

# Anger: Rapid de-escalation strategies

## Andrew Fuller

---

When I worked in psychiatric crisis teams, I often had to work out quick ways of calming angry, upset and sometimes, dangerous people. Here are a few methods.

### How to calm angry people

Anger is usually caused by feelings of injustice, frustration or being controlled or thwarted. Anger runs on a continuum from mild annoyance and irritation to rage.

### The RESOLVE method:

**R**espond with Respect

**E**ngage

**S**eek understanding

**O**bserve feelings

**L**ower the Tone

**V**alue add

**E**mpower

### RESPOND with Respect

The aim of this approach is to respond rather than to react. If we react we are being led by the angry person's actions. Responding involves leading and calming angry people.

The key in calming angry people lies in respect. Feeling respected creates the sense of being heard and increases trust. Feelings of trust reduce anger. When we respond respectfully we enable angry people to calm and recover.

### ENGAGE

If someone approaches you looking irate, be the first one to talk. Say "Hi, you look upset about something. Can we talk about it?"

Acknowledging their feelings at the outset prevents the person from feeling the need to *prove* how they feel, by demonstrating it.

Clever thinking will keep you safer and get you further than toughing it out. 80% of communication is non-verbal. What you do is more important than what you say.

Respect their territory & give them space- a cornered rat fights hardest and dirtiest. Standing at an angle (45 degrees) with your right side forwards rather than directly fronting the person can help keep a situation calm and non-adversarial.

Hold your hands in front of you in a temple position to communicate calm authority.

People's feet often give more information than their faces. Usually feet point in the direction the person is most likely to move next. A shift in the direction may give you an early warning that someone is about to run away, leave or move closer to you.

Maintain at least one and a half arm's length distance from the angry person. This is less likely to increase the person's anxiety. You will also reduce danger to yourself by giving yourself time to react to sudden moves.

Position yourself so you are safe. If you can, place something between you. Find safer ground. If they back away, slowly retreat also. If they start to come back, stop & wait.

### SEEK UNDERSTANDING

Listening & validating concerns communicates respect. Validating doesn't necessarily mean agreeing; it means acknowledging the distress or upset behind the immediate issue. If one person refuses to struggle or engage in the conflict, there can be no conflict.

Talking & calming are incompatible. If you try to verbally explain or defend yourself while trying to calm the other person, you will send mixed messages. It is never wise to send mixed messages to angry people.

It is impossible to simultaneously calm someone down, get them back onside & convince them that the whole thing is not really your fault all at the same time.

Try to re-direct their verbal aggression into a problem-solving approach. Obviously, this is easier said than done.

### **OBSERVE FEELINGS**

When it is appropriate (and it isn't always) allow the person to release as much energy as possible by venting verbally. As a person is venting, there will be peaks and valleys in the outburst. If you cannot allow the person to continue venting, state the limits during the "valleys" in the venting process.

By the time an angry person gets to you, they're already frustrated. They may not be interested in solutions. They may just want someone they can yell at to vent their anger.

During an anger outburst, useful information can be gained. The real reason for the outburst is often not what it seems to be. Listen for the feelings behind the facts. Restate the message you think you have received in order to determine if you correctly understood the person.

Angry people are often in a rush to express their displeasure. Slow down the process. Give them the sense that you have plenty of time to hear them out.

### **LOWER THE TONE**

In some ways, calming an angry person is similar to protecting yourself from an aggressive animal:

Aim to give the message that you aren't really a threat.

Avoid direct eye contact -glance but don't stare

Speak only in a calm voice.

"Be a tree," with feet together, elbows against your chest & hands under your neck  
Lower down the level of tension, stimulation & adrenaline. Breathe evenly

Lower levels of stress but do not make a joke. People who are angry cannot be joked out of it. People may increase their anger if they feel they are not being taken seriously.

People often stop yelling when you calmly and quietly ask, "Could you please speak a little slower, I'd like to understand?"

Repeating back to the other person what was said also does this. Listen then paraphrase.

To cool things down, do something unexpected. Ask the person to sit down or step away yourself to get something, like a pen to take notes. If all else fails, excuse yourself & act as if you're about to sneeze.

### **VALUE ADD**

Ask "What would you like me to do?" This unexpected question is the most useful tool for dealing with anger. Angry people either don't know or won't admit what they want you to do. To answer this question, they will have to stop and think, which is what you want them to do.

### **EMPOWER**

Your gut feeling of fear is something you should attend to. No animal senses fear and thinks 'oh, it is nothing'. If you are in a loop and getting nowhere ask someone else to take over. If you really feel unsafe with someone leave.