

Dealing with the stress of angry people at work

One of the stressors that my clients mention to me most often is the stress of having to deal with angry people as part of their job. When confronted by customers, clients or coworkers who suddenly appear seeking attention in an unpleasant, demanding or abusive way, the natural reaction is to feel a sense of internal distress. If the distress is severe, or the scenario frequent, such stress can be present so much of the time that the thought of going to work alone can be enough to trigger the cascade of unpleasant feelings associated with being near angry people. A method to deal with angry people when they present themselves for attention that doesn't leave you feeling angry and exhausted yourself is an essential skill to possess if you find yourself in a job that places you "in harm's way" on a regular basis. The consequences to your mental and physical health without such tools in your professional toolbox can be real and disabling. That makes the exercise of learning such skills an absolute essential to the long-term survival of anybody who deals with angry people regularly.

In this article, we'll look at the first step I teach people to employ when they find themselves dealing with an angry person (in person or on the phone), and why this step works to preserve your sanity and begins to calm the other individual.

When someone is in a state of real anger, there are a number of assumptions that are safe to make about communicating with that person. The first is that verbal information, for the first minute or so, is basically going to be a one way street – from the angry person to you. This is because great anger is usually a state of both emotional imbalance and intellectual handicap for the person who is angry. They find it very difficult to take information in during their initial outburst of anger for both of those reasons.

Let's look at the emotional imbalance first. What angry people are often feeling internally is a sense of deep frustration that may have accumulated over some period of time. Beneath the frustration is the fear that they have lost or are about to lose control over something in their environment that they believe they must have in order to remain happy. A sense of control over our environment is one of the core components that our minds demand before granting "permission" to relax from a state of stress and to feel good internally. This is so deeply ingrained in our biology that scientists have demonstrated that this is just as true for animals such as lab rats as it is for humans. Rats that are given random electric shocks with no means of controlling them develop stress signs such as ulcers, impaired immune systems and aggressive behavior (sound familiar?) compared to rats given equal numbers of shocks but who believe they have a way to control them when they occur. (Notice that all that is necessary to stay healthy is the *belief* that control is possible, not actual control itself). Keep all this information in mind for a moment, and we'll come back to plug it into the big picture shortly.

Now let's examine the intellectual handicap portion of anger, which is better known (ever hear somebody say "I wasn't thinking clearly, I was angry?"). What is taking place for the angry person is one of the effects of an ancient survival mechanism called "fight or flight".

