

Working with Angry Consumers

1. Keep your cool...always

This is the *Number 1* rule to remember when dealing with a challenging consumer. Stay calm, and never let your own feelings spiral out of control. Responding to your consumer emotionally or angrily is only going to escalate the situation.

If you feel tense take a few deep breaths, keeping a slow and steady rhythm. It's ok to wait a moment and collect yourself rather than responding immediately.

Remember not to take your consumer's behavior as a personal offense. They might be under pressure from a tough boss, they could be having personal problems at home, or they are having a horrible day. Whatever the reason, try not to be offended - you never know their exact situation.

2. Acknowledge their feelings

When someone is firing aggressive or emotive language at you, it is easy to roll your eyes and dismiss them. But disregarding a consumer's feelings may only inflame them more.

It is crucial that you acknowledge their emotions - whether or not they are justified - so your consumer feels like they've been truly heard. The following statements can help...

- "It sounds like this situation is frustrating for you" or "I hear that this situation is frustrating for you".

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- “I know this is a sensitive topic, and that you’re worried about your _____.”
- “I understand this has caused you real stress and concern.”

Often just acknowledging their feelings will be enough to calm them down.

3. Wait for the calm

If it gets to the point where you consumer loses control and is yelling insults or failing to manage their emotions...you need to have patience. Wait it out. If you attempt to argue with them when they are angry or frustrated no logic is going to break through.

Try to let your consumer get their feelings off their chest without interrupting. Avoid telling them to calm down - this can feel extremely patronizing and will often have the opposite effect. If things are escalating, politely suggest taking a ten-minute breather. Ask if they would like a glass of water or coffee, or if they would prefer to reconvene on another day. Try not to judge them or respond personally for word/thoughts said in the heat of the moment.

If you feel unsafe, you always have the option of leaving the meeting. Continue to be polite but share with the consumer that you need to stop the conversation and will reschedule the meeting that will include your supervisor.

4. Practice active listening

While it is important to placate an angry or emotional consumer, you should also carefully consider their comments as you work to establish a working relationship with them. Do they have a valid reason to be so distressed? Why do they feel let

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down by your assistance or our agency? Were your initial promises or communications misleading?

Active listening means really stopping and processing the words your consumer is saying. If you are simply imagining your rebuttal while they talk, that's not active listening.

Here are tips:

- Put aside distracting thoughts
- Do not mentally formulate your rebuttal while they're speaking
- Never interrupt
- Make eye contact
- Ask questions for clarification
- Repeat their points to show understanding
- Keep an open posture (no closed arms)

By really listening to your consumer's feelings, you may discover ways to improve our service, processes and communication going forward.

5. Find common ground

Try to find common ground early in the conversation. If you only focus on the point of disagreement, your consumer will feel like they are banging their head against a brick wall.

Here are examples of statements that may be helpful:

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- “I think we can agree that the results from this plan did not go as expected.”
- “I know we are both eager to find a plan that works for you.”
- “We both want to get the best results so you can reach your goals. Let’s talk about this some more and make a plan that ADA can work with you to accomplish.”
- “I know we’re both keen to get these delays resolved as fast as possible.”

Establishing that you have things in common can help generate feelings of empathy and understanding. You do not want to be at loggerheads for the whole conversation.

6. Establish control with facts

When tensions are running high it is easy to get off topic or end up discussing tangential details. Anecdotes or argumentative statements can quickly veer the discussion off course. Stay focus by continually asking clarification of the consumer’s goals while stressed your role as CIS. (To help them learn, be independent and not dependent on your help.)

To keep things on track, make sure you bring a written plan to the meeting. You should also have all relevant paperwork with you. Having these facts at hand will help you establish control of the conversation.

Use the paperwork to clarify your understanding of their goals, especially when reviewing their IL plan. If they disagree with your understanding calmly ask for clarification until they agree with the documentation. Make it clear that you cannot budge on your role as their CIS but if they want something else help them articulate what they feel they need.

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7. End with a concrete plan for next steps

Always conclude the meeting with a concrete plan for moving forward and send a follow up email (summary) of this to the consumer. This means the meeting outcome will be difficult to dispute. Include timeframes and specifics.

If you don't manage to reach a mutually agreeable solution, make sure you set a date for a follow-up meeting. Let the consumer know about our consumer satisfaction survey. Or if you prefer, tell your consumer you will speak to your supervisor about assigning a new CIS but let them know someone may not be readily available to work with them. It is crucial to document every step forward, so you keep momentum, and nothing gets forgotten.

Remember that it is in everyone's interest to deal with unhappy consumers as quickly as possible. The longer the disagreement drags on, the more likely the consumer will complain publicly or leave negative reviews of ADA.

8. Stop potential problems before they start

Following these steps will help to resolve most conflicts. But the best approach is to take proactive steps, so conflict is less likely to arise.

Have you ever experienced a bad gut feeling when meeting a new consumer? Your stomach forms a little knot when their name pops up in your inbox. We all find it hard to say no to potential new assignments, but often it's better to act on your intuition. The most difficult consumers may never be satisfied. Discuss these situations with your supervisors.

Meeting with a consumer is like going on a date. Both parties should feel positive about progressing the relationship. If you have concerns from the outset, tell them

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you do not have the capacity to take them on (be ready with appropriate referrals), or they may not be the best staff member to work with the individual. The next step would be discussing reassignment with your supervisor. If you feel Alliance of Disability Advocates may not be a good fit to meet their needs and offer to provide appropriate referrals to other agencies.

In these situations, inform your supervisor and the Executive Director as soon as possible so a strategy can be developed moving forward.

9. Interactions that become escalated to the point of needing outside interventions.

Unfortunately, there may be rare incidents during which the consumer becomes so upset that their behavior becomes dangerous – both to staff and the consumer. If you feel that you need assistance in deescalating the situation, contact a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) instead of a pure law enforcement call. These situations can be tense and are often misinterpreted when individuals who have little or no experience interacting with people with disabilities try to help. States and localities that have employed these teams have seen fewer injuries and deaths among officers and people with psychiatric or intellectual and developmental disabilities, increased jail diversion rates, fewer lawsuits following crisis incidents, and stronger ties with mental health and disability communities.

Be prepared don't wait for an emergency. Take the time to enter the appropriated contact information for the counties your consumers live in. Record these numbers in your agency issued cell phone/address book.

Use the link below to access the NC CIT list.

[Crisis Solutions North Carolina | An Initiative of the NC Department of Health and Human Services Crisis Solutions North Carolina \(crisissolutionsnc.org\)](https://www.crisissolutionsnc.org/)