

Dealing with difficult people the easy way

This article gives you some tips on how to manage difficult people in such a way that everyone — including yourself — is satisfied with the outcome

Ailsa Benson is a freelance consultant with over 20 years' experience in education and training in community pharmacy

There will have been parts of your undergraduate course — and certainly part of the preregistration year — that focus on communication skills. After all, much of your day-to-day work will be with people: staff, customers, other health care professionals and a host of others. (The word client is used in this article to cover them all.) It will not be surprising if you find some of these people difficult to deal with.

Remember to use what you have learnt about both verbal and non-verbal communication. The same phrase said with different intonations and body language can completely change the meaning!

Know yourself

It is most important that you remember the only person who truly knows what you are thinking and feeling is yourself. Others may think they know (and will respond accordingly) but what they are reacting to is your behaviour. So you need to develop a fine understanding of yourself — monitoring and managing your own behaviour.

There is nothing wrong with being open

about your own thoughts and feelings. Indeed, if you find it tricky to hide your feelings in a difficult situation, it may be helpful to explain what you suspect your behaviour is showing (eg, “my irritation is not with you but that this should have happened”).

Be aware of the types of situations (and people) that trigger unhelpful responses from you. Understanding why gives you the opportunity to modify your behaviour. Learn from the bad experiences! People that we find difficult are those who:

- ▶ Put us on the defensive
- ▶ Make us lose our control
- ▶ Generate negative feelings in us (such as guilt, frustration, anxiety, inferiority)
- ▶ Stop us from doing what we want to do or make us do things we are unhappy about.

So, next time you find yourself talking about “that difficult person” ask yourself in what ways did their behaviour make your life difficult? How can you change your own behaviour so as to change the client's behaviour?

What we often do is react in such a way as to make the problem worse — we try to defend our position rather than try to

understand their perspective. We take their insults personally rather than understand they come from some deep anxiety or frustration. An angry person probably has a need that isn't being met, and they think that you could be the means of solving the problem. This puts you into a potentially powerful position. So, do not take their behaviour personally

Knowing them

If you want to make progress then you also need to understand how the other person is feeling. Do this by:

- ▶ Listening carefully to what the person is saying
- ▶ Trying to understand his/her feelings
- ▶ Showing that you empathise
- ▶ Paraphrasing to show you understand what the key issue is.

Asking questions to clarify:

- ▶ The sequence of events
- ▶ The expectations.

Remember to use appropriate non-verbal language:

- ▶ Intermittent eye contact (never hold a gaze for longer than three seconds)

- ▶ Head nodding
- ▶ Positive body stance.

Useful phrases include statements such as:

- ▶ "I can imagine how disappointed you are"
- ▶ "So you had hoped that . . ."
- ▶ "What happened next?"

Once you have dealt with the feelings then (and only then) you can move onto the next step.

Agreeing what the problem is

It is important that you understand what the problem is from their perspective. This can sometimes be surprisingly difficult but until you have agreement on what the problem is then progress will be limited. It can often be helpful to say something like:

- ▶ "So you had hoped that . . ."
- ▶ "So, the . . . did/did not . . ."
- ▶ "So . . . failed to . . ."

Finding the solution

You may be surprised at how often such people cannot tell you what they want. But if they do have ideas, then it will be more effective if you find out what they are.

Getting the difficult person involved in the solution process is critical. So say something like:

- ▶ "I can see we have a problem here. What would you like me to do to help you?"

There is of course no problem if the solution suggested is one that is acceptable to you. Be positive about their solution — and if you feel that you could actually improve on it, do not be afraid to do so. Useful phrases include:

- ▶ "Thank you for your suggestion."
- ▶ "That is very reasonable of you"
- ▶ "That is a sensible solution"
- ▶ "I appreciate your telling me this"

- ▶ "I would like to do a little more to recognise the trouble you have experienced."

If their solution is something you cannot meet, offer alternatives as close as possible to what the client wants and is reasonable. Offering alternatives is important as you are handing the choice (and the apparent power) back to the client. But be sensible about the alternatives — two is good, three ok. But no more. And, obviously, these alternatives must be ones that are sensible under the circumstances.

Useful phrases include:

- ▶ "If we did that then . . . , so I suggest that perhaps we could . . ."
- ▶ "Perhaps . . . or . . . would other ways forward?"
- ▶ "What we can do is either this . . . or that . . ."
- ▶ "The options that we seem to have are . . . or . . . or . . ."

If you really cannot offer any alternatives (really?) and their solution is unacceptable then you must explain how rules or policies prevent you implementing their solution. But — make sure that your explanation is specific to the situation of the individual. Do not generalise. Then make some alternative suggestions that are allowed:

- ▶ "I realise that would seem to be a good solution but we no longer stock that"
- ▶ "I am allowed to refund £ . . . but for a higher amount I will need to get head office permission. This usually takes . . ."
- ▶ "Only my superior can make that decision. I will find out and come back to you before . . ."
- ▶ "What we can do is . . . or . . ."

Agreeing who will do what and when

If there is going to be some kind of delay before the solution can actually be put into practice, agree the timetable for this. And stick with it. If you do not agree a

timetable, clients will form their own expectations about when this will happen. They are likely to expect something to be done immediately, whereas you know that it will take x hours/days. Save further anger, frustration and disappointment! Summarise by using phrases such as:

- ▶ “So I will arrange for . . .”
- ▶ “This should take no longer than . . .”
- ▶ “If we do/exchange/replace/refund . . .”
- ▶ “I will now . . .”
- ▶ “If you can wait five minutes then I will be able to. . .”
- ▶ “Within the next five days we will . . .”.

Making your behaviour persuasive

Strategies include:

- ▶ Positive voice tone
- ▶ No hesitations
- ▶ Using open ended questions
- ▶ Pauses and silences (to allow responses from the other person)
- ▶ Avoiding irritating phrases such as “you know”, “ok” or “right”
- ▶ Looking at least half time at the person
- ▶ Holding eye contact for complete thoughts (no more than five seconds)

- ▶ Gestures — in moderation, not continuously, natural
- ▶ Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative.

Remember too that a difficult person confronted by a blank-faced, cold and non-responsive person is likely to become even more difficult. Be aware too that, sometimes, angry people who feel that they are being dealt with badly will walk away. The problem may seem to have been solved from your perspective, but it has not. It has walked out of your domain and a negative message will be taken to others.

To admit or not?

Sometimes in dealing with difficult people you realise that you have made a mistake — either you personally or one of your colleagues. It isn't easy to admit a mistake, particularly when much of your dispensing training has focussed on the imperative need for you to always get it right. You won't. Never be ashamed to admit your own mistakes there and then. Apologise for what happened. Avoid explanations as to why — that puts you on the defensive and provides yet

more opportunities for the client to complain.

Use a phrase such as:

- ▶ “Yes, I can see that should have been done. I am sorry.”
- ▶ “It is a mistake. I am sorry.”

Show willingness to fix it and agree with the client how and when. Move the discussion on by saying something like:

- ▶ “ Let me see what I can do to correct the error.”

And then correct it. If you don't, you can be sure that the mistake will happen again – and to the same person!

Needs and expectations

Of course, an article of this length cannot deal with the huge variety of situations that you will find yourself in. Nor can it deal with assertiveness, and this is an important aspect of dealing with difficult people. But I hope that you find the above a useful start. Remember that we all have needs. We also have expectations. Dealing with difficult people means meeting both their needs and expectations — even if those expectations are greater than what we might consider reasonable.

If needs and expectations are satisfied, the client is in a neutral state. If needs and expectations are exceeded, the client will have positive feelings. If either is not met, you will have a difficult person on your hands. Return to the start of this article or find out more about assertive (not aggressive) behaviour. 