

2.11. Strategies for managing unreasonable behaviours

The principles underlying the strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable behaviours are about 'setting limits' and 'setting conditions'. Setting conditions is about requiring a person to do something as a precondition to taking any action on their issue of concern or performing a particular service/action. Setting limits is about establishing clear boundaries and placing limits on interactions or services, if necessary. When setting limits, you should:

- identify the behaviour you consider to be unreasonable
- ask the person to change that behaviour
- state the consequences if the behaviour continues (identify the limits)
- offer the person a choice, if possible
- enforce the limits, if necessary.

For example:

I cannot continue with this interview if you are going to continue to bang the table. Please stop – otherwise I will end the interview. Would you like to continue or would you like to do this some other time? It's your choice.

Important caveat

The suggested strategies that follow must always be balanced against your organisation's security protocols and procedures. If any of the suggestions conflict with those protocols and procedures, the latter should always take priority, unless you are otherwise instructed by a supervisor or senior manager.

See – 2.16. Ten steps for responding to threats, hostility and aggression.

The NSW Ombudsman also has *Model Guidelines for Managing and Responding to Threats, Aggressive Behaviour and Violence* – available at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.11.1. Foul language and swearing that is part of their normal communication style or an expression of distress, but still makes you feel uncomfortable – low risk

Attempt to calm the person down and to stay calm yourself. You may find that asking the person to calm down may well be ineffective or counterproductive. A better approach may be to display empathy for their distress.

Tell the person that you are uncomfortable with their choice of words and politely ask that they change them.

If it continues, ask the person to stop again and warn that your organisation's policy is that you can end the call if the inappropriate language continues.

If it continues, end the call and make a note of the conversation.

You may also wish to invite the person to call back when they are prepared to use more appropriate language. Avoid saying – we need time out here so we can calm down – as this is likely to escalate the situation.

If you do tell the person to call back, make sure to give them clear instructions about who they can contact, when, how (method of communication) etc.

Consult with your supervisor/senior manager as to whether:

- to take further calls from the person and, if so, who should take them
- further calls should be automatically put through to voicemail (if this is possible)
- to inform reception about what they can do with any further calls.

Note: Whether or not this behaviour is unreasonable will depend on the circumstances of the case.

2.11.2. Acts up in the presence of others/at public functions to create a scene – low risk

Attempt to calm the person down and to stay calm yourself. You may find that asking the person to calm down may well be ineffective or counterproductive. A better approach may be to display empathy for their distress.

See – 3.3. Cultural communication styles.

As soon as possible, take the person to another room or remove others from the immediate area where the person is located.

Do not discuss any issues relating to their matter or any sensitive issues in front of others, no matter how much they try to taunt you.

If the person calms down, get them to agree to go to another room and get a colleague to assist you with the interview.

If a colleague is not available, leave the door open and sit closest to the exit so you can make a swift and easy escape if an incident arises. This ensures that staff in the immediate vicinity can be quickly alerted to what is happening.

If the person rejects your efforts to calm them down and the situation persists, tell them that security may be contacted if they cannot calm down. Give them time to cool off, but follow through as appropriate.

2.11.3. Makes confronting comments or low level threats in written communications – low risk

Make a copy of the communication, file it and then return it to the sender – advising that it will not be considered until the inappropriate content is removed.

Notify your relevant supervisor or senior manager immediately if any actual or suggested threats have been made in the communication so a decision can be made about the appropriate course of action.

If the person continues to send communications with inappropriate content – particularly by email – consider talking to your supervisor or senior manager about restricting the person's access to your direct email and, if necessary, only allowing contact to be made through your organisation's general email portal.

2.11.4. Goes online and vilifies, defames, harasses, intimidates or threatens – low risk

You should not respond to personalised or negative online comments. Make a copy and take it to your designated communications officer/manager who can decide on the appropriate course of action.

Warn the person that this type of conduct will not be tolerated and action may be taken to restrict their contact with the organisation.

If you think the comment may give rise to criminal or civil liability, you should immediately consult your relevant supervisors/senior manager so they can decide whether legal action will be taken to address the situation.

2.11.5. Audio or video recording interviews or telephone conversations without prior consent – low risk

If you suspect that the person is recording the conversation or interview, expressly ask if they are doing so. If your organisation's policy on this issue is that you can or are required to refuse consent to being recorded, clearly and firmly tell them that you do not consent to being recorded.

If the person says they are not recording but you still suspect they are, you may inform the person that:

- (where applicable) they are required by law to warn any and all other parties to the discussion/interview of the recording and obtain prior consent from each – otherwise they may be committing a criminal offence
- they may also be violating confidentiality and privacy laws and (where applicable) your organisation will take legal action against them if necessary.

Depending on your organisation's policy on the issue, you may also be authorised in these circumstances to terminate a call immediately. It may then be appropriate for you to discuss with your supervisor/senior manager changing how you communicate with the complainant in the future – for example, contact in writing only.

Note: You will need to seek appropriate direction on the laws in your jurisdiction and your organisation's policy on the issue to determine the most appropriate approach for dealing with such situations.

2.11.6. Refuses to leave the premises or move when asked – low risk

Politely ask the person to leave and then move towards the exit.

If the person follows you, walk them out to ensure that they have left the premises/building.

If the person does not leave, you should leave the room or area where they are located as soon as possible.

Immediately inform other relevant staff/supervisors that the person refuses to leave and make sure that no one approaches the area where the person is located unnecessarily.

Tell the person that you will give them 10 minutes to leave, after which time security or the police will be contacted and they will be escorted from the building.

Allow the time to pass and contact security as advised if they are still there.

If security is not available and you need to contact the police, at the end of the 10 minutes tell the person that the 10 minutes has passed and that the police are in the process of being contacted – this will give the person a final opportunity to leave before you follow through with that action.

Allow security/police to address the issue.

Make a detailed record of the incident, including:

- the timing and wording of all instructions/requests that you (and others) made to the person to leave the premises
- the reasons why the person was directed to leave
- the person's responses to each request/instruction.

See – 4.2. Recording and reporting incidents.

With a supervisor/senior manager, you may also consider whether the person's access to your organisation's premises should be restricted – for example, by notification under the *Inclosed Lands Protection Act 1901* (NSW) or equivalent trespass legislation in your jurisdiction.

See – 5.2. Using legal mechanisms to restrict access.

2.11.7. Makes aggressive, abusive, harassing or otherwise confronting phone calls – medium risk

Try to calm the person down and to stay calm yourself. You may find that asking the person to calm down may well be ineffective or counterproductive. A better approach may be to display empathy for their distress.

See – 3.3. Cultural communication styles.

If the person does not calm down, explain that you consider their language/aggressive behaviour to be unacceptable and ask them to stop.

If it continues, warn the person that your organisation's policy is that you must end the call. You may mute the phone and seek assistance, if necessary – but do not hang up.

If it continues, tell the person that the call is being terminated and follow through, unless the call should be traced – in this case you should mute your phone, but do not hang up.

Report the incident to reception/inquiries staff immediately in case the complainant rings back.

Consult with your supervisor/senior manager as to whether:

- to take further calls from the person and, if so, who should take them
- further calls should be automatically put through to voicemail, if possible
- to inform reception about what they can do with any further calls.

Make a file/case note of the discussion, fill out a security incident form and direct it to the appropriate supervisor/senior manager.

Seek support either through formal or informal debriefing.

See – 4.4. Managing stress.

Note: If the abusive person has been previously told only to contact the organisation in writing, you should immediately remind them of this and terminate the call.

2.11.8. Makes targeted threats towards the case officer, obvious or implied, during phone calls – medium risk

Make the threat overt by naming it. Repeat the person's statements as close to verbatim as possible so they either take ownership of their threats/comments or retract them.

Take comprehensive notes of everything that is being said.

Tell the person the consequences of making such a threat – for example, where appropriate, that your organisation's policy is that the police must be notified.

If the threats continue, ask the person to stop and clearly restate what the consequences will be if they do not – for example, where appropriate, that your organisation's policy requires you to terminate the call and contact the police or mental health crisis team.

Attempt to redirect the conversation onto the person's substantive issues of concern, being careful not to reward their behaviour.

If it continues, tell the person that the call is being terminated and follow through, unless the call should be traced – in this case you should mute your phone without hanging up.

Report the incident to the receptionist/inquiries staff in case the person rings back.

Immediately inform your supervisor/senior manager of the call and seek advice about any further action. For example, disclosing information about the call to police or mental health professionals – if this will lessen or prevent harm to the person, yourself or third parties.

Make a file/case note of the discussion, fill out a security incident form and direct it to the appropriate supervisor/senior manager.

Seek support either through formal or informal debriefing.

See – 4.4. Managing stress.

2.11.9. Attends the premises while under the influence of drugs, alcohol or other substances – medium risk

Drugs and alcohol can increase aggression and reduce impulse control. Aggression by people under the influence of drugs or alcohol can therefore be very unpredictable and they are more likely to be easily provoked or frustrated.

When dealing with people in such circumstances you should:

- Try to stay calm.
- Be assertive and firm.
- Use non-threatening words and tone – avoid using words like 'drunk' in their presence.
- Not argue – arguing is usually pointless when a person is intoxicated or under the influence of drugs, and could lead to physical violence.
- Ignore abusive words.
- Keep your distance and avoid physical contact with the person, if possible.
- Show concern for the person's safety and comfort – you might offer a cup of water or food.
- Repeat important statements clearly.

- Get help when you need it, including calling a colleague, security or police as appropriate.
- Look for a workable compromise, if possible – for example, if the person is insisting on meeting with you immediately suggest that you will meet with them in a day or two when you have more time to discuss their concerns.

If you make arrangements to meet with the person another time and you are apprehensive about the meeting, you should consider talking to your supervisor/senior manager about having another staff member or security or a police officer present.

Note: Depending on the circumstances, one or more of the other suggested approaches in this section may be applicable.

2.11.10. Displays aggressive, abusive, harassing or otherwise confronting behaviour face-to-face – high risk

You do not have to tolerate aggressive behaviour. If you feel threatened or distressed, end the interview immediately.

If you believe you are in imminent danger:

- Immediately press your portable duress alarm or the closest alarm.
- Leave the interview room or immediate area and go into a more secure area of the office.
- If leaving is not possible, you may need to defend yourself by using ‘reasonable force’ – that is, the amount of force necessary to stop an attack or prevent personal injury – nothing more.

Ask a more senior officer for support.

Make a file/case note of the discussion, including a description of any threatening behaviour, and fill out a security incident form and direct it to the appropriate supervisor/senior manager.

Seek support either through formal or informal debriefing.

See – 4.4. Managing stress.

In all other circumstances you should:

- Continually assess the possibility of the situation becoming violent – is the person’s conduct improving or getting worse?
- Ask a colleague or relevant supervisor for support.
- Keep a safe distance and preferably ask the person to sit down.
- Create space if there are any signs of physical aggression – get something like a desk between you and the person.
- Provide alternatives to the aggression by making it clear to the person that aggression will not achieve their goal and that the interview will be terminated if it continues.
- Maintain non-confrontational verbal and non-verbal communication, avoiding any ‘jargon’ and/or language that is going to confuse the person and increase their frustration.

Be careful not to get into a fight and do not attempt to physically restrain the person or physically intervene between other people who are behaving aggressively towards each other – do not try to be a hero.

If the person's behaviour continues, end the interview. It is better to withdraw earlier rather than later. You may offer to hold the interview another time or suggest an alternative form of communication.

Make a file/case note of the discussion, including a description of the inappropriate behaviour, and fill out a security incident form and direct it to the appropriate supervisor/senior manager.

Seek support either through formal or informal debriefing.

2.11.11. Makes threats of suicide or self-harm (obvious or implied) – high risk

Threats of self-harm or suicide can be very difficult things to deal with. If you do not feel that you are competent or emotionally capable of dealing with such calls or contact, you should transfer them to or involve another staff member who can. We advocate that you always react to such calls and contact and make explicit any threats of self-harm by naming them. If the person confirms the threat, then attempt to keep the person on the phone for as long as possible to get as many details as you can about what they intend to do. Report the threat immediately to your supervisor/senior manager and complete an incident form.

In accordance with the ASIST model developed by Livingworks, you should:

- Notice invitations – recognise when the person may be thinking about suicide. Listen for statements like:
 - I can't take it anymore or I can't cope.
 - What's the point?
 - I'm going to off myself.
 - I'm sitting in my car and I just don't know what to do anymore.
- Explore invitations – respond in ways that clarify and address the suicide risk. Ask:
 - Do you have thoughts of suicide/are you thinking of killing yourself?
 - It sounds like you're very upset. If yes, I'm concerned and do take this seriously.

Note: You can't put ideas into their heads by asking. However, you should avoid responding in ways that might be perceived as being authoritative or unsympathetic. You should also try to calm the person down and to stay calm yourself.

- Listen – try to understand why the caller wants to commit suicide – the reasons for dying, the reasons for living. There is usually some hesitation once the caller starts speaking about it.
- Review – the risk factors and take comprehensive notes:
 - How? When? Where are you?
 - Is there anyone else with you?
 - How are you going to do it?
- Disable their plan – this might involve telling the caller that a Mental Health Team will be asked to go and check up on them.

- Make a safe plan – get a commitment from the caller – for example, that they will make an appointment with their GP right away etc.
- Remain on the phone and seek assistance – while on the phone alert those around you/your supervisor about the person’s threats so that they can take steps to obtain appropriate assistance for the caller – for example, getting a local Mental Health Team to go to their location. Try to keep the caller on the phone until they arrive. Do not hang up.

If the caller does hang up the call, you should not also hang up. The caller’s location may be capable of being traced so the police or other appropriate response service can be sent to that location to help. Also, immediately discuss the situation with a supervisor to decide on the appropriate course of action in the circumstances.

Note: This brief summary does not constitute training. All staff should be appropriately trained on how to deal with threats of self-harm and harm to others – for example, see www.livingworks.com.au.

2.11.12. Aggressive, abusive, harassing or otherwise confronting behaviour during home visits – high risk

If you are subjected to harassment or aggression in a person’s home, you should leave immediately.

If you are physically attacked – if you have one, press your duress alarm immediately if possible. You are also entitled to use such force as is reasonable to defend yourself.

Contact police immediately on leaving the premises and follow appropriate security procedures.

Otherwise make sure that at all times you:⁴

- Respect the person’s wishes – for example, in terms of taking off shoes before entering the home etc.
- Continually assess your surroundings while conducting the interview.
- Observe the exits in the house and stay close to exits in rooms.
- Do not allow yourself to be blocked or locked in.
- Sit in a position that allows easy access to the front door.
- Interview the person in the closest suitable room to the front door.
- Avoid the kitchen (potential weapons) and bedrooms (personal space, firearms).
- Scan the environment for dangerous items or drug paraphernalia.
- Face the person at all times during the interview.
- Try to monitor what the person is doing at all times.
- Stay alert to anything out of the ordinary.
- Monitor the presence of threatening pets and request they be secured in another area of the premises if you feel unsafe.

4. Office for Children Department of Human Services, *Staff Safety in the Workplace: Guidelines for the prevention and management of occupational violence for Victorian Child Protection and community-based Juvenile Justice staff*, June 2015, http://www.cpmanual.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/Safety%20in%20the%20workplace%20-%20CP-and-YJ_staff_safety%204201.pdf Accessed May 2021

2.11.13. Makes threats to damage property, including bomb threats, obvious or implied – extreme risk

Make the threat overt by naming it. Repeat the person's statements as close to verbatim as possible so they either take ownership of the threats/comments or retract them.

Take comprehensive notes about the threatened action and let the person finish their sentences without interruption.

Try to keep them talking and obtain as much information as possible, including:

- when the bomb will explode/action will take place
- what the bomb looks like
- where the bomb is located/where it will happen
- what kind of bomb it is/what they are going to do
- why the bomb was placed there/why they want to do it
- who their intended target is, if any
- the person's personal details (their name, where they are located etc).

Note the exact time of the call and its duration.

Do not hang up the phone if the person terminates the call.

Immediately report the threat to a relevant supervisor or security officer.

If the bomb threat is believed to be genuine, the supervisor should:

- Inform a designated senior manager or security officer, any security committee and the head of building security so appropriate action can be taken – for example, contacting the police or an evacuation.
- Monitor the staff member involved, especially if support options like debriefing or counselling have not been used.
- Liaise with the relevant senior manager/security officer who is responsible for making decisions about support services to determine whether counselling and/or an operational debrief is needed.
- Make sure the staff member has completed a bomb threat checklist within 24 hours of receiving the phone call, if possible.

2.11.14. Makes threats with a weapon face-to-face – extreme risk

Avoid doing anything that might incite the person – do not try to be a hero.

Remain calm and assess the situation.

Activate the duress alarm or call for help, if it is safe to do so.

Obey the person's instructions, but only do what you are told and nothing more – do not volunteer any information.

Move slowly and avoid eye contact.

Advise the person of any movements you may have to make which could appear sudden or unexpected, such as opening a drawer.

Do not invade their personal space and keep your hands in view.

If required, contact a first aid officer to provide first aid to staff and/or others as soon as it is safe for them to do so.

Once the threat is over, fill out a security incident form and direct it to the appropriate supervisor/senior manager.

Seek support either through formal or informal debriefing.

See – 4.4. Managing stress.

Senior staff responding to the duress alarm should try to isolate the incident by evacuating the area and preventing others from entering it – for example, stand by the lifts or ask building management to close off the lifts to the floor.

The most senior staff member present or the office security adviser should:

- override the duress alarm, if it has been activated
- ring 000 for urgent assistance or check that the police have been called
- ensure communication is maintained with the aggressor until the police arrive – if it is safe to do so.

Liaise with the relevant senior manager/security officer who is responsible for making decisions about support services to determine whether counselling and/or an operational debrief is needed.

2.11.15. Stalking – online or in person – extreme risk

Stalking includes a person for no justifiable reason:

- following, telephoning, sending messages or otherwise contacting you or another person
- giving you offensive material or leaving it where you will find it
- walking or frequently being in your vicinity
- approaching your home, place of work or any place that you frequent.

If you suspect you are being stalked, you should immediately report it to your supervisor or relevant senior manager. Together you can discuss the possibility and appropriateness of:

- being escorted home
- contacting police
- obtaining a legal order – such as an apprehended violence order or an order for trespass.