



TIP #104

Rhetorical Questions: Put-Downs in Disguise!

“Did you really just say that?”

“Am I the only one that does work around here?”

“Didn’t I already tell you that?”

We are all familiar with rhetorical questions, but few people really know how aggressive they are! Rhetorical questions are really aggressive statements disguised as questions. They are not meant to be answered! The purpose is not to validate and empathize but to “prove a point” and to “put down.” For example, if a parent says to a child, “How many times did I tell you to put your shoes away?” The mom or dad is not really expecting an answer, like 159 times. Who’s really counting?

Because rhetorical questions are so common in everyday life, often insults and sarcasm go under the radar due to their clever disguise as questions! They might be unsettling for the recipient, but most people don’t realize they were spoken down to so aggressively.

The accompanying table gives you examples of rhetorical questions and gives you a chance to fill in some of your own as well. This will help you identify this type of disguised aggression and learn how to respond.

Put a check mark next to each rhetorical question that either you say or that you hear others say. Then write an assertive alternative for each, taking away the judgmental quality.

Rhetorical Question	Assertive Alternative (descriptive, not judgmental)
What’s wrong with you?	<i>I am frustrated when you yell at me.</i>
Don’t you listen?	
Are you going to wear THAT?	
Why can’t you just stop doing that?	
How many times do I need to remind you?	

Write your own rhetorical question and then rephrase an assertive alternative.

Rhetorical Question: _____

Assertive Alternative: _____
