

# Responding to Difficult Phone Calls & Self-Care

[www.cseas.per.gov.ie](http://www.cseas.per.gov.ie)



This leaflet contains information on how to respond to a caller who is angry, aggressive or distressed. It also acknowledges that this kind of call can be upsetting for the person taking it and includes some tips on self-care.

The following steps may be helpful.

**Stay calm.** Always remember the caller is not personally attacking you, you just happen to be the person answering a call. Don't take it personally. Keep your voice low – do not respond by raising your voice.

**Listen.** When someone is complaining or seems very angry or upset listening can be hard to do, but when you listen the caller senses you care. Allow the caller to finish speaking before you say anything. Listen for the key facts and the key feelings.

**Take notes.** This is important because a caller may discuss a number of issues during the conversation and your notes will facilitate your recall.

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**On-duty EAO available at 0818 008120**

**Monday – Thursday: 9am – 5.15pm**

**Friday: 9am – 5pm**

**Appointments are available evening  
and weekends if required**

**Email: [cseas@per.gov.ie](mailto:cseas@per.gov.ie)**

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**Repeat back.** When the caller has finished describing the problem, look at your notes and summarise what s/he has said. Seek clarification if necessary. The caller will realise you have been listening carefully and this can sometimes help to calm the situation.

**NB:** *“The important thing is not how the problem seems to you, but rather how the caller perceives it.”*

Remember this sentence if you feel judgmental, or can't understand why a caller is so upset.

**Follow-up.** You cannot always solve the caller's problem and you may have to pass the enquiry to someone else. When this happens advise the caller of your planned action and what, if any, follow-up s/he can expect. If you need to contact the caller again, ask for contact details and respond in a timely fashion.

**If you must put the call on hold,** advise the caller that you are going to do so, tell him/her what you will be doing and when you expect to be back on the line.

**Know the policy.** Become familiar with the policy applicable to your organisation in relation to call management. Follow the guidelines laid down on how to deal with these calls in your Department/Office.

**Check it out.** Inform your manager or supervisor, if required, of the action you took and why. It may also be helpful to document what happened.

*Referring to your Department's policy in relation to call management (assuming there is one) and seeking clarification as to best practice, will build your confidence in dealing with future difficult calls.*

**Cause for concern.** Callers may appear very distressed and you may be concerned about their safety and welfare.

On rare occasions a caller may talk of selfharm or suicide. Should this happen, it might be appropriate to discuss with him/her options for support.

It could be helpful to have the phone numbers of a few voluntary support agencies close to hand.

## **Self-Care**

**Mind yourself.** If possible get help during a difficult call and talk it through afterwards if you need to. When you have listened to a very distressed person you may find that you feel upset, drained, angry, guilty, frustrated, or experience many other feelings.

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## Some things that may help immediately after a difficult call

- It is important to talk to someone else about your feelings and the effect the conversation had on you. This can be your manager/supervisor or a colleague
- Take some slow deep breaths
- Do some simple stretching exercises – they will help interrupt the accumulation of muscular tension you may be experiencing
- Interrupting your thoughts can help to reduce any possible overreactions and negative emotions

## Some wellness tips

- Practise deep breathing anywhere, anytime. It energises the body and clears the mind.
- Make exercise part of your normal day. Take the stairs instead of the lift and make a ten-minute walk part of your lunch-break. Any amount of physical activity will have a positive effect on your mood and boost your energy levels.
- Drink water during the day to keep your body hydrated.
- Be balanced in what you eat and drink. A healthy diet is important for both physical and mental health.
- A good night's sleep enables the body and mind to refresh and renew itself. Try to develop good sleeping habits and engage in techniques to aid relaxation.
- Develop a healthy thought process. This can be easier said than done, but try not to dwell on the negatives of a situation.
- Recognise that other people's attitudes, behaviours and moods don't have to adversely affect the quality of your day.

- Demonstrate respect in how you think, feel and behave towards others.
- Talking problems over with supportive others helps to defuse emotional tensions before they take root in physical tensions.
- Give yourself permission to unwind. Listening to music, yoga, meditation, massage and particular breathing techniques can all be beneficial.

**Note** - Difficult phone calls may only occur infrequently. By keeping in mind the information in this leaflet and bringing your own ideas to bear you will develop your own strategy for responding to these calls in an effective, efficient manner.

## Where to find help

Contact the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) and meet with the Employee Assistance Officer (EAO) for your Department/Office and Region.

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**Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (HQ)**  
**Department of Public Expenditure and Reform**  
**4th Floor, St. Stephen's Green House,**  
**Earlsfort Terrace,**  
**Dublin 2, DO2 PH42, Ireland**  
**Tel: 0818 008120**

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