



A Communications Skills Module: Working with Difficult & Combative People

IN THE KNOW

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Working with Difficult People

Health care is a people-oriented business. Every health care worker spends a lot of time every day with *people*: coworkers, clients, family members, visitors and so on.

Getting along with people is part of your job. And, let's face it...sometimes, it's the hardest part of your job! It's natural to get along better with some people than with others. For example, certain people rub you the wrong way. Others seem unhappy with you no matter what you do. And, still others seem to take pleasure in giving you a hard time. In return, you may feel like these people are being *difficult*. But what do we mean exactly when we say that someone is "difficult"?

People are difficult when they get in the way of what we want or need to do. For example:

- Tom wants to take his lunch break just when his coworker, Sharon, asks for his help transferring a client. Tom has transferred that particular client by himself many times and is irritated with Sharon for needing help. He delays his lunch break long enough to help Sharon, but he's mad at her for being difficult.

- Susan needs to leave work on time today to pick up her daughter at school. But her client, Mr. Jones, is moving more slowly than usual and Susan is afraid she's going to be late. She wished that Mr. Jones would stop being so difficult!



Are Sharon and Mr. Jones really difficult people? Maybe...and maybe not. Remember, it's only Tom's opinion that Sharon is being difficult. Maybe Tom would change his mind if he knew that Sharon is pregnant and her doctor told her not to lift clients.

And, it's Susan's opinion that Mr. Jones is a difficult client. Would Susan think differently if she knew that Mr. Jones had just found out that his wife is dying?

Remember...

**CALLING SOMEONE "DIFFICULT"
IS A MATTER OF OPINION,
NOT FACT!**

Think about the "difficult" people in your life. In this space, write down all the words you can think of to describe their behavior:

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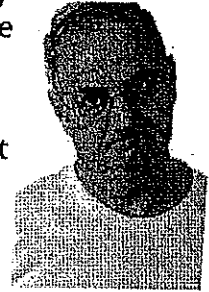
Describing Difficult People

Did you come up with any of the following words to describe the "difficult" people you know?

- Demanding
- Irritable
- Nasty
- Rude
- Aggressive
- Critical
- Depressed
- Abusive
- Scary
- Sarcastic
- Hostile
- Uncooperative
- Angry
- Complaining
- Ungrateful
- Pushy
- Mean
- Argumentative

Now, think about clients and coworkers who are easy to get along with. How many words can you think of to describe them?

If you're like most people, this list will be much *shorter* than your first list. Why is it so much easier to think of the things we don't like about people than it is to think about the good things? Try to think *positively* about all your clients and coworkers!



Remember... It takes more energy to be negative than it does to be positive!

Why Are Some People Difficult?

We are all individuals...with our own personalities, likes and dislikes, personal habits and ways of communicating. But, some of us seem to have trouble getting along with other people. There are many reasons for this. Remember that "difficult" people may be:

- Recovering from stress or tragedy in their lives.
- Suffering from an illness.
- Dealing with a disability.
- Experiencing pain—all day, every day.
- Feeling lonely or depressed.
- Taking medications that make them act differently than normal.

Write down *three* qualities you have that make you easy to get along with:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Hint: Be Careful Who You Call "Difficult"!

Imagine this: You've been assigned to work with a new client, Mr. Taylor. Your coworker, Mary, tells you that she worked with Mr. Taylor yesterday and he was "difficult", "rude" and "grouchy".

So, now what? You haven't even met Mr. Taylor, but you're already prepared for him to give you trouble. You probably wish you didn't have to work with him at all. How will this affect the way you treat Mr. Taylor when you first meet him?

Remember...reporting incidents of violence or abuse from clients (or coworkers) is important, but it's best to avoid spreading "rumors" about people. After all, Mr. Taylor may have been scared or in pain yesterday. Or, Mary may have been having a bad day herself!



If you think that a person is going to be difficult, he probably will be...because of the way you behave around him!

What Are Aggressive Personalities?

People with aggressive personalities may be:

- Loud.
- Rude.
- Bossy.
- Intimidating.
- Argumentative.
- Impatient.

Aggressive people tend to:

- Interrupt others instead of listening.
- Make sarcastic remarks about other people.

- Stand too close to others.
- Stare or glare at other people.
- Point or shake their fingers.
- Raise their voices.
- Make decisions for others.
- Complain a lot.



Aggressive people want to feel like they have power over other people's lives.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Aggressive people seem to be concerned with *their own* needs and wants...but don't care at all about others.

What Makes Aggressive People Difficult?

Working with people who are aggressive can be difficult because they tend to:

- Demand a lot of your time and attention.
- Blame you (and everyone else) for things that aren't your fault.
- Try to control your behavior.
- Say things like, "You always..." or "You never..."

- Put you down to make themselves feel more powerful.
- Try to start arguments by saying hurtful things or by raising their voices.
- Be stubborn about their schedule and activities.

Write down *three* qualities you have that make you difficult to get along with:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How Should You Communicate With Aggressive People?

- Most importantly, try to stay calm. Aggressive people want to upset you. So, if you let yourself get angry, then you've given them what they want—*control over you!* (Remember, no one can make you feel bad unless you let them!)
- Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself...but do it in a respectful manner. Continue to show care and concern for the other person.
- Try to listen to what the person is really saying. For example, if Mr. Smith is yelling about his lunch being cold, maybe he's trying to tell you that he needs help feeding himself.
- Smile and stay relaxed.



If you add your anger to the anger of an aggressive person, what do you have? An explosion!

What Are Passive Personalities?

People with passive personalities may be:

- Quiet.
- Agreeable all the time.
- Apologetic for things that aren't their fault.
- Intimidated by others.
- Shy.
- Scared.

Passive people tend to:

- Avoid speaking up for themselves.
- Let others make decisions for them.

- Get overwhelmed.
- Be afraid to say "no".
- Ashamed of themselves.
- Avoid eye contact.
- "Beat around the bush".
- Allow others to be rude.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Passive people seem to be concerned with *other people's* needs and wants...but don't try to meet their own needs.



People with passive personalities don't take responsibility for their own lives.

What Makes Passive People Difficult?

Working with people who are passive can be difficult because they tend to:

- Blame themselves for everything...but never do anything to change the situation.
 - Waste time by "beating around the bush". (They don't come out and tell you what they need.)
 - Expect you to read their minds—and become unhappy when you can't.
- Get quietly aggressive when they feel overwhelmed.
 - Have trouble making decisions...even little ones.
 - Talk negatively about people behind their backs.

Remember!
80% of the problems in your work day will come from **20%** of the people you work with.

Think about it...
Don't most of your problems come from the same few clients or coworkers?

How Should You Communicate With Passive People?

- Ask questions to try to get passive people to open up. (But, avoid questions that can be answered with just "yes" or "no".)
- Don't stand over passive people while you talk to them. It makes them feel scared and shy. Sit down so you are on the same level.
- Praise passive people when they stand up for themselves or express their needs.
- Help them make decisions by giving them a couple of choices and then offering information about the best way to go. For example, ask Mrs. Kelly if she wants to wear her blue sweater or her green blouse. Then, tell her that it's a bit cool today. Hopefully, she'll pick the sweater!



Passive people are insecure about themselves...and about every decision they make.

Tips For Working With Difficult People

- Since you spend so much time with your clients, their negative behavior is often directed at you. But, try hard not to take their comments or behaviors personally!
- Remember, it's only your *opinion* that someone at work is difficult. A person who seems difficult to you may get along fine with everyone else. Or, you may get along great with a client that no one else wants to work with!
- Try hard not to overreact when dealing with a difficult person. Ask yourself, "Is this issue really worth making a fuss about?"
- When you work with people who have given you trouble in the past, try to start fresh every day. Forget about what happened yesterday, last week or last month.
- Tell your clients what you are going to do before you do it. This decreases the chance that they will react negatively.
- If someone is yelling at you, crying or complaining loudly, try standing still, looking directly at the person...and waiting. This gives the person a chance to get all their anger out.
- You might also try saying, "I want to hear everything you have to say, but not here where it might disturb others. Let's go somewhere private."
- Consider that there may be other reasons for a client's behavior (besides just wanting to make your life difficult). For example, Mr. Jefferson acts grouchy to Sally every time she comes into his room. He says things like, "You always come in here and mumble things at me. I don't like you!" Sally's feelings are hurt until the doctor discovers that Mr. Jefferson has lost most of his hearing. Now, Sally understands that Mr. Jefferson was just feeling scared and upset about his hearing. (And, rather than admit it, he was taking his frustration out on Sally.) Since he got his hearing aid, things have been better.
- Be patient with your coworkers, too. It's human nature to think that if your coworker is grumpy with you, it must be something you've done. But, chances are, it has nothing to do with you. So, don't take everything personally. For example, what happens if you say hi to Tim and he doesn't speak to you? You might think to yourself, "Tim hates me." But, what's the real truth? Tim just got some bad news from home and didn't hear you say hi.
- Remember that old "rule" about counting to ten? It really does work. The next time you feel angry or upset with a client or coworker, breathe slowly and count to ten—before you speak. You'll feel better about the way you handle the situation.
- Don't allow other people to control your moods. If you do, you are giving them tremendous power over you. So, if you're in a good mood, don't let someone else's grouchiness bring you down.



Be patient with the people you work with—even when they are "difficult".

Time for a Laugh!

Dear Lord,

So far today, God, I've done alright. I haven't gossiped, lost my temper, been greedy, grumpy, nasty or selfish... and I'm very thankful for that.

But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help!

Amen.

More Tips For Working With Difficult People

- Remember that when people are being difficult, it's usually because they:

- Want your attention.
- Are afraid.
- Feel insecure.
- Lack confidence.
- Feel like their lives are out of control.



Difficult people are trying to grab your power from you... because they feel powerless.

- When dealing with a difficult person, focus on the particular behaviors you don't like...rather than just labeling the person. For example, instead of saying to a coworker, "You're always rude to me" try saying, "I feel hurt when you don't say good morning, please or thank you to me."
- The next time you have to work with a difficult client, give yourself a little "pep talk". Tell yourself, "I'm ready for this. I can handle whatever happens today. I will not get upset, no matter what." It may seem silly, but if you start out with a positive attitude (rather than telling yourself, "This is going to be awful."), your time with the client will be easier.
- Consider this:* If you saw a videotape of yourself from a confrontation with a difficult person, would you be embarrassed by your own behavior? If so, how would you like to see yourself behave?
- Be sure to praise people when they behave in a positive manner. (In other words, reward the behavior you want to see them repeat.) For example, if Mrs. Simpson says, "Please help me to the bathroom now" instead of the grumpy way she usually says it, you might say, "Thank you for asking so nicely. I'd be happy to help you." Hopefully, she'll continue to ask nicely in the future.
- It's always good not to make promises that you can't keep...but especially with "difficult" people. If you tell them you're going to do something, then do it. And, if you have to break your promise for some reason, be sure to apologize.
- If you work with adult clients, be sure to treat them like adults. If you treat them like children, they may behave that way!
- Watch your body language. If you tell people that you're listening to them, but you're standing with your hands on your hips, tapping your foot and staring at a clipboard...they'll know you aren't really listening.
- Keep in mind that we all have certain "pet peeves", most of which developed during our childhoods. For example, maybe your mother always nagged you to keep your hair out of your eyes. One day, a client says to you, "How can you see with your hair in your eyes?" It's an innocent question, but it sets you off because you're sensitive to it. (And, you're not really mad at the client, you're mad at your mother!) So, think about the little things that tend to bother you and try not to overreact when a client or coworker does them.
- Don't waste your energy trying to change people who behave in a difficult manner. Instead, work on changing the way you react to their behavior.

Think of your most "difficult" client...
Would you want to trade places with that person, even for a day?



What About Confused Clients?

- Does this sound familiar? Mary's client, Mr. Brown, has good days and bad days. On the good days, he's not "difficult" at all. Mary really enjoys working with him. But, on bad days, he tries to climb out of bed, pulls out his urinary catheter, undresses himself and walks around naked. Mary feels like pulling her hair out on those days!
- Obviously Mr. Brown has periods of confusion. These might be a sign of dementia, delirium or a medication reaction. Whatever the cause, it's important to remember that Mr. Brown is not being difficult on purpose.
- It takes a lot of *patience* to work with confused clients. Your number one goal is to keep confused clients safe, but you have to keep their dignity and comfort in mind, too. It's a *bad* idea to use restraints to tie confused clients to a bed or a chair. (And, in many states, it's illegal.)



For some clients, confusion is temporary. For others, it's a permanent condition.

What's the Difference Between Dementia and Delirium?

Dementia is a *chronic* condition which causes people to lose their mental skills and abilities, including the ability to take care of themselves.

Delirium is an *acute* short-term mental problem that lasts for hours or days. It causes confusion and a decreased ability to focus. Anyone can develop delirium, but it's especially common in older people who are:

- On bed rest.
- In a strange environment.
- Recovering from a trauma or recent surgery.
- Deprived of sleep.
- Taking several kinds of medications.
- Suffering from an infection or fever.

Try unscrambling the following words.

HINT: Each word relates to communication!

NITLSE

EMSIL

CEOVI

TESQUIN

How Can You Help Confused Clients?

- Remain very calm when you speak with confused clients. Speak slowly in a caring tone of voice. (Remember that they would never *choose* to be confused.)
- Don't argue with them. For example, if a confused client calls you "Mommy", don't say, "You're mixed up. Your mother is dead." That would probably upset her. Instead, ask her to tell you more about her mother.
- Remember that agitated clients often respond to quiet music. If possible, turn on a radio or tape player. Keep the music soothing—no "rock 'n roll"! And keep the volume low. (The sound from a TV may be too stimulating, causing clients to become *more* agitated.)
- Tell your supervisor right away about any new episodes of confusion and/or concerns you have about a confused client's safety.

What About Combative & Violent Clients?

Some of your clients may be difficult because they tend to be *combative* or *violent*. So, working with difficult people can be more than a communication issue—it can be a safety issue!

The government agency called OSHA (Occupational Safety & Health Administration) is concerned with employee safety. They work hard to make sure that every workplace is safe for every employee.

Did you know that more assaults take place in the health care industry than in any other? About 2/3 of all workplace assaults take place in nursing homes, hospitals and other residential facilities.

To help prevent workplace violence, OSHA has developed guidelines such as:

- Every workplace must have a *zero-tolerance* policy for any violence or threats of violence against employees.
- Employees can't be punished for reporting incidents—whether they involve a client or a coworker. In fact, employees should be *encouraged* to report all incidents.



In a recent study, over 30% of nurses reported that they have been victims of workplace violence.

What Is Workplace Violence?

Violence at work is more than just the kind of things you hear reported on the evening news. Workplace violence includes incidents such as:

- Verbal abuse, including cursing and screaming.
- Threats.
- Unwanted sexual advances.
- Physical assault, including hitting, scratching and biting.

Remember...the majority of your clients will *not* exhibit violent behavior. And most of your coworkers are peaceful people, too! Keep in mind that people are more likely to be violent when they are scared, overwhelmed or have their "personal space" invaded.

Time for a Laugh!

Finding one of her students making faces at others on the playground, Ms. Smith stopped to talk to the child. Smiling sweetly, the teacher said, "Bobby, when I was a child, I was told that if I made ugly faces, my face would freeze and stay that way." Bobby looked up at her and replied, "Well, Ms. Smith, you can't say you weren't warned!"

Patient Rights vs. Your Safety

- You've probably heard that the needs and rights of your clients come first. *And they do!* However, you have rights, too. That includes the right to a safe and healthy work environment.
- It's good to be prepared for the possibility that some of your clients may be combative or violent. But that doesn't mean that you have to put up with being abused, day after day.
- Be sure to report any incidents of abuse to your supervisor. (You'll probably have to fill out an incident report.) Remember...if you don't report the problem, it may happen again to someone else in the future.
- Tell your supervisor if the stress of working with a particular client is getting to you. It's better to switch your assignment than to risk taking your frustration out on the client.

Tips for Workplace Safety

- Remember that workplace safety is an important part of your job. The more attention you and your coworkers pay to maintaining a safe environment, the better off you'll all be. (And, your clients will benefit, too!)
- Ask your supervisor if any of your clients have a history of being physically or verbally abusive. Knowing your client's history will help you be prepared to handle combative or violent situations.
- Take threats seriously. Consider this true story: In a Colorado hospital, a patient was recovering from surgery. During the night, he told the nurse that he would kill the next person who came to get him out of bed. The night nurse didn't tell anybody what the patient had said. The next morning, the patient stabbed two physical therapists with forks.
- Remember...it's better to report a threat and have it turn out to be "nothing" than to ignore a threat and wind up with someone getting hurt.
- Be sure to share your observations about your clients with other staff members. For example, tell your coworkers if Mrs. Grady gets agitated and hostile every time someone mentions her son.
- Consider using a "buddy system" when caring for clients who have a history of being combative. This isn't so you can "gang up" on the client, but so that you can remain safe as you perform client care.
- If you work in a hospital or a facility, there may be a special alarm or telephone code used when an employee is in trouble. Be sure you know your workplace procedure.
- Keep in mind that the following conditions may cause or contribute to violent behavior:
 - **COPD.** This lung disease may prevent the brain from getting enough oxygen. This can make people anxious and agitated.
 - **Stroke.** After a stroke, there may be some damage to the brain that causes a change in your client's personality.
 - **Urinary Tract Infection.** Believe it or not, an infection in or near the bladder can cause confusion and agitation.
 - **Pain.** When clients are in a lot of pain, they may become frustrated very easily and may lash out at those around them.
 - **Dementia & Alzheimer's Disease.** While violence is not a frequent symptom, if it does develop, it's usually in the middle stages of the disease. (And, this middle stage can last for years.)
 - **Brain tumor.** When there is an abnormal growth in the brain, it can cause personality changes.
 - **Substance abuse.** If clients are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, they may be combative or violent.
 - **Depression.** When people are depressed, they may not be thinking straight and may get frustrated easily.
- Be supportive of any coworker who experiences workplace violence. Any violent incident can be scary and can have a lasting effect on someone's emotions. Some people have even quit working in health care because of the stress caused by workplace violence.



Help your coworkers deal with the emotions that linger after a violent incident at work.

Tips For Working With Combative People

- If your client is combative, look for a pattern to the behavior. Your observations will help the nurses and doctors figure out and/or manage your clients' behavior. For example, do your clients usually become aggressive:



Do your clients become aggressive when they know it's bath time?

- When they're hungry?
 - After meals?
 - At a particular time of day?
 - When they're cold?
 - When they're hot?
 - After taking medications?
 - When they're with a group of people?
 - When they're left alone?
 - After getting some exercise?
 - Only with you?
 - With anyone dressed in white?
- Pay attention to things that your clients enjoy doing. Then, if you see a violent episode coming, try to distract your client with a favorite activity.
 - If you encounter clients who are combative or violent, try to:
 - Speak slowly and calmly.
 - Listen to what they are saying. Don't tease or ignore them.
 - Don't crowd them. Give them room to breathe.
 - Don't let them crowd you...or back you into a corner.
 - Avoid touching angry clients unless you know from past experience that touching them is safe.
 - Sometimes, you can get the attention of a hostile, upset person by calling out his or her name—loudly and clearly. (But don't continue to shout at the person.)
 - Try to get a hostile, combative person to sit down, if possible. (Most people are less aggressive when they are seated.) But, if the person refuses to sit, you should remain standing, too.
 - If a client becomes violent around other clients, do your best to protect the other clients (and yourself) from harm.
 - Keep in mind that all clients have the right to refuse treatment. For example, if a client becomes aggressive when you arrive to give a bath, let your supervisor know that the client has refused your care.
 - Be a good role model. If you get angry or aggressive because of a client's violence, it will only make the situation worse.
 - Make sure you know your workplace policy for getting help if a client becomes violent.
 - Remember that all episodes of combative or violent behavior should be reported to a physician. There may be a way to treat the aggressive behavior.

Remember...

You have **two** main goals:

1. Keep your clients safe—even if they are being combative.
2. Guard your own safety and peace of mind.



IN THE KNOW

Are You "In the Know" About Working with Difficult & Combative People?

Circle the best choice and then check your answers with your supervisor!

1. Difficult people are often:

- A. Men.
- B. Dying.
- C. Scared.
- D. Elderly.

2. True or False

Most people with passive personalities tend to be violent.

3. Aggressive people may:

- A. Blame themselves for everything.
- B. Try to control your behavior.
- C. Expect you to read their minds.
- D. Do anything to avoid an argument.

4. True or False

A person who seems difficult to you may get along fine with everyone else.

5. To get along with difficult coworkers, you should:

- A. Ignore them.
- B. Let them yell at you if they feel like it.
- C. Stay calm and listen to them.
- D. Take their behavior personally.

6. Workplace violence:

- A. Is uncommon in health care.
- B. Should only be reported if someone gets hurt.
- C. Can't happen if you're good at your job.
- D. Includes verbal abuse and cursing.

7. True or False

Paying attention to violence in the workplace is an important part of every nursing assistant's job.

8. True or False

Strokes, urinary infections and pain can all cause clients to be combative.

9. True or False

If you yell louder than the person yelling at you, he or she will probably quiet down.

10. True or False

Your personal safety is just as important as your client's safety.

EMPLOYEE NAME _____ DATE _____

I understand the information presented in this inservice. I have completed this inservice and answered at least eight of the test questions correctly.

Employee Signature _____

Inservice Credit: 60 minutes

Supervisor Signature _____

Self Study _____
Group Study _____

File completed test in employee's personnel file.