

The New York State Psychological Association

A Legislator's Guide:

*Communicating with
Distressed Constituents*



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This publication was originally adapted from the following:

A Faculty/Staff Guide: Toward Enhancing Communication with Students and Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student (1989), by Sandra R. Harris Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist, University Counseling Services, California State University, Northridge.

A Faculty/Staff Guide: Working with the Emotionally Distressed Student (1986), Committee on Campus Mental Health, California State University, Northridge in conjunction with the Organization of Counseling Center Directors in Higher Education.

By Sandra R. Harris, Ph.D. originally published by the California Psychological Association (CPA) in 1994. Third Edition, 2009.

Introduction

Constituents contact their government officials for many reasons. When constituents feel they have been treated unfairly they look to you for understanding and to address their concerns. Other times a constituent just wants to meet you, especially if you are the constituent's elected official. In these situations constituents usually know what they want and the communication is generally uncomplicated.

On some occasions, however, constituents may be distressed and can create difficulties for you or your staff. How you respond to an individual constituent who is distressed - whether mildly or more intensely upset - can make the difference between a communication in which a distressed constituent walks away feeling angry, bruised or hurt and one in which the constituent feels understood, heard and helped.

In an effort to assist you with these challenges, The New York State Psychological Association (NYSPA) offers this guide to help you and your staff communicate effectively with distressed constituents. This guide provides general guidelines for effective interaction with distressed constituents along with suggestions for appropriate response to six specific types.

We sincerely hope you and your staff find this a useful resource. We have also developed a brief "coaching module" designed to help you learn to apply this material easily and effectively.

If you would like to schedule a training session for your office staff or receive additional copies of this guide, contact:

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Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents

Legislators, government officials and their staff want to assist constituents, but constituents may have difficulties communicating their needs in a way which allows you to be helpful. They may lack self-confidence about approaching government officials or may feel inadequate about expressing their concerns. So it would be helpful to keep in mind that constituents who meet with you – especially experienced ones - may feel somewhat stressed and anxious.

The purpose of this section is to highlight a few general principles of communication that might be useful in your interactions with constituents. These are designed to help you build rapport, neutralize stress and limit the potential for conflict. .

Short Beginning Phrases

Use these words to lead the constituent into discussion: “So, what can I do for you today?” “Tell me more about that.”

Open-Ended Questions

Begin with what, how and why. This leads to longer more specific responses such as: “What is on your mind?” “How may I help you?” “Why have you come today?” Who, when and where, typically elicit very brief responses.

Short Phrases

These help to keep discussion going. “I see.” “I understand.” “Tell me more.” “This is interesting.”

Paraphrasing

Rephrasing the content in your own words conveys to the constituent that you are listening to get the message right and encouraging further elaboration. You can paraphrase by using lead-ins such as the following: “Let me understand...” “Basically what is happening is...”

Clarifying Facts

Often this goes along with paraphrasing to help you get more of the picture and to focus a vague presentation. One of the best ways to clarify a fact is to say “Those are the facts as I see them. Don’t you agree?” Asking questions beginning with “Are you saying that...” or “Do you mean that...” followed by your phrasing of the message helps to check the accuracy of what you heard your visitor say.

Feeling Description

Rephrasing the emotional part of the message- responds to the constituent’s feelings to convey understanding: “From what you say, it sounds like you are frustrated (angry, upset, etc.)” Acknowledging the person’s feelings and showing empathy are most important in establishing and maintaining good rapport.

Note: This does not mean that you necessarily agree with someone’s position on an issue, but only that you can understand and appreciate the person’s perspective.

The Physical Setting

Where the interaction occurs may contribute to or interfere with communication. Actively moving away from distractions can convey your interest in your constituent. Likewise, getting objects, such as desks or tables out from between you reduces barriers to communication. Sitting behind your desk communicates the power of official authority. If threats have been implied, position yourself near an escape and do not isolate yourself for the meeting.

General Guidelines for Interaction with Distressed Constituents

- Whenever possible, offer to speak directly with the constituent, inviting the individual to come to your office if that is feasible. Your receptivity can have a positive effect on your interaction.
- Listen carefully to what troubles the constituent and try to see the issue from that point of view without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing. Paraphrasing, clarifying and rephrasing the emotional part of the message are especially helpful in conveying understanding.
- Acknowledge that you are sincerely concerned about your constituent's welfare. Let your constituent know that you care about how he or she feels.
- Offer to assist your constituent in reasonable ways; however, involve yourself only as far as you can. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled constituent, you may become more involved than time or skill permits. Extending oneself to others always involves some risk, but it can be a gratifying experience when kept within realistic limits.
- Strange or inappropriate behavior should not be ignored. The constituent can be told that such behavior is inappropriate and that you cannot assist the individual when one acts in an inappropriate manner.

The Verbally Aggressive Person

People usually become verbally abusive in frustrating situations that they see as being beyond their control. The constituent's anger and frustration may become redirected to you. Typically, the anger is not directed at you personally.

Do...

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration. "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion. "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- Allow them to ventilate, get the feelings out and tell you what is upsetting them.
- Reduce stimulation; invite the person to your office or other quiet place if this is comfortable (if this does not compromise your safety).
- Tell them that you are not willing to tolerate verbal abuse "When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen."
- Ask the person to please move back if they are getting physically too close. "Please stand back; you are too close."
- Help the person problem-solve and deal with the real issues when the constituent becomes calmer and receptive.

Don't...

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself. "You cannot talk to me that way!"
- Press for explanations or reasons for their behavior. "I'd like you to tell me exactly why you are so disrespectful."
- Look away and not deal with the situation.
- Don't send a message that you are willing to accept abuse or threats.

The Violent or Physically Destructive Person

Violence, because of emotional distress, is becoming an increasing concern in the work environment. Typically, violence occurs only when the person is completely frustrated and feels unable to do anything about the situation. The adage, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" best applies here.

Do...

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation. "I can see you are really upset and really mean business and have some critical concerns on your mind."
- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable and what is unacceptable. "You certainly have the right to be angry, but threatening me, yelling, hitting or breaking things is not okay."
- Stay in an open area where there are other people.
- Get necessary help (other staff, police, etc.).

Don't...

- Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, indicated by yelling, screaming, clenched fists or statements like, "You're leaving me no choice."
- Threaten, dare, taunt or push the person into a corner.

The Person in Poor Contact with Reality

These people have difficulty distinguishing their fantasies or perceptions from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, disturbed. They may coin new words, see or hear things which no one else can, have irrational beliefs and exhibit bizarre or inappropriate behavior. Generally these people are not dangerous and are very scared, frightened and overwhelmed.

Do...

- Respond with warmth and kindness, but with firm reasoning.
- Remove extra stimulation of the environment and see them in a quiet atmosphere (if you are comfortable doing so).
- Acknowledge your concerns and state that you would like to help them. "It seems very hard for you to deal with all these things that are happening and I am concerned about you. I'd like to help."
- Acknowledge the feelings or fears without supporting the misconceptions. "I understand you think they are trying to hurt you and I know how real it seems to you, but I don't hear the voices (see the devil, etc.)."
- Reveal your difficulty in understanding them, when appropriate. "I'm sorry but I don't understand. Could you repeat that or say it in a different way?"
- Focus on the "here and now." Switch topics and divert the focus from the irrational to the rational or the real.
- Speak to their healthy side, which they have. It's okay to joke, laugh or smile, when appropriate.

Don't...

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking, as that makes them defend their position (false perceptions) more.
- Play along. "Oh yeah, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."
- Encourage further revelations of craziness.
- Demand, command or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

The Suspicious Person

Typically, these people are tense, anxious, mistrustful loners who have few friends. They tend to interpret minor oversights as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everybody's behavior and everything that happens has special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy underlie most of their behavior.

Do...

- Express compassion, without inappropriate closeness; remember suspicious people have trouble with closeness and warmth.
- Be firm, steady, punctual and consistent. Stay in an open area where there are other people.
- Be specific and clear in your communication.

Don't...

- Assure the person that you are their friend; agree that you are a stranger, but even strangers can be concerned.
- Be overly warm, nurturing or flattering.
- Challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs.
- Be cute, humorous or ambiguous.

The Anxious Person

Danger is a key theme in the thoughts of an anxious person. Unknown and unfamiliar situations raise the anxiety level of these people. Often, the need to do things perfectly, or to please everyone, creates feelings of anxiety. They often have difficulties making decisions. They may be very concerned about speaking with you, fearing that they will make mistakes or you will not be accepting of them.

Do...

- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.
- Reassure when appropriate.
- Remain calm.
- Be clear and explicit.

Don't...

- Make the situation more complicated.
- Overwhelm with information and ideas.
- Use rapid-fire questioning.
- Get trapped into making decisions for them.

The Demanding Person

Typically, the amount of time and energy given to these people is never enough. They may seek to control your time and be very persistent in seeking your attention. They may consider your time and attention as a reflection of their worth.

Do...

- Assert your own scheduling needs. “Excuse me; I need to attend other things.”
- Use “broken record” technique, repeating same message. “I wish there were more I could do, but there is not.”
- Ignore persistent demands after other strategies have been tried.

Don't...

- Allow this constituent to disrupt your plans, e.g., canceling out of attending a meeting.
- Chastise or lecture or in other ways give more time.

Obtaining Further Assistance

The New York Psychological Association (NYSPA) is available to you and your staff for information and consultation about handling difficult situations with constituents or others. Consultation with a psychologist member of NYSPA is confidential.

Psychologist members of NYSPA are licensed to practice in the State of New York and have doctorate degrees, Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology), Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychology), or Ed.D. (Doctor of Education). Obtaining a doctorate degree requires an average of seven years of study and 3,000 hours of supervised practice in psychology beyond the Bachelor Degree. A year of supervised post-doctoral experience is required prior to eligibility to take a national written proficiency test and an oral examination. Psychologists are the most highly educated and trained mental health professionals who are licensed to provide services for mental and emotional disorders.

NYSPA member psychologists adhere to the highest standards of ethics and practice as required by the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines, NYSPA's Ethics Committee and the State Board of Psychology.

Through a scientific base of knowledge, psychologists have contributed greatly to understanding human behavior, alleviating pain and suffering, and promoting human health and well-being.