

When a Client is Difficult

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Have you ever been in a situation where you felt uncomfortable or you weren't quite sure what to do? I think we can all relate to that, whether it is in our work, personal, spiritual or volunteer lives.

Early in my career, I worked at a day treatment program for persons with chronic and persistent mental illness. There was one particular client that stood out for me. Mary* was the most challenging client in our treatment center and often needed one staff person to provide one-on-one care. She was difficult due to her unpredictability. One minute she would bound into the room announcing her arrival with a big smile and a dramatic flair. Moments later, her mood could suddenly shift and she would become angry and agitated over something that most of us would consider minor. When angry, she would yell, scream, intimidate or even try to run away. When upset or depressed, she might become unresponsive or curl into a ball. It completely baffled me at first as it was difficult to read this client's signals and there were times that I was frightened for both her and myself.

This may seem like an extreme situation, but I'm sure we have all had an experience where a person reacted in a way that we were unprepared for and unsure how to handle. One of the first lessons I learned in working with Mary was to stay calm. For someone who is feeling so out of control emotionally and even physically, you want to exude self-confidence and self-assurance. You may be thinking that is a little hard to do when your heart is beating through your chest, your face is getting flushed and your natural reaction might be to run.

In most cases, when a person gets upset it comes from a place of fear or hurt. Try to keep this in mind as you are dealing with this individual. This can help you establish an empathetic connection with this person. You may want to address the client by reflecting the emotion you are seeing from them. For instance, if a person lashes out in anger, you might say, "It looks like you are really upset." Pause and wait for them to respond. Sometimes a simple statement acknowledging their anger can go a long way.

People often have difficulty adjusting to change and meeting a new volunteer can be overwhelming to them. In these situations, you may want to say

something about being a little nervous too. Oftentimes, as you get to know the client and they know you, the anxiety and nervousness dissipate and you can better predict how to handle the client. When a client relies on you, as a volunteer, to help them with grocery shopping, reading their mail, etc., it is often difficult for them to relinquish such tasks that they once might have been able to do for themselves. I have had clients become belligerent with me about how I may or may not be doing things on their behalf. I try to acknowledge how hard it is for them to accept help with this important task but at the same time, I try to set limits with them. I might also say that having them scream at me doesn't help me with the task; it only makes my job harder and if they continue yelling/badgering I will need to leave, and we can schedule another time when they are more calm. Often, this can de-escalate the situation and we are then able to finish. On the other hand, there have been some situations where I've had to simply walk out and try again another day. It is okay to leave a situation if the person cannot be pacified. You can certainly try to help them relax, if they are willing to accept your suggestions/help. Activities such as going outside for fresh air or a walk, taking some deep calming breaths, getting something to drink, listening to music, etc., are all typical methods to try.

It's not only a client's behavior that might baffle us, but it may be a question or a statement that is made. My motto is "The more I know, the more there is to learn." Keeping this in mind, if a client asks you a question or puts you on the spot, it is always okay to say, "I'm not sure, let me get back to you" or "That's a good question that I had not really considered." This gives you time to seek advice.

The last point that I want to make is that it is always important to get feedback when you have encountered a difficult client and/or situation. It can be an upsetting situation for both you and the client, so seek out the case manager or the volunteer coordinator. Their insight might provide you with valuable information. It can also provide you with the tools you need to go back and try again later. Working with clients can be emotionally exhausting, but often the hardest clients for me have also been the most rewarding.