

Managing tough customers & stressful situations



Course handbook



The 5 steps process

1. Centre and protect yourself

2. Practice empathy

3. Demonstrate generosity

4. Listen

5. Solve

Breathing

“

When you own your own body, no one can steal your peace.

”

Your breath is a powerful tool of self-awareness.

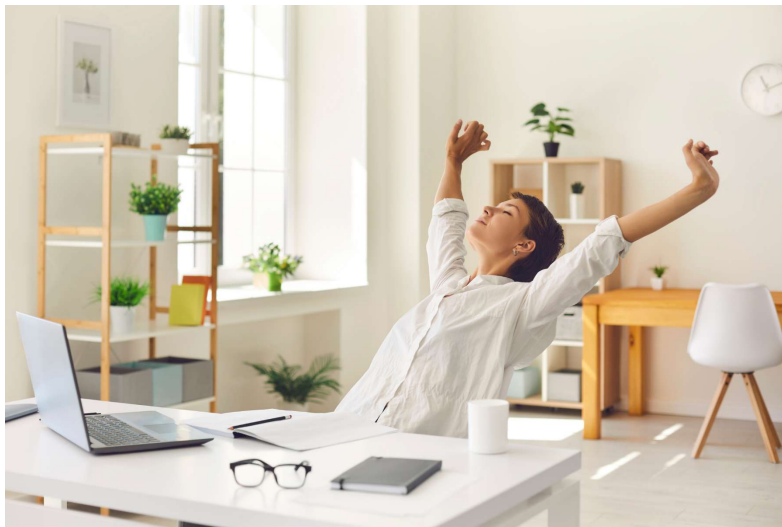
The benefits of breathing deeply

The fight or flight stress response is an automatic reaction triggered when we are confronted with danger. This response literally hijacks higher brain centers with a “act first, think later” pattern that shuts down perspective and analytical reasoning. Quite literally, just when we need it most, we lose our minds. While that fight-or-flight reaction may save us in life-or-death situations, it handicaps the strategic thinking needed in today’s workplace or to deal with difficult situations.

Mindful breathing exercises can limit the threat response. By taking a deep breath or two, when you are confronted by a difficult customer, you’ll be better equipped for the situation.

While you can’t sneak away for five minutes to do breathing exercises, you can take 15 seconds to do this:

- * Take a deep breath
- * Inhale slowly through your nose
- * Exhale slowly out of your mouth.
- * Repeat the words grace, empathy and listen



Empathy

“

Learning to stand in somebody else's shoes, to see through their eyes, that's how peace begins. And it's up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world.

Barack Obama

”

Responding with empathy

Empathetic statements and responses can show that you understand your customer's feelings:

1. I am sorry that this happened to you.
2. That would upset me too.
3. I want to thank you for being so open and honest with me.
4. This sort of challenge is never easy.
5. It is clear this has impacted you deeply.
6. What else would you like to share?
7. It sounds like you had a very stressful time.
8. Yes, what has happened makes no sense at all.
9. I am on your side.
10. It's no surprise you are upset.
11. That sounds frightening.
12. You are making complete sense.



Empathy Bingo

Empathy Bingo can be played in group therapy contexts, or by an individual on their own. Designed to help players differentiate between empathy and other responses, this exercise has two parts:

- Part A is a bingo grid that lists different types of responses that are common during interactions. Cross out each square as you recognize a certain type of response from Part B. If you are working in a group setting, you may want to copy the sheet so that each group member has their own bingo grid.
- Part B is a set of snippets from different example dialogues – you can read these out or cover the left-hand column and read through them without seeing the answers. Each snippet corresponds to a different square on the grid – that is, a dialogue may exemplify “Correcting”, “Educating”, and so forth.

This exercise can help you or a group learn about the different ways we can respond to a friend in need of empathy, and why empathy is usually the best choice.

Part A:

Interrogating	One-Upping	Advising
Correcting	Consoling	Shutting Down
Educating	Sympathizing	Explaining
Fixing It	Empathizing	Storytelling

Part B:

Fixing It	A: I'm anxious about getting to the airport on time. B: I'll drive you.
One-Upping	A: Check out this bruise from my fall down the stairs. B: That's tiny, look at what I got when I was hit by a bike.
Storytelling	A: I couldn't get a taxi for hours last night and had to walk home at 5 am. B: That sounds like the time when...
Consoling	A: I feel terrible that my student failed his exam. B: You're not to blame, you're a brilliant tutor.
Sympathizing	A: The dentist told me I need to have very painful root canal surgery. B: Oh man, that's terrible.
Interrogating	A: My boss has cut my pay. B: Buck up, let's play some pool.
Shutting Down	A: My boss has cut my pay. B: Buck up, let's play some pool.
Educating	A: I don't know anybody at my new college. B: See it as a chance to develop your social skills.
Explaining	A: I'm annoyed because you left the kids waiting an hour after school. B: That's only because the traffic was terrible...
Advising	A: I think your essay about the greenhouse could be improved. B: It was about a glasshouse, not a greenhouse.
Correcting	A: I think your essay about the greenhouse could be improved. B: It was about a glasshouse, not a greenhouse.
Empathizing	A: My whole house is flooded and everything in it is soaked. B: Do you feel stressed out and in need of some support?

Source: Positive Psychology

Active Listening Techniques

There are five key active listening techniques you can use to help you become a more effective listener:

1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations.
- 'Listen' to the speaker's body language



2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to show that you are engaged.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Make sure that your posture is open and interested.
- Make sure that your posture is open and interested.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and "uh huh."

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect on what is being said and to ask questions.

- Reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is...," and "Sounds like you are saying...," are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say...?" "Is this what you mean?"
- Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

Tip:

If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so. And ask for more information: "I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally. What I thought you just said is XXX. Is that what you meant?"

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
- Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately

Active listening is designed to encourage respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting her down.

- Be candid, open and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person in a way that you think they would want to be treated.

<https://www.mindtools.com/media/Images/Infographics/listening-skills-infographic.pdf>

The Feedback Triangle

The feedback triangle is a good way to practice these scenarios. It helps people see the impact of their words on others and to better understand how to respond in difficult circumstances.

Step 1: Get together in a group of three

Step 2: Chose an observer and two 'players'.

One player will be the customer and the other will be the staff member.

Step 3: Role play or recreate a situation that has happened with a customer. Don't be shy, now is the time to practice the toughest moments that you've had with rude or obnoxious customers. Follow the five steps.

Step 4: The observer can track how the conversation is going and if the conversation followed the five steps.



Once the play acting is over, talk about what was difficult and where the conversation might have gone off track. What worked and what felt natural to do or say?

When we learn a skill (skiing, cooking, piano) we practice so that we can continue to improve. But we don't practice how to handle difficult customers. By practicing together, you develop skills and self-awareness that will strengthen your ability to follow the five step process.

The team approach



Team exercise

Spend 30 minutes talking about the following and create a plan to support each other when there is a difficult client.

1. Think of some of the scenarios that happened in the past.
2. Share what made the experience negative and what might have been helpful in the moment and after it was over.
3. As a team, come up with a list of strategies you can use next time there is a issue.
4. Create a short playbook for when something goes wrong.
5. Write it out and share it with others.
6. Commit to the list.
7. Reflect, adjust and update as necessary.

Resilience

“

Although you may not always be able to avoid difficult situations, you can modify the extent to which you can suffer by how you choose to respond to the situation.

Dalai Lama

”

Resilience

The capacity to recover quickly from life's challenges can be learned. Resilience is the ability to persevere and recover from adversity. When a resilient person experiences hardship, they see it as an opportunistic challenge rather than focusing on self-pity.

Strategies to build resilience with emotional agility*

It is easy for someone to tell you to not waste time and energy when a rude customer triggers strong emotions, but those emotions are real, and they won't go away on their own. In fact, if you push aside or ignore your emotions, they get stronger. Psychologists call it amplification.

Do's and Don'ts

- First, stop thinking of emotions as positive or negative
- Don't deny your emotions
- Don't label your emotions as positive or negative
- Don't judge yourself
- Don't numb (drinking, gambling, overeating)
- Do view emotions as inherently valuable
- Do practice self-compassion
- Do try to label your emotions accurately as it can help you better understand the cause of your feelings.
- Do remind yourself that you own your emotions, they don't own you and you are not your emotions. You aren't stressed, you are feeling stressed.
- Do find strategies to better understand your feelings such as journaling or spending time with loved ones.

* Based on Emotional Agility by Susan David. Take the Emotional Agility test to see how you score <https://www.susandavid.com/quiz> and take 16 minutes to watch her TED Talk (also found on her website)

A quarter of all employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives, according to the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC).



Other Resilience Strategies

Seek social support and connection

Those with a strong social network and meaningful connections are better able to rise above tough situations.

Remember your goals and values

Studies have shown that people who lean into their values and focus on their goals are more likely to persevere after a setback or upsetting event. If you enjoy being a server in a restaurant because you are a foodie or love to help people enjoy a great night out, then remind yourself that you are right where you are meant to be. If you are a coffee loving barista, remember why you've chosen to work at the coffee shop. Similarly, if your long-term goal is to get a university degree without incurring too much student debt, focus on that.

Focus on the good

Appreciate and recognize the good in the world. Think about your favourite places, people, or pets. Think about the beauty and warmth of the sunshine, your health, and the beautiful city we live in. When you cultivate that, you are watering the seeds of gratitude and compassion.

Reflection

What are some of the emotions you feel when you are confronted with a customer who is angry or upset?

How long do these emotions typically stay with you? Is it a minutes, hours or the entire day?

How do these interactions impact your ability to serve other customers?



How do these interactions affect your self-esteem and your mental health?

What are some strategies you've learned that will help you next time a customer is rude or difficult?
