

Diffusing the Angry Patron - by Rhea Joyce Rubin, c. 2000

Lower the stress level. Anger is a protective mechanism resulting from stress.

1. Treat the patron with respect and courtesy.
2. Try to eliminate any discomfort by showing empathy.
3. Acknowledge any frustration that the patron may be feeling.
4. You are not responsible for dealing with belligerent patrons – security should be called to deal with this type of response.
5. Respond to the primary emotion (anger is a secondary emotion) – the patron’s feeling of fear (loss of library privileges, a large fine, etc.), loss of self-esteem or embarrassment.
6. Don’t take the person’s anger personally. “Take it professionally.”

In a 1995 study, patrons who found the material they needed and were treated efficiently and politely by circulation staff rated the library as “satisfactory,” while patrons at the same library who had the identical experience – *except* that the staff member smiled at them – rated the library as “excellent.”

Good customer service is a preventive measure. Welcoming behaviors:

- Acknowledge people who are waiting in line or for help – “I’ll be right with you.”
- Greet each patron in a friendly and respectful manner.
- Give the patron your full attention.
- Make eye contact. Smile.
- Maintain a polite tone of voice and body language.
- Use library terms that the patron will understand (they won’t understand if you tell them to use the OPAC or go to ILL).
- Be proactive – “can I help you with anything else?” or, “I can’t help you but I will find someone who can.”

To calm someone who is irate – speak at a similar rate (speed) as the patron, and watch your tone of voice. Try to avoid sounding annoyed, impatient or condescending. Watch for the patrons non-verbal cues (someone who keeps checking his watch may mean that he’s in a hurry; appears to be nervous/tense) and react appropriately.

TWENTY BASIC STRATEGIES:

1. **Set the tone for the exchange** – Greet the person in a calm, friendly voice, using the patron’s name if possible.
2. **Breathe and count** – Control your reaction. Breathing regularly and deeply relaxes your body and increases the flow of oxygen to the brain allowing you to think more clearly. Count to ten –

by holding your reaction, this allows the patron to vent and to calm down. You demonstrate respect and don't escalate the problem by making inappropriate remarks. It also shows that you are in control of the situation.

3. **Treat the patron with respect** – This allows the patron to concentrate on the issue rather than on offense or defense. Give your full attention to the situation. Focus all of your attention, energy and interest on the patron. Maintain eye contact, but not to the point where you make the patron feel uncomfortable. Be and sound sincere.
4. **Listen** – Let the speaker know that you have listened and understood. Good listening requires understanding both the content and the feeling in a person's comments, and responding to the emotion as well as the facts. This kind of listening validates a person's worth.
5. **Acknowledge and validate** – The angry patron is not ready for solutions if he does not feel heard and respected. It is essential that you acknowledge the anger or frustration first and express sympathy before moving on. The emotion may be an obstacle to solving the problem. By showing sympathy you lower the patron's stress level and reduce any embarrassment.
6. **Focus on the problem** – One way to demonstrate that your focus is on the problem is to restate it, to show that you understand the situation. Understanding the situation is not the same as agreeing.
7. **Concede a minor point** – An angry person expects a battle. If you offer a concession rather than a rebuttal, you appear to be flexible and conciliatory. Try to be an ally rather than an opponent
8. **Avoid red flag words** – “why did you ignore the recall?” or, “you should have...” Avoid the words, “I can't,” because it sounds as if you are evading responsibility.
9. **Don't argue** – Keep your focus on the goal of solving the problem, pleasing the patron, and moving on to the next customer or task. “There are two times to keep your mouth shut: when you're swimming and when you're angry.” Anonymous.
Eighty percent of people will fight back when they feel challenged. Teach yourself to ignore the reflex to fight back (breathe deeply and slowly, count to ten). Take the patron away from the public arena and out of sight of the “audience.”
10. **Disagree diplomatically** – Be sure the disagreement is followed by offering possible solutions to the problem. One technique is called “fogging.” See if you can find any part of the argument that you can agree with, even if it's miniscule.
11. **Don't justify** – Only offer explanations if the person asks for them.
12. **Don't use one-upmanship** – Don't assume ignorance or stupidity on the part of the patron or that you have more problems than the patron.
13. **Apologize** – If the library has inadvertently caused the problem/anger, apologize....”for the inconvenience,” or, “for having caused you so much trouble.”
14. **Use bridge statements** – Once the patrons has calmed down, it's time to move to resolution:
 - a. “Let's see what we could do...”
 - b. “Let me help you with that right now...”
 - c. “Here's what we can do for you...”
 - d. “I'm glad you brought this to my attention...”
15. **Define the problem** – Offer alternative solutions that fit the library's policies and procedures.
16. **Use the Salami tactic** – If the patron's problem is complex, try slicing it into manageable pieces.

17. **Take your time** – Sometimes the complaint, coupled with high emotion, makes it difficult to think of appropriate solutions. Stall by asking questions. The average person can think ten times as fast as one can talk. If necessary, tell the patron that you will get back to them ASAP with an answer or solution to the problem.
18. **Be assertive** – The problem solver wants open, straightforward communication that will lead to a solution acceptable to both parties. He uses assertive communication to avoid confusion and to demonstrate self-control. When you are assertive, you stand up for yourself and demonstrate self-respect, without violating the rights of others.
19. **Don't make idle promises** – Follow through with your solution. Make sure that the patron knows that you will look into or take care of the situation and follow up if necessary by email/phone.
20. **Involve a colleague** – If you feel that the situation is getting out of control, or can't come to a resolution, it's time to call in a colleague/supervisor.

A fine line exists between angry encounters and unacceptable confrontations. If using the above methods does not work, give the patron one last option: discontinue the behavior or leave the library. If necessary, call the police to have the patron removed. Two other notes on responding to unacceptable behavior: First, do not use active listening in this situation. The primary goal here is to change or stop the behavior, not to help the patron feel better. Second, be aware of the strength of the words you use. The secondary goal in these situations is to gain or retain control. For example, "You must..." is a much more controlling statement than, "I need you to..." or "I would like you to.." and both of the latter are stronger than, "Would you please..."

Behavior policies should be posted publicly for two reasons: so that staff can point them out to patrons as necessary, deflecting the patron's attention from the staff member to the policy; and in case of lawsuits by patrons after the fact.

The library should also have a written policy and procedure for handling extreme and emergency situations. This should include when to call police, what to expect when the police arrive, when to call another agency (e.g., mental health; student judiciary), and any legal responsibilities.

The most important follow-up to any encounter with an angry patron is the incident report. The form should include the date and time, staff person's name, the patron's name (if known), description of the patron, the problem, and the resolution.