

De-escalating Distress

How to Support Customers While Preserving Your Well-being

Supporting customers can be uniquely stressful. Thankfully, it's possible to be in a customer service role while preserving your own well-being. Here are practical skills for de-escalating customer distress in-the-moment and easy-to-use techniques for taking care of yourself along the way.

Supporting others in times of distress

To effectively support a customer who is in a state of upset, try the 4-step ACED model:



Actively listen

Listen closely and reflect back what the customer is telling you. For example, "It sounds like you're feeling/wanting/needling _____. Is that right?" Mirroring the customer's words and clarifying shows that you are paying attention and you care.



Calmly respond

Research shows that people copy the emotions of the people they interact with, so slowing your pace and keeping a moderate volume can help de-escalate your customer. It's hard for someone to stay at a level 10 if you are at a 4 or 5.



Empathize and validate

Make it clear that you're trying to put yourself in their shoes. For example, "I appreciate you sharing that with me." Or, try reflecting back why their feelings make sense given what happened, using the words they used "I understand why you'd feel _____ given that _____."



Develop a plan

Give the customer reassurance, a summary of your interaction, and next steps if applicable. Even if the next steps are not what they would most hope for, a wrap up can give a sense of closure and an informative and clear way to end the interaction.

Notice your own experience and take care of yourself in the moment

While you're supporting customers who are upset, you may find yourself getting worked up, too. Here are some common ways we can get distressed, mark the ones that apply to you:

Thoughts	Emotions	Physical Sensations	Behaviors
Worry	Anxiety/panic/fear	Muscle tension	Avoiding/withdrawal
Self-doubt	Anger	Heart racing	Freezing up
Perfectionism	Helplessness	Shallow breathing	Confrontation

Now, let's take a look at some strategies below that can help you cope.

Coping with:

Thoughts. Notice the thoughts going through your mind. Slow down and ask yourself: are they helpful or unhelpful? Realistic or unrealistic? Thoughts like "if I don't handle this perfectly, this interaction will turn into a disaster" are not likely to be all that accurate or useful.

Try replacing these thoughts with more balanced ones that can help you move forward, for example, point out what you can still do even when an interaction is not going well, like: "this customer is upset, but I know how to listen and empathize, and that's still helpful" or "there are no perfect words, but I can try to help solve the problem."

Emotions. Tune into what you're feeling in the moment. The goal isn't to get rid of the emotion. Instead, the goal is to:

-  Notice what you're feeling (for example: anxious).
-  Remind yourself that this emotion will pass, like waves emotions come and go.
-  Remind yourself that you can keep going even before the emotion passes.

Here's a sample pep-talk that follows this format: "I'm feeling anxious and scared, these feelings will pass, and I can continue trying to help even before they do." Research shows that simply observing and naming what you're feeling, while giving yourself some reassurance that those feelings will subside, can reduce the intensity of those feelings and help you recover faster.

Body Sensations. Notice how your body is responding. Classic stress reactions like muscle tension, racing heart, or shallow breathing might show up. If they do, try a relaxation strategy that can help hack your nervous system and calm you down:

- Breathing from your belly instead of your chest and taking longer outbreaths than you take inbreaths, (for example: 6 second outbreath, 4 second inbreath).
- Tensing an already tense part of your body and then releasing that tension, noticing how it feels when you let go.

Taking care of yourself in the long term

Practicing self-care can help you and your customers. When you take care of yourself you are more likely to approach difficult interactions from a place of wellness. Prioritizing your well-being involves making sure you are prioritizing self-care essentials, like: nutrition, sleep, relationships, exercise and hobbies.



To power-up your self-care make self-care choices based on what you value or what adds meaning or importance to your life!

Practice making a plan for this with the steps below:

- 1 Mark your top three values in this list. If a value isn't listed, write it in.

Career	Education	Fun	Justice
Citizenship	Family	Health	Relationships
Community	Friends	Love	Spirituality

Work

- 2 For each of your three values, write down just one activity that will help bring you closer to that value. Be specific and realistic. For example, if being persistent in staying connected with friends is important, write "call my best friend once per week."

- 3 Know that even when setting intentional values-based self-care goals, we won't always be able to follow through in the way that we want. When this happens, try to treat yourself with the same kindness you would treat a loved-one or friend who was having difficulty meeting these goals.
- 4 Remember: sometimes things can be challenging. It's okay to need extra support, and that's when working with a mental health care professional can help.

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