



Effective Communication: Working with the Dissatisfied Customer

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Identify common customers of the home health aide.
2. Discuss useful techniques for listening and responding to dissatisfied customers.
3. Identify common misperceptions that may prevent good customer service.

You have just arrived at work, and are looking over your heavier-than-usual client assignment for the day. On it, you see that you'll be spending a good bit of time with Mrs. G. You've worked with her before, and found her angry and impossible to please. Do you:

A. develop a sudden illness and have to go home immediately.

OR

B. plead with a co-worker to trade assignments with you.

Fortunately, there are better options than these two. No one likes to work with angry or upset people, and, as a home health aide, you may feel that you get more than your fair share of this particular "skill." But there are ways of working with these situations that do not leave you begging for mercy, or wishing you were having dental surgery, instead.

This newsletter will discuss working with dissatisfied customers, including an overview of who your customers are, and the possible consequences of dissatisfaction. Actions you can take to help these customers will also be covered, as well as common pitfalls.



Your Customer's Needs

As a home health aide, you have a lot of customers depending on you! These include, at a minimum, clients and their family members/friends, nurses, physicians, and other agency staff members.

Of the customers who stop doing business with a company, over 80%

stop due to dissatisfaction with service or the way they are treated. In this day of stiff healthcare competition, your agency cannot afford to lose customers in this way. Studies show



that a dissatisfied customer tells an average of 10, and even up to 20, people about the negative experience. A satisfied customer, however, tells only about 3 to 4 others about their positive experience. So unfortunately, those who are not satisfied can do a lot more to influence your agency's reputation than the satisfied customers. And increasingly, people are sharing their dissatisfaction on social media and review websites, reaching an even wider audience. More importantly, an unhappy customer's needs are not being met, and additional support may be required.

How to Help

Here are several guidelines that will help the next time you encounter a dissatisfied customer:

Manage your response: Try to keep your anxiety or anger low, and your desire to help, high. The more "keyed-up" you get, the more likely the other person is to take it up a notch. Focus on the situation as a challenge—"How can I best help to meet this person's needs?"

Don't take it personally: Avoid becoming defensive when confronted by someone who is dissatisfied. This can be difficult, since often our first response is to think, "Hey, don't yell at me—I didn't have anything to do with

it!" The person is not angry at you as a person, he or she is angry with a situation. Decrease your tendency to become defensive by focusing on the other person and what he or she is saying and going through, rather than yourself.

Listen carefully: Pay very careful attention to what the person is saying. Show the person that you are truly listening by leaning slightly forward, making eye contact and other nonverbal signals, such as nodding, where appropriate. This tells the person that he is being heard.



Allow the person to talk: In many cases, a major goal of the upset individual is to get her story told. Allow the person to explain the situation without interruption, as this can be helpful in decreasing the person's stress level. Even if you think you know how to address the customer's problem right off the bat, keep quiet until she has finished explaining/complaining, or she will not feel that she has been heard. Also, you cannot know for sure what the customer's needs are, until you have heard her out. For example, let's say you're aware that the aide working with Mr. P yesterday did not have time to do the scheduled change of bed sheets. His daughter approaches you and says angrily, "My father's sheets..." It is the unwise home health aide who interrupts in mid-sentence to say, "I know, the bed hasn't been made because Sara didn't have time." That may have been her concern, or it may not have. Regardless, her concern wasn't fully heard and addressed, and she is likely to remain frustrated and angry. Also, realize that people receiving healthcare, especially clients and family members, are often under a lot of stress. This can make them more likely than normal to become upset. Try to understand that the customer may be going through a very difficult time.

Apologize: Once the customer has finished explaining, start by apologizing for the situation, and use the customer's name frequently throughout the interaction. Say, "Mrs. C, I'm so sorry your father's bed wasn't changed yesterday." Even if you had nothing to do with the situation or it was unavoidable, an apology goes a long way toward bringing the customer's defenses down. You can show, right away, that this is not going to be an argument or battle. Also, keep your voice calm and low in volume when talking with the customer. People tend to follow your example, and it may decrease their intensity. Above all, don't offer excuses for the situation, as these often sound weak and minimize the customer's feelings.

Acknowledge the customer's feelings: Show the customer that you understand his feelings, by saying something like, "I can see why this is upsetting for you."



Take responsibility for meeting the customer's needs:

The customer remains your responsibility until you or someone else meets his needs. If the situation is one you can fix, tell the customer, "Let me help you by..." or "To fix this, I'm going to...". If someone else must be involved, take responsibility for putting the customer in touch with that person, and explain the situation so the customer does not have to keep repeating it. For example, Mr. B has a complaint that the nurse or other department must handle. Don't just tell him, "You'll need to call..." Instead, contact the nurse or other department, explain the situation, and have that person talk to Mr. B.

Follow up after the issue: Making sure that the customer's situation was satisfactorily addressed shows him that you are concerned for his welfare, and want his experience to be positive. It can be as simple as asking, the next time you see Mr. B, "Was your issue taken care of, Mr. B?" or "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Despite your best efforts, some customers may behave inappropriately. If necessary, set limits on inappropriate behavior, such as yelling or cursing. Calmly say, "I can't help you when you're yelling at me." If the customer's behavior continues to escalate and/or becomes violent, follow agency policy, such as by calling 911 for assistance, if necessary. Your safety is of utmost importance, so immediately remove yourself from the situation and seek help if you feel threatened.



Common Pitfalls

Despite our best intentions, there are several common pitfalls that may keep us from effectively managing dissatisfied customers.

Thinking that "this is not my problem" or "not my job": Customer service is everyone's job. When the customer's needs are met, less time is spent dealing with additional problems. This makes for a more pleasant and efficient work environment for everyone.

Thinking that your actions don't mean much: You are an important representative of your agency, especially to clients and family members. These people often generalize your behavior as that of the whole agency's, either good or bad... "The people at XYZ Agency are so wonderful and helpful." Never think, "I'm just a worker here—I don't have the power to change things." You have tremendous power when you can help a customer and change his or her outlook. Employees who can calmly defuse customers and meet their needs are an invaluable resource to the agency!

By responding appropriately to upset customers, you have the power to turn a dissatisfied customer into one who is thrilled with your service.



Effective Communication: Working with the Dissatisfied Customer

NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Satisfied customers tend to tell more people about their experience than dissatisfied customers do.
A. True
B. False
- _____ 2. The best way for the home health aide to maintain self-control and decrease anxiety when working with a dissatisfied customer is to:
A. keep thinking, "This is not my fault. This is not my fault."
B. concentrate on the positives, like how much longer before time to go home
C. focus on the customer and what he is saying
D. find someone else to help the customer
- _____ 3. Which of the following actions by the home health aide does NOT show good listening skills with a dissatisfied customer?
A. loading the dishwasher while the customer is explaining
B. nodding or making other nonverbal signs of encouragement
C. leaning forward slightly
D. making eye contact
- _____ 4. Mr. H is a 78-year old client, and Tanya, the home health aide, is scheduled to care for him today. The nurse tells Tanya that Mr. H's wife is upset because the aide scheduled for yesterday did not show up. Tanya should:
A. tell Mrs. H, "It's not my fault." when she arrives at the home
B. tell Mrs. H, "I know why you're upset." so she doesn't have to talk about it
C. apologize immediately on arrival
D. allow Mrs. H to tell the full story

- _____ 5. When an upset family member states that the agency staff delivered the wrong medications to their home, the home health aide should FIRST:
- A. tell her to contact the pharmacy
 - B. say, "It happens all the time, I'm sure they'll fix it."
 - C. apologize for the situation
 - D. quickly explain, "I had nothing to do with that."
- _____ 6. A family member comes to the home health aide with a problem that must be referred to the nurse. The home health aide should:
- A. say, "You'll need to see the nurse about that."
 - B. tell the family member that she'll let the nurse know later in the week
 - C. tell the family member, "I'm sorry, but I can't help you with that."
 - D. call the nurse, explain the situation, and have her talk with the family member
- _____ 7. Vera, the home health aide, sees a client's family member who recently needed help with a difficult situation. Vera should:
- A. avoid the family member so that the situation won't get worse
 - B. find out how the situation turned out before speaking to the family member
 - C. greet the family member but make no mention of the situation
 - D. greet the family member and ask if the situation was resolved
- _____ 8. The calmer the home health aide is in working with a dissatisfied customer, the more calm the customer is likely to be.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 9. An angry visitor in the home becomes verbally abusive and starts throwing items across the room. The home health aide, should:
- A. direct him to calm down and stop acting like a child
 - B. leave the area and follow agency policy, such as calling 911
 - C. ask the client to control their visitor
 - D. offer an apology to the agitated visitor
- _____ 10. The actions of one individual can affect a customer's perception of the entire agency.
- A. True
 - B. False

