Tip Sheet: Five Tips for Calming Angry People

While mirroring delivery in everyday conversation helps build connection, matching anger with anger only escalates the situation. People get upset when they perceive a situation to be unfair, feel a loss of control, sense fear, or experience deep frustration. They want your attention! If you appear so calm that it seems you don’t care, they get angrier. Show your willingness to understand by mirroring their energy level, making direct eye contact, and repeating key phrases regarding their frustration. Avoid mirroring negative language, shouting, and aggressive body language. Here are five more tips from the book Dealing with Difficult People (Brinkman & Kirschner, 2006):

Seek to understand first. Listen without judgment or interruption until you fully understand the other person’s message. Responding too soon will fuel the anger.

Offer empathy. See it through the eyes of the other person and attempt to understand what he or she is experiencing. Even if you have shared similar experiences, avoid saying, "I know how you feel." You’ll never know exactly how someone else is feeling. Instead say, "It sounds like you’re feeling frustrated," or "I can only imagine how you must be feeling."

Introduce facts carefully. As emotional intensity increases, one’s ability to reason decreases, making it difficult to listen to the facts. Telling angry people they are being irrational is wasted energy and can even escalate the situation. Be empathic first, and then offer facts second.

Encourage time-limited venting. Blowing off steam can be beneficial, but if it becomes an unending rant, angry people can grow increasingly agitated because they start obsessing. Limit their venting to 2 minutes before narrowing concerns.

Narrow concerns. Once a person vents, narrow down many concerns to the most important by asking, "Out of everything you mentioned, what’s the number one thing you want to focus on solving right now?"