

Tip Sheet

How to respond to someone who is agitated...

1. Listen

Try not to offer solutions or your opinion, and don't interrupt an agitated person. Sometimes it can seem like the only way to progress the conversation is to interrupt and take the lead, however this can exacerbate things. This may be perceived as you trying to 'hurry them up' or you not caring how they see things. Instead, simply listen to what is being said, and repeat or use clarification to communicate that you are focused on what they're saying and have understood their point of view.

2. Maintain calm body language

It is important to convey to an agitated person that you are not going to be a threat in any way. This includes being aware of your:

- Facial expressions – maintain steady eye contact and try to control any reactions which convey negative judgement, such as eye rolling or frowning
- Tone of voice – keep it even and calm, and speak at a relaxed pace at your normal volume
- Posture – ensure that you aren't taking on a 'fight stance' (e.g. chest puffed out, leaning in etc.)
- Gestures – make only slow, small and quiet movements. Fast, large and noisy movements may be mirrored by an agitated person and serve to escalate their agitation.

3. Keep your own feelings in check

It is often difficult to manage our own feelings when being challenged or confronted. It is easy to get caught up in the emotion presented by others, however this will not aid or assist the other person to de-escalate their behaviour. Be aware of what you are feeling, and remind yourself

that the situation is not about you. Using phrases such as “that sounds really difficult for you”, will gently remind both yourself and an agitated person that you are not their problem.

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4. Know your limits

It is ok if you are not comfortable to respond to the agitated person alone. You can simply state “I want to be able to help you. I just need to get some advice from a colleague”. Make sure you let your colleague know that the person is agitated before they are confronted by them. If you feel that you can respond and help the person:

- Let them know you want to help them
- Invite them to sit down and have a glass of water whilst you get the information you need (this will give them a moment to calm down, and yourself a moment to collect your thoughts)
- If possible, move them to an area that is away from other people (such as visitors to your centre) but is still within view or ear shot of your colleagues
- Ask your colleagues to stay close by and monitor the situation

Nb: If you suspect the person is drug-affected, try to avoid helping them whilst they’re in that state. You could try offering them an ‘appointment’ with you for the next day, or offer to call them on their phone once you have found the information they need.

5. Follow policy if matters escalate

If the situation escalates (e.g. the agitated person becomes physically or verbally aggressive or threatening), do not try to reason with the person. Follow the policy that your centre has set up for these situations.

If you are unsure of the policy yourself, find a colleague to take over for you.