

Dealing with difficult behaviour symptoms

Day to day dos and don'ts

Defusion: is a term for verbal and non-verbal ways of reducing tension. These tips work - they were developed from practice and experience. The more you try these tips the better you will become. The principle is: change 'acting out to talking out': try talking things through, rather than acting impulsively.

Don't invade defensible space: people like their own bit of territory - their own chair etc.

- Stay an arm's length away.
- Avoid being in a corner, or cornering the person.
- Always knock on their door.

Get to know signs of rising tension: rocking, stuttering, colouring of the face, pacing, hand wringing.

Keep neutral body postures.

- Keep hands in sight - showing the palms is a sign of peaceful intentions.
- NO clenched fists, hands on hips, pointing, leaning over people.
- Make eye contact - but don't stare!
- 90% of communication is non-verbal so SMILE!

If you defuse the situation you are successful. If the person has not lost face, has kept their pride - then they are successful.

Self-awareness : this is not a vague thing. If you are in a grotty mood don't pretend you are feeling great, or that it doesn't matter. Just being aware of your mood can help you make adjustments to how to deal with any given situation.

Establish a warm environment

- Physically turn up heat (a side effect of some medication can be to feel chilly).
- Sit in a warm place to talk.
- Be sensitive about colour schemes - décor, clothing etc.
- Keep a quiet place for talking or for space to get away.

"Walk don't run": apply this in different ways: lower the voice, walk slowly.

Count to ten - this really does work. When first faced with a situation start counting. As you do: check your mood, assess the situation, decide on a first

course of action, confirm it to yourself then do it. You will be more likely to gain control because unwell people are very often frightened people and do not know what will happen next. If you come up with safe solutions the unwell person will develop confidence in you.

Use humour. A good one-liner can be worth all the other tips put together. Avoid negative humour like sarcasm, put-downs or jumping to conclusions - one may jump back!

Empathise: this means, "I think I know how you feel." You can't always, but if you think you do then use it.

Sympathise: this means, "I agree with you."

Someone may be right to show anger or distress - develop this by talking about ways of doing something about it.

Ventilation: once someone is talking, let them let off steam, don't try to stop them. Don't interrupt and don't argue with them.

Ask open-ended questions like "How did that make you feel?" rather than closed ones like "Did you do that?"

Make general statements:

- "Lots of people feel like that when they're ill."
- "You're not alone in thinking like that."
- "That's not you that's the illness."

Split up the antagonists: take one off for a chat or get them both talking to you rather than at each other.

Sit out a threat: employ a stand-off - NEVER join in a scrap. This will be appreciated because you become safe. By setting a limit you reassure. Always take threatened violence to an individual seriously. Ask for weapons to be put down NOT handed over.

Individuals have different strengths in defusing situations; there are natural differences between the sexes. So if your partner is dealing successfully with the situation just be visible; be around to be called on.

Physical contact: don't wake someone abruptly or aggressively; this carries a high risk of an equal response. Don't touch the back of the neck during tension. Don't take a grip on an arm.

Don't put up with the unacceptable - zero tolerance of violence or aggression has to be the rule. Discuss this in a calm setting not when a situation has reached crisis. Set limits and keep to agreed ground rules.

Know who to call and how to call for help in an emergency. Keep important numbers (e.g. crisis team), next to the phone or in the phone memory.

Don't become involved in an argument; try to divert the conversation to a subject which is not controversial.

Develop ways of defusing situations that are appropriate to your family, your personality, or the person who is ill. Apply the solution that fits at the time.

Discussion after a tense situation - wait for a cooling off period. Then have a family conference to devise a plan. Always try to have a plan in place that has been agreed by everybody for an emergency or crisis. If you think things through before a problem arises you will be better able to cope and to continue coping.

Down tools. Accept that your life has changed - at least for as long as your loved one is ill. There may be times when you just have to stop everything, in order to keep yourself or your loved one safe. It won't hurt to ignore a deadline or be late for something. Take breaks yourself - even if that inconveniences someone - no one is indispensable! If you become unwell you cannot continue to care. Your health is important too!

Talking to someone with delusions (unusual beliefs)

Don't dismiss the delusions. Recognise that these ideas and fears are very real to the person - but show that you do not agree with them. Try, for example, "I don't believe ... is out to get you, but I can see you are really upset about it."

Don't act horrified by bizarre words or unfinished sentences etc. Say, "I don't really understand what that means." Or remind them what the conversation was about "Remember we were talking about..."

Don't let others laugh about the hallucinations or the strange talk.

Don't ask the person to try to force the voices to stop.

Do act calm.

Do try to distract the person by involving them in something interesting, looking for something, chatting or mixing with close friends or family.

Do give the person space and time if they don't want to talk. Say, " I can see you don't want to talk now, but I'll be here if you want to talk later." Allow them time to recover their pride, their thoughts, their composure etc.

Do find someone to talk to, to let off steam yourself - another carer, a support group, a professional who can guide/advise.

Take a break to recharge the batteries, you will need it. Have a carer's assessment - it's a legal right - it can help you to identify where help and support may be available to further enhance your ability to care and to help you stay well yourself. It may be difficult to go through this process, for example admitting how much you actually do, but it should help you to resolve things in a more positive light.

Compiled with grateful thanks to Rethink. October 2005