

help tip 5

Developing helpful communication skills with the person who is unwell and agitated

Communicating with someone experiencing severe/acute mental distress and who seems to be a danger to themselves or others can be a difficult, frustrating and frightening experience.

It is vital that you remember that the person will have a **reduced capacity to understand, process and act on information in a logical, reasonable and socially acceptable way.**

During severe mental/emotional distress the person very often feels frightened, confused and out of control.

It is therefore essential that you:

- establish trust so you can help reduce their sense of confusion and gain their co-operation, thereby reducing the risk of injury occurring to themselves or others.

There is no SITUATION CONTROL without SELF-CONTROL

- You cannot achieve trust if you speak or behave in a manner that may be interpreted as being aggressive, intimidating or demanding.

Such behaviour may cause further distress leading to dangerous acts and behaviour. There is no situation control without self-control.

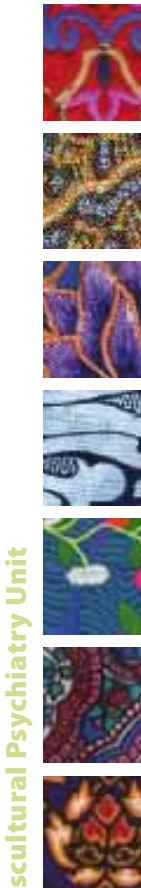
Self-Control

The most important factor in successfully managing a threatening situation is self-control. In threatening situations your breathing becomes shallow, your muscles tense, your voice sounds tense and changes in volume and pitch. Be aware of these changes and try to reduce your reaction.

- Try breathing steadily and deeply, taking your breath down into your abdomen.
- Deliberately tense and relax your hands, arms, shoulders and neck repeatedly, until you can feel your muscles are more relaxed.
- Be aware of how your voice sounds; aim to sound calm and reassuring.
- Use self-talk to help you monitor yourself: ...how relaxed am I? ... how does my voice sound? ... is my body language/posture comfortable?

Body Language

Your non-verbal communication is very important. Try to be physically relaxed – don't stand stiffly and obviously tense. Face the distressed person slightly side-on with your feet slightly apart for comfort and balance. If possible, lean against a wall, door-frame or chair. This can suggest informality and comfort. Try not to wave rapidly or wave your hands around. If your hands are visibly shaking, put them in your pockets or hold a towel or some clothing. Never hold something which could be seen as being a possible weapon.



Self Space

When someone is mentally distressed they may need four times more space than usual. You may also need plenty of space to separate you from the other person in case you need to leave quickly. Never go near a person who is mentally distressed and agitated unless you are certain that your movements will not be interpreted as threatening. Don't move quickly towards a mentally disturbed person.

If you're not sure about the person's reaction to you moving closer, keep your distance and respect their need for physical space around them. If the person starts backing away when you move forward, stop and respect the physical distance they need. If you don't it may result in a violent response to escape your intrusion.

Assessing a Situation

When someone is mentally distressed and agitated there is a likelihood that they will misread situations and misunderstand your intentions. For this reason it is always wise to remove objects in the area that might be used as a weapon.

If indoors, note the nearest way out, just in case you need to leave quickly.

Be aware of the person's behaviour and any suggestion of an increasing loss of control and risk of aggressive behaviour: e.g. increased pacing or physical agitation; finger pointing and finger-jabbing at you; clenching fists; increasing tone and tempo of speech; specific verbal threats towards you or others – present or not.

Due to fear, confusion and paranoid ideas, the unwell person may feel they need to defend themselves against you. If the distressed person is holding a weapon of some sort **DO NOT** approach them or attempt to disarm them. Ask them to put the object down ('...please put that down because it worries me.') If they refuse, do not continue with the request. Withdraw to a safe place and call the police then contact the CATT for assistance.

If the person at any stage makes threatening gestures towards you with any sort of weapon, withdraw immediately and phone the police.

Practical Communication Strategies

Be courteous, try to stay calm; speak and move in an unhurried way. Reassure them that no harm will come to them.

Don't let your own anxiety or fear drive you to making threats. Verbal abuse or threats will only make the person even more frightened and more likely to become aggressive, in order to defend themselves.

Keep requests, instructions and questions simple. A disturbed person usually cannot understand or cope with complicated statements.

Acknowledge their distress ('...I can see you're upset.') State your own willingness to listen; ask how you can help ('...is there anything I can do to help?')

If they're verbally abusive to you, don't take it personally or verbally deny the statements, or argue the point. Such abuse comes from the illness, not the person.



Avoid side discussions with others. Communicate directly with the distressed person. Don't talk about them to other persons present as if the distressed person isn't there ('...he's very upset.')

If the person threatens physical harm, set firm and simple limits on their behaviour: state that you will keep them safe, but you will not allow them to hurt themselves or anyone else. Always be prepared to withdraw from the situation if the threats escalate or there's any move to carry the threats into physical action.

Be honest, open and direct. **Don't try to trick or deceive.** If the person can see or hear things which aren't actually there and asks 'can you see or hear them too?', acknowledge their reality but also state your own. E.g. the person may be hearing voices telling them they're not safe: you can counter this by giving assurances that they actually are safe.

Never assume a non-verbal or unresponsive person is not listening to you, even though they're moving around or not looking at you. They're probably listening very carefully to every word you say. **If you've told the distressed person you've arranged for help (CATTs, police, friends, doctor) always inform the person if there is any delay, and the reason for the delay. Reassure them that help is coming.**

