

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS

While working in customer facing roles can be rewarding and fulfilling, there can also be challenges. For example, you may have to deal with people who are angry, frustrated or upset. How we react to difficult customer interactions is individual to each of us.

The degree (or extent) to which a difficult customer interaction impacts us can also be influenced by other factors. For example if we are already feeling stressed, or the situation reminds us of a previous experience we found difficult.

Detailed below are some suggestions and advice on what you can do before, during and after difficult customer interactions to help minimise their impact on your wellbeing



BEFORE

- Remind yourself that there are limits to what you can provide to a customer and that you can only do what is within the boundaries of your role.
- Accept what you cannot control. For some of us, it is inevitable that as part of our role, we will experience challenging customer interactions.
- Prepare key phrases to de-escalate potential challenging situations, for example: "I can see that this is a stressful situation for you, let me see what I can help you with", etc.
- Have relevant information / phone numbers to hand should you need to refer customers on to other sections / services.
- Reflect on what has worked well in the past for yourself and other colleagues.
- Keep things in perspective. Remind yourself that not every conversation or interaction will be difficult.
- Keep lines of communication open with colleagues and line managers, and seek support if you are feeling worried or anxious about customer interactions.
- Where possible, establish a buddy system so no one feels like they are dealing with difficult situations on their own.
- It also may be helpful to think about / explore:
 - The emotional impact of the work
 - The stress response that might be elicited
 - What might help
 - Being aware of our own personal approach based on working style; previous distressing experiences

Seirbhís Chánaimh
d'Fhostaithe na Stáseirbhíse



Civil Service Employee
Assistance Service

CIVIL SERVICE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICE
ST STEPHEN'S GREEN HOUSE, EARLSFORT TERRACE, D2

0818 008 120 | CSEAS@PER.GOV.IE
WWW.CSEAS.PER.GOV.IE

DURING

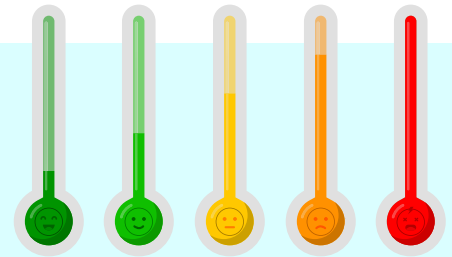
- Listen – avoid interrupting.
- Be aware of non-verbal communication, e.g. eye contact, body language and facial expressions.
- Clarify what the customer is saying by summarising / repeating back what they have just said. This will help to show them that they have been understood and heard.
- Try to stay calm. Self-regulation skills can address and calm emotions in the moment and help maintain control and composure, e.g. take deep breaths. Deep breathing floods your body with oxygen and can help reduce physical tension. When you're in fight-or-flight mode, your breathing becomes irregular, fast, short, and shallow. Changing your breathing pattern is a first line of defence and can help to bring you back into a more relaxed state of in mind.
- If a customer is shouting, lowering your voice can be a helpful technique to use in de-escalating the situation.
- End the interaction if needs be. It is never ok to tolerate abusive or threatening behaviour.
- Try not to take it personally. This is easier said than done but remember that customers are usually reacting to the situation rather than you as a person.

DURING



AFTER

- Spend a few minutes taking some slow, deep breaths. Ground yourself, focus on the here and now.
- Step away from your desk or out of your office for a few minutes.
- Be kind to yourself as the day goes on. Do what you can to mind yourself. Find what works for you.
- Remind yourself that you have done the best you could to help the customer within the boundaries of your role.
- Take time to process your feelings and acknowledge the effect the experience has had on you. This can be done alone or with someone you trust.
- Report any incidents of threatening or abusive behaviour to your line manager.



It is normal for our anxiety and stress levels to peak after a challenging interaction and it can take a few hours for us to return to a calm state. If, however, you are noticing difficulty with moving forward from it, please reach out for support via:

Your line manager or trusted colleague

Support team (where applicable)

HR

CMO

Training supports

CSEAS