



NEW ZEALAND  
**RED CROSS**  
RĪPEKA WHERO AOTEAROA

# Abusive and Challenging Behaviour Guidelines

Key Fact:

## Communication



### What we say

These simple facts show us that **the way** we say something is over **3 times more important** than the words we actually say!

Think about your body language as you're speaking, and understand that your volume, speed and tone is far more important than any single phrase.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**Abusive and challenging behaviour is most likely to stem from dissatisfaction or frustration with a service or misunderstanding of New Zealand Red Cross' purpose and, to a lesser extent, by antisocial behaviour, mental illness, drugs and alcohol, cultural and language differences. Being aware of the drivers of this behaviour is important for a satisfactory resolution for all parties.**

When people become angry or emotional, logic and rational thought gets lost, breathing becomes shallow and they speak louder, faster and longer. Responding in the same manner and/or failing to listen, acknowledging the emotion or addressing the reasons behind it will only make things more difficult.

How you react influences the outcome.

The following guidelines have been developed to assist you to manage abusive and challenging interactions. Your personal safety is paramount and it's important you always use good judgement and escalate the situation to a manager where possible, or police if necessary, if at any time you feel unsafe or threatened during the interaction.

These guidelines work in tandem with New Zealand Red Cross' Personal Safety Training.

# BODY LANGUAGE

Our body language gives immediate and visual feedback, so it's important this is seen as neutral and non-aggressive at all times.

- 1 Stand or sit tall and relaxed** to indicate you're not afraid.
- 2 Keep your hands neutral** – face palms out or upwards or hold a pen for example.
- 3 Use direct eye contact** when talking, but look away at the end of the sentence.
- 4 Large slow nods** show willingness to listen.
- 5 Don't stand up** if someone is yelling at you. If you do, your brain will identify you are on a solid foundation and you will begin to argue back.
- 6 Mirror the person's body language** once they've calmed down.



# LISTEN

Interrupting a person who is angry or emotional will only lengthen the conversation and make the situation worse.

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- 1 It's all about them at this point** so it's important to listen without interruption and let them vent. They may do this 2-3 times and, in the process, readily provide you with what you need to know.
  - 2 Acknowledge their emotion** (e.g. I can see you're frustrated, upset, etc.); this allows the other person to move on because you have shown empathy.
  - 3 Try to take turns to speak** and pause before you do respond; take a slow deep breath and hold for 3 seconds while counting in your head.
  - 4 Encourage longer answers.** This gets the person to breathe out longer while speaking. The same things you are doing consciously, they are doing subconsciously.

- 5** **Ask open-ended questions** to encourage the person to talk more. Start the sentence with words like ‘tell me ... explain ... describe ... show me ...’
- 6** **Paraphrase what they’ve said** every so often, to clarify your understanding and let the person know you are listening to them. This helps develop rapport and is particularly useful when someone is confused or English is a second language.
- 7** **Provide assurance** that you will do what you can to help them – and make sure you follow up on it.



# VOICE

The **way** something is said can be five times more important than **what** is said.

- 1** Be polite and respectful.
- 2** Keep your voice calm and neutral, your volume low and speech slow.
- 3** Always avoid the urge to yell back at them.



# CHOICE OF WORDS

Our choice of words is important in moving the person forward.

**1** **Don't react** with the first thing that pops into your head – remember to take that deep breath first.

**2** **Avoid words that damage rapport.** Examples of this and better phrases to use are:

I understand → I can see your point

Calm down → You are angry about this

You should(n't) → Another way is to

I can't help you → Let's have a look

Just answer the question → I need more information

I can't understand you → How can I make it easier for you?

I've told you what to do → Thanks, I have everything I need

Don't cry → Take your time

**3** **If the person is swearing at you,** say something like 'I am having difficulty helping you when you swear at me'. This places the onus back on them to behave in a polite manner.



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# DEALING WITH THREATS

Occasionally, unresolved anger and frustration can escalate into aggression and potentially physical violence. On very rare occasions this may be the ulterior motive. Be aware of the signs which are:



- 1** The person's voice becomes louder
- 2** Their words become more threatening
- 3** Eye contact increases with concentrated staring
- 4** Their face is pale and sweaty
- 5** Their body tenses and they adopt protective positioning

If you find yourself in this situation you should always:

- 1** Try and maintain **neutral body language**
  - 2** **Keep a safe distance**
  - 3** **Sit down** or lean against something
  - 4** **Look for a safe exit route** and move slowly if you do have to exit
  - 5** **Never get 'hands on'** or try to intervene if you are an observer
  - 6** Where possible **alert someone** to call police
- !** If the motive is robbery think **C.A.L.M.:**
- Comply** with all requests
  - Agree** with the robber
  - Listen** to what they are saying
  - Manage** your breathing



# AFTER AN ABUSIVE INTERACTION

It's quite normal to feel upset, shaky or frightened after an abusive interaction. This is the result of an increase in adrenaline which takes a while to get out of your system. If this happens, here are some practical things you can do:

- 1 Sit quietly**
- 2 Get some fresh air**
- 3 Have a sip of water** – avoid sugary and caffeinated drinks
- 4 Talk it through** with your manager, team leader or colleague
- 5 Report it**



# REPORTING

Report all incidents on GOSH as soon as you are able after the event.

 [gosh.net.nz/redcross/index.html](https://gosh.net.nz/redcross/index.html)

If you don't have access to GOSH, get a paper form from your local Red Cross service centre to fill out. Also advise them of the details of the incident and the staff will enter it into GOSH for you.









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