

Handout: Dealing with Angry and Aggressive People

The first and most important point is to keep yourself safe, and remove yourself from any situation that feels unsafe. Check out your agency guidelines about personal safety. But if you find yourself in a situation with an angry person, the following tips may help to calm the situation if it is safe to try.

1. Hear the person out

Don't interrupt or try to make your point. Instead, listen attentively, using head nods or short verbal statements like "Uh-huh" or "I see" to encourage the person to continue to talk.

2. Keep asking for elaboration and clarification

Keep a cool head. Realize that when you show that you are open to hearing and understanding what the person is saying, this will eventually encourage the individual to calm down. You may ask questions like, "Then what happened?"

3. Consider taking notes

In some cases this can be helpful, if you say something like, "I want to be sure that I understand your main points, so would you mind if I take a few notes while you tell me about it?" This sometimes has a way of slowing what the person is saying, and it may tend to cause him or her to be less raging.

However, the note-taking strategy must be used with caution, because at times it could make the person even angrier, especially if they're tending toward suspiciousness and paranoia about your motives.

4. Show concern on your face

Your facial expressions should be attentive and concerned. Indicate your interest in what the person is saying by maintaining a pleasant, relaxed facial expression and a steady (not staring) gaze.

5. Keep your voice tone soft

Never raise your voice volume so that you can be heard over a person who is yelling. This will only make the other person yell more loudly! Instead, lower your voice tone even below your normal range. The natural effect of this is that the other person will also speak more softly.

6. Paraphrase and summarize what the person has said

In an attempt to show to the person that you are listening and trying to understand, you might say something like, "Let me see if I have the main points that are important to you" ... (then proceed to summarize those in your own words)

7. Do not argue

An argument occurs when you listen to what the person is saying with the intent of finding the weakness in it. You then begin to rebut their statements, often interrupting to do so.

8. Empathize with the person's feelings

You might say something like, "I can see how you would be really frustrated. In situations before where I felt that I was cut off and my opinions didn't matter, I felt frustrated, too."

9. Ask if the person would be willing to hear some additional information

This is where you begin to share your side of the story. You are saying something like, "Would be it all right if I shared with you some other facts that may give us a part of the total picture?"

10. Ask what he or she thinks would make the situation better

Very often the person is so consumed with the expression of anger, he or she has not really paused to think about what can be done now to improve the situation. Openly asking the individual for suggestions for improvement can begin to move the situation toward a problem-solving mode.

11. Add your suggestions

If the person has not offered constructive suggestions, but insists on continuing the attack, you may want to suggest something that could make the situation better.

12. Make an action plan; restate it for clarity

If you have been able to agree on some action steps, be sure that you both restate those steps to ensure that you understand your agreement the same way.