

Responding to unreasonable behaviour – threats, anger and aggression

1. Recognising danger signals and reviewing risk

Recognise the signs of client anger, whether or not the anger is directed at you, and if so whether this is causing you anxiety, distress or fear. Always start by asking 'Am I in danger?' If the answer is 'yes', then you should remove yourself from harms way as quickly as possible.

In such circumstances, walk through the nearest door into a more secure area, turn and deliver the message that 'The [name of the organisation]'s policy does not allow me to continue the interview while you are angry or making threats'.

If the threat abates (eg, the client's behaviour de-escalates) then the interview can be recommenced based on clear behavioural ground rules.

2. Repeating

Ensure threats are clarified (made overt) and ensure the person takes ownership of a threat: repeat the statement as close to verbatim as possible (eg, 'You have just said to me that...'), and ask if this is what the person meant to say and whether it is in fact a threat to cause harm (eg, 'Is that what you meant? Are you threatening me?').

3. Reacting

React to all threats by explicitly acknowledging them (whether they are overt or covert, or threats to you, themselves or to others, etc). Always show some reaction to a threat (even if minimal, eg, taking a 5 minute break). However, do not over react to a threat or mirror the threatening language or the threatening behaviour.

Continue to show respect even when the person is being rude or threatening.

4. Responding

Ask the person to stop the behaviour ('Mr ... stop shouting at me') while informing the person of the organisation's protocols for responding to threats – communicate clearly and consistently the repercussions that will flow if the behaviour continues.

5. Redirecting

Redirect or distract the attention of the person with actions or comments that do not reward the behaviour (eg, asking questions about the substantive issue to try to move the person from the 'emotional' state back into a 'cognitive' or thinking state, taking a 5 minute break, offering a cold drink, etc).

6. Refocussing

Try to help the person bring their emotions under control and refocus their attention on their issue. A question about the facts can refocus a person from their feelings to thinking about the substance of their issue.

7. Raising concerns

If you feel threatened, activate a silent alarm (if available) or leave the room and call for assistance from other staff.

8. Running

If all else fails and you feel an imminent risk of harm – run (or at least move to a safe location).

9. Recording

Always make a 'verbatim' record of all threats and put a copy on the relevant file.

10. Reporting and reviewing responses

Report the matter to a supervisor/manager so that both of you can review your responses to the threatening behaviour and identify strategies to manage or control any future interactions with the person.

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Contact us for more information

Our business hours are: Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm (*Inquiries section closes at 4pm*)

If you wish to visit us, we prefer you make an appointment. Please call us first to ensure your complaint is within our jurisdiction and our staff are available to see you.

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We can arrange an interpreter through
TIS or you can contact TIS yourself before
speaking to us.