



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MANAGING DIFFICULT CALLS

Finding out what the caller wants

Allow the caller time to share their story so you can understand their needs and how best to support them.

Avoid

- Starting with "Well..." as it may sound dismissive, or as if you disagree, even when you don't.
- Asking what the caller wants immediately after they've shared their concerns or story. Always acknowledge their concerns or story first.
- Asking what the caller wants straight after they've asked a question, without first acknowledging it.

Try

- Reflecting their concern before moving on, for example: **"So what I'm hearing is..."**
- Using small transition phrases such as **"Okay, thanks for explaining that..."** to move from listening to responding.
- Acknowledging their feelings before asking questions, for example: **"That sounds like a frustrating/upsetting situation for you..."** This shows you have heard and understood their concern.
- Validating their experience without making judgemental statements.
- Asking open, positive, solution-focused questions that help the caller feel respected, involved, and supported in the conversation.

Distressed or angry callers

Callers may become distressed or angry for many reasons. They may be feeling anxious, frustrated, overwhelmed, helpless, or experiencing mental health challenges. Anger may also be used as a way of regaining a sense of control in a difficult situation.

How you can support the caller and stay in control of the call

Remain calm

- The caller is not personally attacking you, you are simply the person taking the call.
- Keep your voice calm and at a steady, low volume. Avoid raising your voice in response.
- Pause and take a breath before responding if needed, to help you stay grounded and measured.

Reassure

- It can be difficult to hear someone who is upset or angry, but often they need space to express their emotions.
- Let the caller know they can take their time and that you are there to listen.



Acknowledge feelings

- Acknowledge the caller's emotions rather than ignoring them.
- Use simple, validating statements such as:
 - ***"It sounds like you're going through a really difficult time."***
 - ***"It sounds like this situation has left you feeling very frustrated/angry."***
- Recognising emotions helps the caller feel heard and understood.

Listen actively

- Listening can be challenging when a caller is upset, but it is essential for de-escalation.
- Allow the caller to finish speaking without interruption.
- Focus on understanding their concerns fully before responding.

Support techniques during the call

- **Take notes:** Recording key points is important, as callers may raise multiple issues. Notes will help you stay accurate, recall details, and identify the main concerns.
- **Use active listening responses:** Show the caller you are listening by using reflective phrases such as ***"So then..."*** after they've shared their story. This helps avoid sounding judgemental and encourages continued sharing.
- **Summarise:** Once the caller has finished explaining their concern, refer to your notes and summarise what you have heard. Check for accuracy and seek clarification if needed. This demonstrates careful listening and can also help de-escalate the situation.
- **Guide the next steps:** Match the caller's level of emotion while responding in a calm and constructive way. Speak slowly, use a steady tone, and clearly explain what options or actions are available.
- **If the caller is highly distressed:** If a caller is unable to communicate clearly due to crying or cannot process information, gently suggest they call back when they feel ready. This should be used as a last resort, as most callers can continue the conversation effectively when their emotions are acknowledged and they feel heard.

If a caller becomes abusive or offensive

- **Set a clear boundary early:** Politely but firmly interrupt the caller and explain that their language or tone is not acceptable. Ask them to moderate their language so the conversation can continue.
- **Give an opportunity to adjust:** Allow the caller a chance to change their behaviour. For example: ***"I understand you're upset, but I'm finding it difficult to continue this conversation with the language/tone being used."***
- **Reinforce support with limits:** If the behaviour continues, explain that you want to help, but the call can only continue if the language remains respectful. You may advise them to call back when they are able to communicate without abuse or offensive language.
- **End the call if necessary:** If the caller continues to be abusive or offensive despite clear warnings, it is appropriate to inform them you will be ending the call and then terminate the call.



'The long way round' or 'been there, done that' calls

Repeated barriers / “Nothing will work” callers

These are calls where any suggested options are met with responses such as “I’ve tried that already,” “It won’t work,” or “No one has ever been able to help me.”

Why the caller may be responding this way

- They may feel overwhelmed, hopeless, or inadequate due to ongoing difficulties.
- They may be under pressure to resolve the issue and shift responsibility for finding solutions.
- They may be frustrated after repeated attempts or due to the complexity of their situation.

How to support the caller and stay in control of the call

- **Refocus the call:** After listening briefly, gently return to purpose: “So what can I help you with today?”
- **Clarify and paraphrase:** Reflect understanding: “It sounds like you’re looking for information about X?”
- **Set focus if needed:** If the caller is repetitive: “Before we continue, I need to understand what you’re hoping I can help with today.”
- **Summarise and prioritise:** Summarise key points and identify the main issue, confirming: “Is that right?”
- **Look for underlying issues:** Listen for what may be behind the presenting concern.
- **Stay focused on one issue:** If multiple issues arise, agree on the main one before proceeding.
- **Stay within role:** Clarify concerns, provide information, and outline next steps, don’t try to solve everything.
- **Avoid over-investing:** Accept that some options may already have been tried; don’t feel responsible for finding new solutions.
- **Reframe positively:** “It sounds like you’ve already been doing a lot to manage this situation.”
- **Acknowledge frustration:** “It can be frustrating when you’ve already tried many things.” or “It can feel overwhelming when things are this complex.”
- **Close appropriately:** “Thank you for your call today. I hope the options discussed are helpful.”
- **Self-care:** Some calls can be emotionally draining, take time to reset and seek support if needed.
- **Seek support if required:** Debrief with a colleague, supervisor, or Mental Health First Aider.



Calls involving strong feelings of injustice or unresolved experiences

There are several reasons callers may present in this way:

- The caller may feel they have experienced something unfair or unjust and are seeking acknowledgement of that experience.
- They may have gone through a difficult situation and feel strongly that others should not have to experience the same thing.
- They may be finding it difficult to move past the experience and feel frustrated that others do not see it as equally significant.

How to support the caller and stay in control of the call

- **Allow the caller to tell their story and acknowledge their experience:** Give them time to explain what has happened and reflect back key points to show understanding. For example: *“What I’m hearing is... that sounds like a very difficult situation.”*
- **Acknowledge without necessarily agreeing:** Recognise the impact of their experience while maintaining neutrality and professionalism.
- **Be clear about scope and limitations:** Clearly and respectfully explain the limits of your role, for example: *“I’m not able to assist with this matter as it falls outside my area of expertise/our scope, but I’d like to refer you to someone who can help”.*
- **Recognise this may be difficult:** Understand that it may be frustrating for both you and the caller when expectations cannot be met within the service.
- **Offer appropriate next steps where relevant:** If suitable, suggest external organisations that may be able to assist, such as complaints or advocacy bodies.
- **Provide escalation information if needed:** If the caller is dissatisfied with the interaction, provide them with information about your complaints procedure.

'What would you know?' calls

These calls involve the caller challenging or doubting the information you provide.

Why this may happen

- The caller may be anxious about making the “right” decision.
- They may feel uncertain or lack confidence in the information they’re receiving.
- They may have previously received incorrect or conflicting advice and want reassurance.

How to support the caller and stay in control

- **Check understanding:** If the caller suggests you’ve misunderstood, clarify calmly: *“Sorry, let me check I’ve understood correctly... (summarise). Is that right?”*
- **Stay patient and consistent:** Repeat or reframe information as needed, anxiety may drive repeated questioning.
- **Respond to challenges about your advice:**



- If unsure: place the caller on hold, check information, or consult a colleague.
- If needed: take details and offer to call back after further research.
- If confident: calmly restate the information: *“The options available are...”*
- **Set boundaries if required:**
If the caller continues to reject accurate information, restate options without escalating.
- **Offer escalation if appropriate:**
Provide complaints or feedback pathways if the caller remains dissatisfied.

Suicidal thoughts or mental health crisis calls

The caller may be experiencing a mental health crisis or feeling overwhelmed, which can sometimes include suicidal thoughts. They may feel they've reached the limits of available support, feel like a burden, or be unsure where to turn for help.

How to support the caller and stay in control

- Acknowledge your role and provide support options: ***“I’m not a trained mental health professional, but I can provide you with contact details for people who can help.”***
- Provide crisis support contacts immediately:
 - **Lifeline: 13 11 14** (24/7 confidential crisis support)
 - **1300 MH Call – 1300 642 255**
 - **Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467** (24/7 telephone and online support for people at risk of suicide and carers)
- **Encourage immediate contact:**
Support the caller to reach out to one of these services straight away.
- **If there is immediate danger:**
If the caller is in immediate risk of harm to themselves or others, encourage them to call **000** or contact emergency services.
- **Stay within your role:**
Avoid prolonged or detailed exploration of suicidal thoughts. Focus on immediate connection to crisis support services.

Self-care and support for you

Supporting callers in crisis can be emotionally demanding. Make sure you debrief and seek support when needed. This may include speaking with a trusted colleague, supervisor, Mental Health First Aider, or contacting appropriate support services.



Threats of violence

In the unlikely event you receive a call involving threats of violence, follow the guidance below.

Why the caller may be acting this way

The caller may be seeking help to stop or manage violent thoughts or behaviour and may expect you to take action. They may also be attempting to regain a sense of control by disclosing actual or threatened violence.

How to support the caller and stay in control

- **Remain calm:** Take a breath and maintain a steady, neutral tone.
- **Clarify the purpose of the call:** Establish why the caller has contacted your organisation and what they are seeking.
- **Take detailed notes:** Record all relevant information provided, including:
 - Name and contact details
 - Location
 - Details of any potential target(s)
 - Nature of the threat or concern
- **Escalate immediately:**
Notify your supervisor or appropriate staff member as soon as possible.
- **If the caller is seeking support:**
Where appropriate, provide information about crisis and mental health supports and encourage immediate contact, such as:
 - **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (24/7 confidential crisis support)
- **Confidentiality limits:**
If you believe there is a serious risk to a person or group, clearly inform the caller that confidentiality may need to be breached.
- **Set clear boundaries:**
If the caller continues to discuss violence, calmly and firmly advise that you can no longer maintain confidentiality and will need to escalate the call to your supervisor.
- **Immediate risk response:**
If you believe there is an imminent or credible threat, contact **000** and request police assistance.

Self-care and support

Managing calls involving threats or distressing content can be emotionally challenging. Debrief and seek support as needed. This may include speaking with a trusted colleague, supervisor, Mental Health First Aider, or contacting Lifeline 13 11 14 for support.



Acknowledgements

These notes were prepared by Karen Wilson, Executive Officer, Seniors Social Isolation Services Program, Council on the Ageing Queensland. They were adapted from the Challenging Telephone Calls training workshop delivered by Mind (National Association for Mental Health, UK). The section on suicidal thoughts or feelings was informed by resources from the Suicide Call Back Service website and SANE Australia.

Original date: 12/04/2021

Revised date: 12/05/2026

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