

## 20 Expert Tactics for Dealing with Difficult People

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What follows are the tactics that professional crisis intervention teams use, and you can learn them, too. You can use these techniques with your boss, a customer, a family member, even a stranger. Keep in mind: The closer your relationship to the person, the more knowledge you'll have of what will best work to calm things down.

These tips may feel unnatural at first. When you're dealing with a person behaving unreasonably, the fear response center in your brain (the fight-flight-freeze part) is going to be activated. This part of the brain can't distinguish between a customer that's yelling at you or a vicious dog about to attack you. It's up to you to engage your conscious mind in order to defuse the situation. Some of these tips are general, suggesting a mindset to cultivate. Others are more specific in advising you what to do in the moment.

1. Listen. Listening is the number one step in dealing with "unreasonable" people. **Everyone wants to feel heard.** No progress can take place until the other person feels acknowledged. While you're listening, really focus on what the other person is saying, not what you want to say next.
2. Stay calm. When a situation is emotionally charged, it's easy to get caught up in the heat of the moment. **Monitor your breathing. Try to take some slow, deep breaths.**
3. Don't judge. You don't know what the other person is going through. Chances are, if a person is acting unreasonable, **they are likely feeling some sort of vulnerability or fear.**
4. **Reflect respect and dignity toward the other person.** No matter how a person is treating you, showing contempt will not help productively resolve the situation.
5. **Look for the hidden need.** What is this person really trying to gain? What is this person trying to avoid?
6. **Look for others around you who might be able to help.** If you're at work and there's an irate customer, quickly scan to see if a colleague is close by.
7. Don't demand compliance. For example, telling someone who's upset to be quiet and calm down will just make him or her irate. Instead, **ask the person what they are upset about**—and allow them to vent.
8. **Saying, "I understand," usually makes things worse.** Instead, say, "Tell me more so I can understand better."
9. **Avoid smiling,** as this may look like you are mocking the person. Similarly, humor can sometimes lighten the mood, but more often than not, it's risky and it may backfire.
10. **Don't act defensively.** This is tough. You're naturally not enjoying the other person saying nasty things or things that you know aren't true. You're going to want to defend yourself. But the other

person is so emotionally revved up, it's not going to help. Remember, this is not about you. Don't take it personally. (I know, easier said than done.)

**11. Don't return anger with anger.** Raising your voice, pointing your finger, or speaking disrespectfully to the other person will add fuel to an already heated situation. Use a low, calm, even monotone voice. Don't try to talk over the person. Wait until the person takes a breath and then speak.

**12. Don't argue** or try to convince the other person of anything.

**13. Keep extra space between you and the other person.** Your instinct may be to try to calm the other person down by putting your arm on theirs, or some other similar gesture that may be appropriate in other contexts. But if someone is already upset, **avoid touch**, as it might be misinterpreted.

**14. Saying, "I'm sorry," or, "I'm going to try to fix this,"** can go a long way toward defusing many situations.

**15. Set limits and boundaries.** While some of the above tips have encouraged listening and letting the angry person vent, you also have the right to be assertive and say, "Please don't talk to me like that."

**16. Trust your instincts.** If your gut is saying, this is going downhill fast, be ready to do what you need to do to remain safe. Look for an exit strategy.

**17. One response does not fit all.** You have to remain flexible. Although these guidelines have proven effective in de-escalating tough situations, every person is unique and may respond differently.

**18. Debrief.** After the situation is over, talk to someone about what happened.

**19. Discharge your own stress.** You had to put your natural reactions on hold for a while. Now is the time to discharge some of that pent up adrenaline. **Go for a run.** Take your dog for a walk. Don't let the emotions stay stuck in your body.

**20. Give yourself credit for getting through an uncomfortable situation.** It takes a lot of energy not to act like a jerk when someone else is behaving badly. Don't skip this step!