

# About Being Heard and Heeded

By Xavier Amador, PhD

New research supports what I've heard from readers—that LEAP (Listen-Empathize-Agree-Partner) works not only to convince persons with anosognosia for schizophrenia (poor insight into being ill) to accept help, but also to diffuse anger. A summary of this research, presented at the International Congress on Schizophrenia Research in March 2009, can be found at [www.LEAPInstitute.org](http://www.LEAPInstitute.org).

Nevertheless, when I am leading a LEAP seminar I always hear the complaint, "I just can't use LEAP because I am too angry with my loved one for refusing treatment!" From doctors and nurses I hear, "My patients are too defensive and upset to talk about treatment options because so many of them tell me, 'I'm not sick, I don't need help!'"

### Look both ways before you LEAP

Not long ago, in the heat of a highly charged moment, I almost failed to keep my head and practice what I preach. Luckily, I was able to catch myself and save the situation from deteriorating before it was too late.

What happened was this: My mother was in the intensive care unit of a hospital in another state, and I was trying to learn everything I could about her condition and treatment. I'd already called the hospital and asked that her chart be faxed to me. Legally, I was entitled to this information because I had my mother's medical power of attorney. When I went through the records, however, I discovered that two day's worth of crucial progress notes were missing, so I called again to ask that the missing portion be faxed to me. This time I spoke to a nurse on the ICU (intensive care unit). I introduced myself, explained the situation, and asked her to fax me the notes. Her immediate response was that the new HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) regulations did not allow her to do that, and whoever sent me the previous fax had no right to do so.

My knee-jerk reaction was to become equally huffy: "I sat on the medical review committee at Columbia University. I know all about HIPAA, and you're wrong. You can fax the information to me because I have my mother's medical power of attorney."

In one thoughtless moment I made at least three mistakes. I told the nurse, in effect, that she was stupid; I told her I was more expert than she; and I allowed my anger to blind me to everything I knew about handling the situation. My feeling brain had overcome my thinking brain, and things started to go downhill fast.

### Take the temperature of the argument

When you're seeing red, the fire in your eyes blinds you to everything else. The same is true for the person with whom you are arguing. Being able to use LEAP depends on first knowing when you or the other person is too angry or defensive. You need to look both ways—at yourself and the other person—to see if either of you is too hot to have a constructive argument.

In my conversation with the nurse it didn't take long to calm myself—and her—down once I saw the warning signs. When I caught myself pulling rank, I literally stopped talking and took a deep breath. Then I apologized for my attitude and asked her for permission to start over, which gave her some control over the conversation. I said, "Sorry I said I knew more than you about HIPAA, can we start over?"

A well-placed apology can give you and the person you're arguing with time to stop and think about the direction things are going. It is also a way you can help the other person save face, which usually lowers their defensiveness.

The point is, you have to take the temperature of the situation before you even broach the topic, keep monitoring it during your discussion, and take it again at the end. If you do that, you preserve the relationship and your ability to use LEAP to persuade the person to give you what you need—their trust and cooperation.

### Know when it's time to cool down

Cars come equipped with thermostats that monitor engine temperature, because when the motor gets too hot the car will stop working. When the engine light comes on (one of my brothers, who is a mechanic, calls this an idiot light because you would have to be an idiot to ignore it) you need to stop driving, turn off the car, and let the engine cool down. You do this for two reasons: to stop further damage and so you can fix the problem. The same principles apply here. But there isn't any idiot light for arguments, so you need to pay attention to the signals that let you know when you and/or the other person are overheating. You will know it's time to cool off when:

You...

- find yourself interrupting
- don't feel listened to or heard
- engage in name-calling, either directly or by implication
- bring up issues that have little or even nothing to do with the argument of the moment
- insist you are right more than one time.

