inherently inferior or despicable.



If someone doesn't like a particular food, they can eat something else—there's no sense in putting it down. If one doesn't enjoy opera music, one doesn't have to listen to it—there's no need to put down the music or the musicians. If one doesn't like soccer, one doesn't have to play or watch it—there's no need to put down the players or the fans. If we don't like or prefer something, it doesn't mean the thing is bad, wrong, or inherently inferior.

However, people often put down anything they simply don't like or have decided against. This is totally unnecessary, but very common.

A put-down directed toward another person is one of the most emotionally hurtful things one can do to another human being. When people are put down, many shut down out of embarrassment, or attack by reflex, or change or hide what they were shamed for whether it was harmful to anyone or not. Some people find a way to compensate for feeling inferior, such as a religion that tells its followers they are superior.

People put others down because of their occupation, how much money or assets they are perceived to control, their level and location of schooling, their ethnicity, their language or accent, their opinions or beliefs, how they look, how they dress, how their partner or family looks or dresses, the type or color of their car or bicycle, or anything they've ever said or done, even out of context. Most of these criteria for putting people down are absurd. It is always unjust to put someone down for something like their nose, native language, or parentage which they did not control. Put-downs like these are tribal behavior, less humane and more primitive than humanity's present capability.

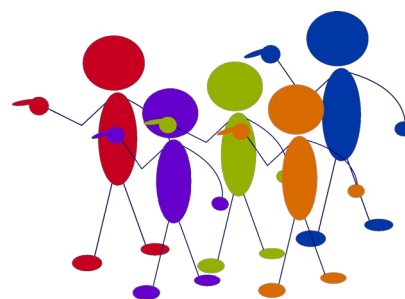


Put-downs include a cruel emotion. They are *intended* to hurt. They aim to reduce someone's self-respect and, if done publicly, their social esteem as well.

One man divorced his wife because a button on one of his dress shirts had been replaced with a slightly different one by the drycleaner, and he felt put down by another man in an elevator who commented on the discrepancy. He blamed his wife for what the drycleaner had done without her knowledge and against her instructions. Such is the power of humiliation.

Putting down people who are not present results in some of the most vicious of human behavior, since there is no chance for whomever is put down to offer facts or an alternative viewpoint, explain circumstances that others would not know, or defend oneself in any way. Most people simply adopt attitudes and accept information, especially what they hear first, what is repeated, or what is conveyed by someone in their circle or tribe. Emotions and attitudes spread as if by osmosis; people rarely verify facts or circumstances, and even more rarely ask the one who is directly involved.

Put-downs are one of the most powerful ways of inducing people to conform to tribal norms and restrictions. Schoolchildren in Europe and America were humiliated by having to wear a dunce hat and stand in the corner. People who are mocked or derided often apologize when they didn't do anything requiring an apology.




Far more insidious were witch hunts, the Inquisition, and the French Reign of Terror, which resulted in the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. Humans in large groups exhibit mob mentality, in which people act less morally and more cruelly than they would individually. The pre-frontal cortex of the brain becomes less active; people think less, and act more emotionally and more primitively. When a large group censures a person or another group, the harm and destruction can be barbaric.

Put-downs occur in many flavors: belittling, insult, disdain, scorn, derision, deingratiating, scoffing, ridicule, mocking, sarcasm, or even repeated disenfranchisement. Sometimes put-downs are mixed with humor, cheapening the humor and disguising the put-down.

What characterizes a put-down is a particular **emotion** of the speaker. A criticism, judgment or rejection can be stated objectively and dispassionately as a matter of fact, **or** as a put-down. The difference is not in the words alone. Words that appear to be complimentary can be a cruel put-down when spoken in a particular tone of voice. The situation, context, vocal and facial expression, and character of the speaker tell us whether the person was putting someone down or simply conveying information. “Jim is not up to our standards” could be a mere evaluation, or a scornful put-down. “Jane is disgusting” could actually be true if she is filthy and smells bad, or it could be just unobjective derision due to the speaker’s preferences, vindictiveness, or a host of other personal reasons having nothing to do with Jane.

Facts alone, including tragic facts, unpleasant facts, and facts that expose wrongdoing are not put-downs. Journalists and authors who report verified, accurate information about corruption provide a vital service to society. Such reporting is not cruel in any way. Facts by themselves are not cruel or emotional. People have emotional responses, but those are not caused by the facts but by the people themselves.

It is crucial to recognize the put-down emotion  in order to distinguish sentiment from information. The emotion puts **down** the target, as if trying to force it to be smaller or even non-existent. It is a mean, hateful emotion.

This cruel emotion can arise from a sense of being superior or a desire to be superior. Although most people put things and people down daily, they don’t feel full-blown hate and don’t realize it is so mean. A small put-down is a little bit hateful; a big one is a lot hateful.

A put-down emotion usually raises **up** the speaker. This is common in youth who are starting to feel a sense of their own potency, who attempt to pull their self-esteem up by pulling someone else’s down. Although people hopefully grow out of this tendency as they come into their own, it persists in many adults in all strata of society.

In an environment in which put-downs are common, people can become desensitized to them, ignoring their own internal compass because “everyone else does it.” Put-downs are an accepted element of male social behavior. Social status in male groups is hierarchical, and the pecking order dictates who is allowed to put down whom in whose company. Male-dominated industries or groups are thus more likely to exhibit and to tolerate open put-downs. Anyone with even a modest amount of “emotional intelligence”—the ability to identify emotions and use this perception to guide thought and behavior—can identify a put-down immediately, however. Social acceptance doesn’t make anything morally acceptable.

Put-downs are very common in religious and social groups. Every religion believes itself to be superior to others—or it wouldn't have any followers. Most religions teach that they have a superior founder, a superior doctrine, a superior path, and that their adherents are superior and will enjoy superior rewards.

Parents and religions teach and enforce moral and other imperatives by putting down people who disobey them. Although put-downs are intended to be hurtful, they are less hurtful than physical beatings and other forceful methods.

Since put-downs **aim** to hurt people, they are a type of personal, emotional attack. They are aggressive emotionally and mentally. Put-downs are used as social or political attacks as well.

Put-downs can be harmful when the target is a child. They can also be harmful when done publicly so as to damage someone's reputation with emotion, rather than with a justifiable complaint based on accurate facts presented in an unbiased manner.

When someone puts us down, no one else is directly responsible for our subsequent emotions. We might feel hurt, angry, sad—or we might find it funny, we might disrespect the speaker, or it might just roll off us and have no effect. Our feelings are not **due to** the speaker. Our feelings are **our** response to what the speaker said or did, but **other people cannot actually cause us to feel bad emotionally, even if they try.**

## **2. Deflecting Put-downs**

Put-downs don't always succeed in making people feel bad. People with strong self-esteem aren't affected at all, as well as people who are ignorant, arrogant, or uncaring. It is possible to have high self-esteem without pride, and with great compassion for other people.

The first step in deflecting put-downs is to separate actual facts or complaints from the put-down emotion of the speaker. We set our emotional reactions aside and look with a level-headed perspective for any facts underneath the put-down.

We also look at whether the speaker may have an ulterior motive, such as social status, our position in an organization, or appearing attractive to a potential mate.

The next step is to evaluate any actual facts to see if there's a valid complaint. We ask objectively, "Is it true?" Is there a criticism underneath the put-down that can help us improve?

① If so, the complaint is helpful. We can learn something, or do something better in the future. In this case, we can thank the speaker for the feedback and use the information to improve. Our self-esteem remains intact because we are in integrity.



Then, we dump the negative emotion that came along with the criticism. Even though the speaker wanted us to feel hurt and for our esteem to go down, and even though the person didn't intend for us to benefit, we can discard their negative emotion like a piece of trash that it is, and go merrily on our way.



② Sometimes we honestly evaluate the actual complaint and it's not valid. Someone puts down our work, but they have the facts wrong and our work is actually fine. Once a car washer found footprints on a dashboard, and put down the owner with a dirty look for engaging in reproductive activity in the car! It was completely untrue, and the business lost an irate customer. This type of comment says more about the mind and character of the speaker than about anyone else.

“Can you believe she's dating that twerp?” Such a remark puts down both parties. Is he really a twerp? Is he young, arrogant and obnoxious? Does he perhaps have some valuable qualities? Are they really dating? Is it anyone else's business? Such comments serve no good purpose. They are not worth considering.

If the complaint is untrue or invalid, we dump both the complaint and the put-down emotion. Our self-esteem remains intact. Our esteem for the speaker might diminish, however.



The next step is to examine whether we behaved in a lowly manner. Did we harm someone, or try to? Did we seek to plunder, cheat or gain unfairly? Were we deceitful? Were we underhanded?

③ If we did something we ought to be ashamed of, something immoral or dishonorable, we should apologize and reverse any harm we did as best we can. When we correct the situation and commit to ourselves that we will not repeat it, our self-esteem is restored. There is no reason to carry old guilt or shame after we have reformed.

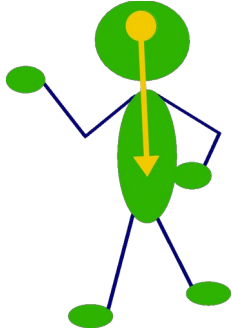
④ *If, however, a put-down emotion was just due to someone's own personal dislike or preference, it needs to be discarded just like a smelly, rotten egg, or an obvious fallacy like “2+2=5.” Unless one's aim is to counter something harmful, immoral or dishonorable, emotions that are intentionally hurtful belong in the waste bin.*



Put-downs are often manipulative, designed to induce compliance indirectly. These also belong in the waste bin if we want to make our own decisions in life. A great deal of *inner* strength of mind and will is required, because pressures on us to do what other people want are extreme from all sides, top and bottom. Being able to deflect put-downs is essential if we want to have any measure of self-direction.



Even more inner strength is required to deflect put-downs from a group. One risks rejection by the group or tribe, and one's family and friends can be ostracized as well. It takes courage and a strong character to remain firm for truth and the freedom to choose amid public censure.



In order to deflect a put-down, throw it into the waste bin, and maintain our self-esteem, we **utilize our intellect to remind us of the truth**. Then we **enlighten our emotions with the truth from our intellect and help our emotions to adjust**. We may need to remind ourselves of the truth of the situation many times. Human beings are inclined to remember traumas, and the more hurtful a put-down, the more often the emotion surfaces.

After we have dumped the base, rotten emotion that was directed against us, we have an **option to refute, rebuke, or reflect** what was said, either publicly or directly to the speaker. If we were put down publicly, it is sometimes wise to correct facts and counteract the effects of the put-down on other people's attitudes.

It is sometimes good to confront the speaker directly with the person's intended hurtfulness and any incorrect claims made. Some people need this feedback. It may even be necessary to reflect hurtful words back in order for the speaker to realize the effects.



If we do refute, rebuke or reflect, it is important that we only reflect the put-down emotion, and not add any of our own! This requires a lack of animosity, a lack of desire to retaliate or hurt the person. Reflections can be stated objectively and without unkindness in heart or voice. Here are some examples:

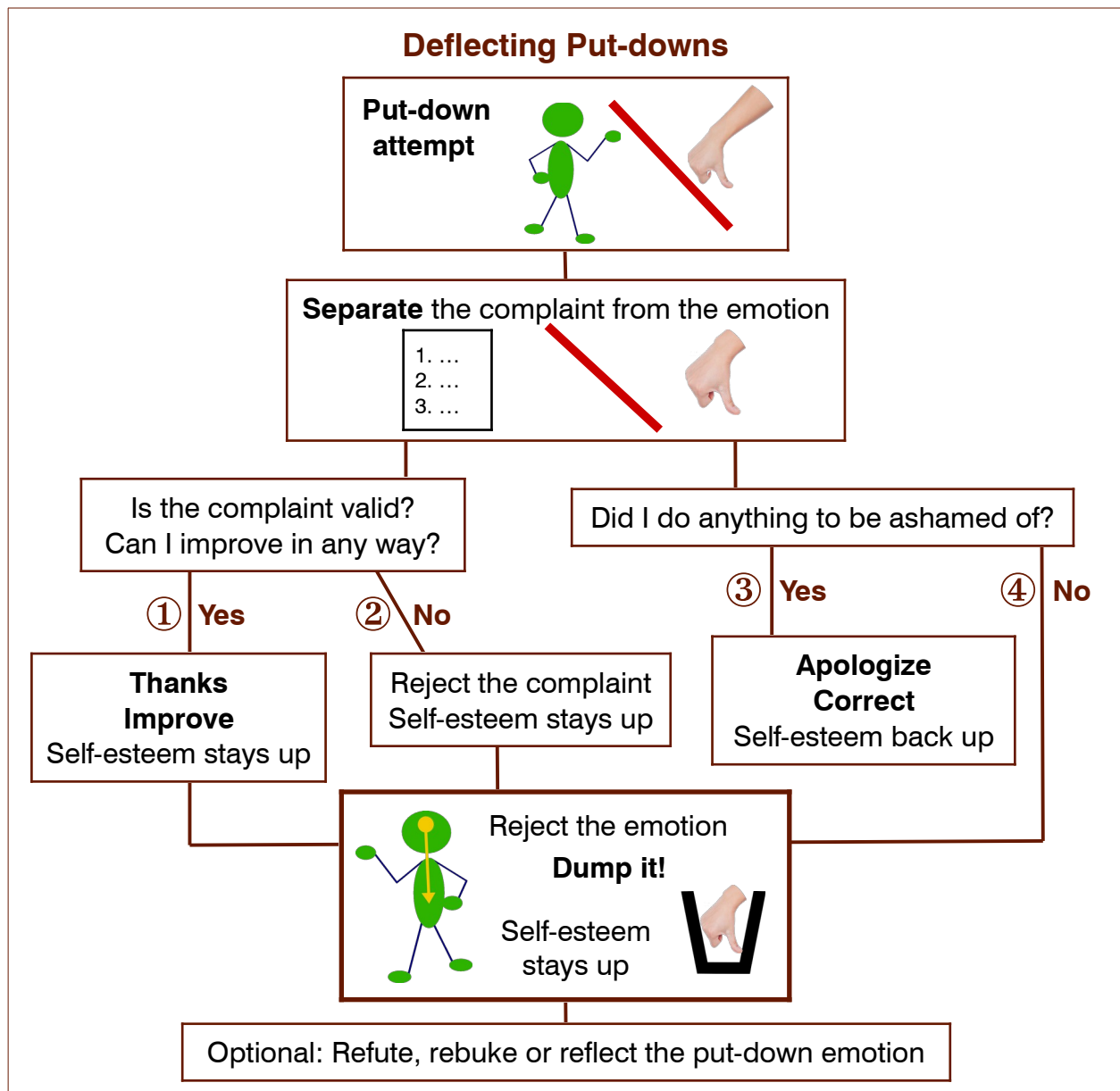
- ◆ "I don't think there's anything wrong with it. Your comment sounds harsh to me, and I'm not sure your criticism is justified."
- ◆ "Her nose doesn't bother me at all. We're all born with noses."
- ◆ "It sounds like someone made a mistake. ... Don't you ever make a mistake?"
- ◆ "Do you really think that's true? His work is excellent. He was also very kind to me last winter when I missed my bus."
- ◆ "Well, as long as her clothing is clean and decent, I don't think it's worth complaining about, or even discussing. Besides, it's not our business."
- ◆ "I would feel hurt if you said that about me. I have qualities you could make fun of too. We all do—including you, by the way."

- ◆ “It’s not right to accuse him behind his back. If you’re only trying to put him down, I’m not interested in listening. If you have a real issue, please talk to him about it. Maybe he has some reasons you don’t know about, or maybe he’ll change.”

Remember that reflecting a put-down is optional. Sometimes silence is adequate, or prudent, and sometimes it is beneficial or wise to object to even small amounts of hatefulness.

Deflecting put-downs is a crucial skill in today’s world where people all around are under pressure and think that if one gets ahead, someone else must get behind.

Here is a diagram of the process of deflecting put-downs:



### 3. Evaluating Without Put-downs

Every day we evaluate things, people, and options. We decide what to eat, what to watch, what to do. We have to judge whether one product is superior or preferable to another, whether one route, one service, or one course of action is better than another. We have to decide whom to associate with and whom not, whom to work with, whom to marry, whom to allow our children to play with. In all these cases, we must use our discrimination to evaluate and make a decision.

We must make evaluations and use our judgment. But our conclusions do not have to include any put-downs at all. Even minor put-downs can be destructive, whereas objective evaluations—feedback—can be extremely helpful and productive. **How can we make evaluations and give feedback that is truly constructive, without putting anyone down?**



Here are some things we can remember:

- Things we don't like are still likable to others. People have a right to pursue their own paths, to make their own decisions and mistakes—just like we do. Our accepting that other people have a full right to their own opinions and preferences needs to be **heartfelt**, not just a thought. We need to release our feeling that our own is **better**. Ours might actually be better, but other people still have a right to choose and learn from experience.
- Any put-down is based on a scale with superior at the top and inferior at the bottom. Each of us has our own scale, a way we evaluate qualities. **Other people have different scales**—and a right to have different scales! Again, we must accept deeply that other people have a right to decide their own priorities, and to learn by experience.

Accepting that people have a right to their own ideas does not mean their ideas are valid, or equally valid, or that we consent to any actions based on their ideas. It also doesn't mean that there are or should be no consequences for actions based on their ideas.

- Each of us also has our own ideas of which qualities are most important—our values. Most people assume that other people's values are the same, or should be the same, as their own. This is a great fallacy! Each of us has widely different natures and experiences, different sources of joy, pain and trauma. These have led to our current values.
- All of the above can be painful for us! If a close family member or friend makes a big mistake in life, we feel hurt too. We suffer with them and we help them out the best we can, at our own expense. We all seek to avoid pain, so we try to impose what we have learned or believe on others—to avoid suffering ourselves, actually.



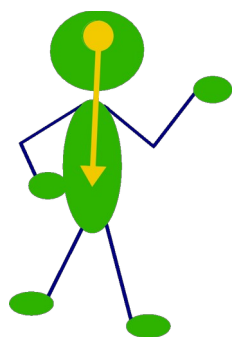
Isolating ourselves from other people to avoid the pain of their mistakes is not really a solution. We are all living this life together. Most of us would not feel fulfilled living alone in a mountain cave, self-reliant yet exposed to weather, tigers and snakes, without human company.

Life is both joyful and painful. We experience loss, illness, accidents, old age, and death. Associating with other people makes the difficulties of life easier to bear, both physically and emotionally, and it also gives us the opportunity to share our joy together.

- We also need to keep our self-esteem strong so that we never feel a need to put anyone else down in order to feel better ourselves. When someone else is down, a little part of us is down too. The best way to keep our self-esteem strong is to act honestly and honorably to the best of our ability.
- Once we are free of wanting to put anyone else down, we need to express our objective, unemotional evaluations with wording and timing that is less likely to be inflammatory or misunderstood. We can't guarantee that anyone will hear our evaluation clearly without imagining the put-down emotion, but we can do our best.

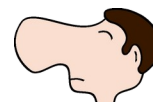
Our ideal is to eventually eliminate all hatred in any form from our heart and mind. At that point there is none left to express, even subconsciously. We don't have it in us, and it can't come out of us.

Even if a hateful entity tried to speak or act through us, it could only do so by latching onto a similar vibration in our own field. If we don't have a vibration that is similar enough to resonate with hate, such an entity cannot abide with us.



When we enlighten our emotions with the truth, any hateful-ness disappears like darkness in the sunshine. Before saying or doing anything, we need to notice our feelings inside to detect anything that doesn't align with the truth of the matter,.

If we feel irritated looking at someone's nose, we need to remind ourselves that Nature made the nose and there's really nothing wrong with it. It isn't worth us getting irritated about. Besides, someone may not like our nose either. We can remind ourselves of something we like about the person. Our irritation will vanish.



If we feel annoyed by someone's sloppy work and feel an urge to put the person down, we first make a mental list of the errors and examples of sloppiness. Then we calm down, remember that perhaps we were sloppy when we were young or new at a job. We remember some work the person did that was good or even admirable. If we are a colleague or supervisor, we can plan how to express our disappointment or disapproval and encourage better quality in the future.

Even an outright condemnation can be made without a hateful put-down, just matter-of-factly. This happens in courtrooms when a verdict is read.

If someone puts someone else down and we're tempted to adopt the emotion and join in, we can simply dispute the put-down and often others will stop. When we refuse to listen to put-downs, people refrain from making them in our presence. They also might respect us more. Some may even trust us more when they realize that we won't listen to put-downs of them either.

People put things down so often that when they hear a fact or evaluation, they often **assume** the speaker is putting something down! When one starts to eliminate the put-down emotion, one ends up saying, "I'm not putting anyone down" many times in a single conversation. Put-downs are so common, and often hurtful. They do have a small place, however.

#### 4. When to Use Put-downs

Put-downs are hateful. Like weapons, they are appropriate only when something hateful or dangerous needs to be destroyed. Deceit, falsehood, fraud, plunder, cheating, human malice, most domination, cruelty, hatred ... and put-downs themselves fall in this category.

It is vital to condemn a hateful emotion or action, and not the speaker. When using a put-down, it is to be directed toward the expression of hatred, not to everything else the person did, or to the actual human being.

The only thing to hate is hate itself—an actual hateful emotion of the speaker, **not** what someone else imagines. As Sri Yuktेश्वar used to say, "What a person imagines he hears, and what the speaker has really implied, may be poles apart. Try to feel the thoughts behind the verbiage."<sup>1</sup>

If someone does something that truly is shameful, deceitful, dishonorable, immoral, or corrupt, then it is not cruel to shame them or put them down. Sometimes this is the **only** way a person will learn. It's very important that one's judgments be valid and information be correct, of course. If the person doesn't retract, correct the situation, and change, it may serve both the community and the person to make their behavior known to others.

If a public figure says something that is wrong or actually stupid, it is fine to refute their claims or call them stupid. **Someone** needs to do this publicly—otherwise, untruth and stupidity flourish.

Put-downs are emotional, mental weapons. They are to be used responsibly and rarely, with accuracy and care. If everyone were good all the time, there would be no need for them at all and they would disappear naturally from human communication. We're not there yet, but humanity is progressing in this direction.



1 Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), Ch. 12, <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Autobiography-of-a-Yogi-by-Paramahansa-Yogananda.pdf>, p. 100.

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