

De-escalation strategies for telephonic CONVERSATIONS



1. Calmly Listen

People often just want their voices heard. Even if the person yells or uses foul language, allow the caller to vent...to a point (more about that below!). Don't take the rant personally, though, or allow his or her frustrations to make you angry. To de-escalate someone who is upset, you must remain calm. Use the caller's name; either a first name if they give permission, or "Mr." / "Mrs."

2. Practice and Demonstrate Empathy

Using empathy can help demonstrate that you hear what the caller is saying and that you care about his or her experience. During this difficult public health crisis, emotions are high and worries are prevalent. Connect with how you, personally, are feeling right now. Then recognize that the caller is likely feeling many of those same feelings, if not more. Repeat the primary concerns back to the caller; this process ensures you understand correctly while assuring the caller you were listening. Use a neutral and caring tone during this process.

3. Apologize and Offer Solutions

When appropriate, a sincere, genuine apology for the caller's situation and the issues he or she is experiencing can go a long way toward de-escalating the situation. Ask the caller what steps he or she has already taken that were helpful or worked well. Inquire if the caller can identify what he or she believes is still needed to resolve the concerns. Allowing the caller to be part of the solution-finding process can help empower them.

4. Set boundaries

While it is appropriate and important to allow a caller to vent as mentioned above, there are limits to how much you should endure. As long as the venting feels helpful and productive, it can be a positive part of the process. However, if you begin to feel verbally abused or like the caller is starting to go "down the rabbit hole", it's time to step in and gently take control of the conversation. Continue to use empathy and active listening skills while interjecting some concrete questions. Start with simple, easy to answer questions. Gathering some demographic information is a good place to begin. Then move on to more complex, open-ended questions ("What steps have you already taken?"). If the caller still refuses to be re-directed or isn't ready to engage in a productive conversation with you, passing this person on to a different colleague can be helpful. It doesn't mean you failed or aren't doing a good job! A different voice in the conversation may change the dynamic for the caller. In addition, YOU need a break too. Staying on unproductive, extremely challenging calls doesn't help either the caller or you.



5. Stay Informed

Right now, things are changing day by day. Stay informed of the current practices and policies your employer has implemented. Offer solutions and resources you know are feasible and available. If the caller is asking for something you aren't sure is a viable option, honestly advise him or her of that. Realistically acknowledging the challenges and barriers while not blaming anyone can go a long way to earning a caller's trust and de-escalating the situation. Focus on what can be done and utilized as of today. If possible, offer to look further into the concern and follow up with the caller once you have more information and answers. Be sure to follow through on any commitments you make.

6. Self-Care

Working with callers to address and resolve their concerns and frustrations is difficult and draining work. It takes time to become comfortable shifting from face-to-face interactions to telephonic discussions especially when the nature of the conversation is challenging. Be patient with yourself. Recognize that while you are assisting people with their concerns and challenges, you should not own these difficulties for them. Maintaining emotional distance yet continuing to communicate with empathy is important to support your own mental health. Allow yourself to process your experiences in a productive and positive way. Take breaks as needed and physically step away from the call center area if possible. Ask for help.