
AGING I&R/A TIPS

Tip Sheet 5

National Aging Information & Referral Support Center

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

“Respect the ‘impossible person’ and always expect and require respect in return. Accept nothing less.”

—“Dealing with Impossible People,” Temple University Department of Human Resources

While there is no magic bullet to cure the “impossible behavior syndrome,” there are strategies to make communication easier. The idea is to make sure people feel heard.

Effective Communication

- **Act professionally at all times.** Use tact and diplomacy to express your thoughts and feelings. Set boundaries and ground rules for interaction.
- **Ask questions beginning with “how” and “what”** to help clarify problems and what the individual wants.
- **Listen** for clues about what is causing the difficult behavior. Confirm your understanding by paraphrasing what you have heard.
- **Use active listening techniques** such as paraphrasing, labeling emotions, effective pauses, open-ended questions, and validation to advance the conversation.
- **Explore options.** Acknowledge the person’s reality then ask “what if?” problem-solving questions to introduce options.

- **Examine consequences** as appropriate. Ask the person to articulate the consequences of a specific action. Example: “Tell me what happened the last time you stopped taking your medicine.”
- **Agree on action steps** and time frames. Ask for confirmation then rephrase what the individual said by saying something like, “Is that right?”

Dealing with Difficult Behavior

1. BEHAVIOR:

Rude, obnoxious, condescending, generally unpleasant.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- **Acknowledge feelings.** Say: “I see that you’re upset about...” Or, “I can understand that must be frustrating.”
- **Try to find out the source of the dissatisfaction** to determine if the concerns are justified or not. Say: “You seem really upset. I’d like to hear more about that...”
- **Remain calm and polite.** Question firmly with confidence; paraphrase rather than interrupt.

2. BEHAVIOR:

Overwhelmed or upset — presents a shopping list of problems in a fast steady stream.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- **Acknowledge feelings.** Calmly recap the problems in order to bring clarity.
- **Jump in when a person stops to catch a breath** and echo his or her comments. Say: “So what I am hearing is that...”
- **Preface your remarks** by saying, “My experience with this type of situation has

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been...”

- Say: “You seem especially concerned about... I would like to pay attention to that.”

3. BEHAVIOR:

Helplessness – expect others to do everything.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- Once you have identified issues, attempt to negotiate a plan of action. Try to establish where we go from here.
- Say: “Let’s talk about solutions.” Or, “May I suggest something?” Or, “Let’s explore this from another angle.”
- Gently remind the person they are in charge. Decide together which issues to take first.
- Offer positive feedback to reinforce steps that have been taken so far.

Tips to Keep Your Cool

- Don’t take the behavior personally.
- Distance yourself emotionally and view the situation objectively.
- Acknowledge the individual’s points and feelings. Apologize if appropriate or at least express sympathy for their problem.
- Make “I” statements rather than accusative “you” statements.
- Don’t get drawn into an argument. Disarm the individual by stepping to their side.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Aging Information & Referral Support Center

National Association of State

Units on Aging

1201 15th Street, NW, Suite 350

Washington, DC 20005

202.898.2578 / Fax 202.898.2538

www.nasua.org/informationandreferral

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