A Legislator’s Guide:

Communicating with Distressed Constituents

© 2009 California Psychological Association, 2019 Edited with permission
New York State Psychological Association
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 3
Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents............................................ 4-5
General Guidelines for Interaction with Distressed Constituents ......................... 6
The Verbally Aggressive Person ........................................................................................................... 7-8
The Violent or Physically Destructive Person ........................................................... 9
The Person in Poor Contact with Reality ............................................................... 10-11
The Suspicious Person ....................................................................................................................... 12
The Anxious Person ............................................................................................................................. 13
The Demanding Person ...................................................................................................................... 14
Understand your role in the conversation................................................................. 15
Obtaining Further Assistance .............................................................................................. 16

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.
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 constituents 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. Sometimes you can react to their distress. 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:

New York State Psychological Association
555 8th Avenue, Suite 1902, New York, New York 10018
518-437-1040 nyspa@nyspa.org www.nyspa.org
Suggestions for Enhancing Communication with Constituents

Legislators, government officials and their staff want to assist constituents, but constituents may have difficulties communicating their needs to you in a way which allows you to be helpful. Constituents may lack experience advocating with their legislators, lack self-confidence about approaching government officials, or struggle with strong emotions as they attempt to express their concerns. So it would be helpful to keep in mind that constituents who meet with you – even 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

Continue 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 in today?” Who, when and where typically elicit very brief responses.

Short Affirming Phrases

These help to make sure the constituent feels they are being heard. “I see.” “Tell me more.” “This is interesting.”
Paraphrasing

Summarize the content with as much of the constituent’s language as you can to convey that you are actively listening. You want to show that you got the message right and encourage further elaboration. 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 “Is this what you are telling me?” 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. Make sure to be mindful of your phone usage. If you use a tablet or other device to keep notes, we suggest letting constituents know what you are doing, and getting their permission to do so.
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.

- Part of your short beginning phrases, make sure to include something positive, welcoming, and affirming, such as “Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experience/concerns/time to meet with us” or “I'm very glad to meet you.”

- 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. Use feeling descriptions to let your constituent know that you see and care about how she/he feels.

- Offer to assist your constituent in reasonable ways; however, involve yourself only as far as you can. Scheduled appointments might make their needs known prior to the meeting, where as walk-ins might take you by surprise. Know what you can do, and be prepared to say “I'll get back to you later” if you do not have the answer. 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. This must be said calmly and confidently.
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/see 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. Please don’t interrupt them; allow them to tell their story in their time. Interrupting someone will elevate their negative emotions, which will encourage them seek other ways to get their point across. This can derail the conversation and relationship with your constituent.
- 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 “I’m getting uncomfortable, and I’m finding it hard to listen to you.”
- Ask the person to please move back if they are getting physically too close. “Please stand back; you are too close.”
- Remember, when someone is very upset, they are often hard to reason with. The goal in these situations is to reduce negative emotions so you both can communicate again.
- 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.
- 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. It can be helpful to have a plan in place for what to do if a constituent were to become violent or aggressive. Make sure all members of your staff are well versed in that plan.

Do…

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation. “I can see you are really upset 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.”

- Don’t ignore your gut if you feel that you or anyone else is in danger.

- Threaten, dare, taunt or push the person into a corner.
The Person in Poor Contact with Reality

Some people have difficulty distinguishing their fantasies or perceptions from reality. Their thinking can be 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, they 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.).”

- Listen for a topic or area of conversation where you can find agreement.

- 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).”

• Demand, command or order.

• Expect customary emotional responses.
The Suspicious Person

Some people will present to you as highly suspicious: they may be tense, anxious, highly mistrustful, or easily offended. Sometimes they see themselves as the focus of everyone else’s behavior. They may misinterpret minor disagreement, conflicts, or oversights as intentional personal insults or attacks. They may have rigid ideas of fairness and justice. You might find yourself trying to bend over backwards to try to earn their trust, or withdrawing from them and their intense emotions.

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 offended by their suspicions and lack of trust. Focus on what they are saying more than how they are saying it.
- Be cute, humorous or ambiguous.
The Anxious Person

Anxiety can make communicating hard to put their best foot forward. People may have difficulty communicating in a way that is easy to understand or follow. Anxiety also makes it hard to hear what the other person is saying.

Do...

- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts, even if they are not totally clear. Often this alone relieves a great deal of pressure.

- Reassure when appropriate.

- Remain calm. Pay attention to your body language and tone of voice as well.

- 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

Sometimes the most demanding person gets their needs met first. This might be a learned behavior that has worked for them in the past. They may seek to control your time and be very persistent in seeking your attention.

Do...

- Assert your own scheduling needs. “Excuse me; I need to attend other things.”

- Listen to what they are asking for, not how they are saying it.

- 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.
Understand your role in the conversation

Many people enjoy public service because they personally know how important this work is. The stories constituents bring into your office can be very emotional. They could leave you feeling very raw and vulnerable, detached and deflated, angry, or powerful. Be aware of your feelings and how they are coming across to your constituent. These conversations are about the constituents and their needs.

Do...

- Develop an awareness of how stress and emotions affect your body. For example, when you are angry do you feel hot? Are you muscles tight? When you are sad does your stomach hurt? Our bodies often let us know how we are feeling before our mind, especially when it is already occupied in a conversation.

- Give yourself a micro-break to take a deep breath or a drink of water if you are feeling overwhelmed.

- Find someone to talk to to process the conversation.

- Get professional help if you find you are feeling burnt-out by the challenging work you do.

Don't...

- Ignore how your body is feeling. Listen to what it is saying

- Assume strong emotions are always because of the constituent.

- Criticize or beat yourself up if you find yourself either emotionally affected or disaffected by the conversation.
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.