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## Responding to Angry Expressions During Crisis Conversations

Anger is often used as a mechanism to cope with complex emotions. Anger and frustration are common responses to heightened emotional states, such as stress, fear, and sadness. Individuals who are expressing anger may also be struggling with feeling misunderstood, as though their needs are not being met, or as though they have lost control of their life. Regardless of the reasons behind the anger, it is important that crisis counselors respond to individuals in ways that validate their emotional experience and empower them to move through the crisis.

### How Anger Might Present Itself During a Crisis Conversation

Anger may look different depending on the individual, the mode of communication, and the context of the conversation. Some examples of how anger might be expressed include the following:

Aspect of communication	How anger might be expressed
Volume or tone of voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shouting, screaming, crying, and/or yelling</li> <li>● Sharp/clipped tone of voice</li> </ul>
Pressure of speech (or messages in chat/text)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speaking rapidly or sending multiple chats/text messages in a row               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ In chat/text messages, anger may be conveyed through capitalized words or an increased use of punctuation</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Long pauses in conversation or a lack of response to attempts to engage the individual further</li> </ul>
Content of the conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuals may readily express that they are angry and what they are angry about</li> <li>● Individuals may struggle to identify what they are feeling as anger and find it difficult to engage with the crisis counselor or clearly communicate their concerns</li> <li>● Difficulty communicating and/or the appearance of struggling to think or speak clearly</li> <li>● Threats to harm themselves or others</li> </ul>

Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of strong language and/or name-calling (toward the crisis counselor or others)</li> </ul>
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**Responding to Expressions of Anger**

Once you have identified that an individual may be expressing anger, it is important to respond in a way that communicates to the individual that they are being heard and that there is a space for their emotions in the conversation.

**Stay Calm:** When someone presents angrily (regardless of whether or not they’re angry with us), we sometimes have our own emotional response of anger, fear, stress, or anxiety. When dealing with an individual expressing angry emotions, it's important for the crisis counselor to remain calm and composed. Maintain awareness of your own volume and tone of voice. Utilizing a calm, warm tone can help to prevent the conversation from escalating further.

**Active Listening & Reflection:** The crisis counselor should allow the individual to express their anger and frustration without interrupting them. Listening actively and attentively can help to build trust and show the individual that their story and feelings are valid. However, reflection provides an opportunity for deeper exploration of an individual’s emotions, which can help them to better understand feelings that may exist beneath the anger. Expressions of anger may not always hold anger as the root of the emotion.

- Example: *“So, what I'm hearing is that when your roommate said they were moving out, you felt hurt and rejected by them and it made you worry you were going to be alone.”*

**Validate:** It's important for the crisis counselor to validate the individual's feelings by acknowledging their emotions and letting them know that their feelings are normal and understandable. This can help to de-escalate the conversation and make the individual feel heard. This can be an especially useful tool if the individual is angry about a miscommunication that has occurred with the crisis counselor during the conversation.

- Example: *“I misunderstood what you meant by that and it sounds like it made you feel like I wasn't really listening to you. I can understand how that would make you feel angry.”*

**Use Empathy:** Crisis counselors can use empathy to connect with the individual on a deeper level and help them feel understood, share their concerns, and de-escalate anger.

- Example: *“I can imagine that was so frustrating to experience. Could you share more with me about what happened?”*

**Avoid Arguing or Correcting:** Arguing or trying to “correct” the individual is counterproductive and can escalate the conversation. Instead of trying to prove them wrong or defend yourself, focus on validating their feelings and offering support.

**Responding to Strong Language:** Many individuals may use language that some people find offensive to express themselves. This alone is not a reason for a crisis counselor to end the conversation or set boundaries with the caller, texter, or chatter. It is important that the personal values or beliefs of each crisis counselor do not take precedence over what the individual in crisis is expressing. If an individual is using language that you find offensive to share their story or to express how upset they feel, a crisis

counselor must be able to remain calm and continue attempting to connect with the individual, keeping in mind that the anger is not being directed at them, but instead the individual's own experience.

**Offer Support:** It is crucial that you **do not rush** to offer help and resources when an individual is expressing angry emotions. **Oftentimes, they just want to be heard.** After listening, validating, and expressing empathy, crisis counselors should offer support to collaboratively problem-solve with them.

- Example: *“What kind of support do you feel you need from me today?”* or *“What has not been working?”*

**Assess Safety & Create a Safety Plan:** Expressions of anger may indicate someone is experiencing emotional dysregulation, self-hate, increased anxiety, or other types of distress that are associated with suicidal ideation. Be sure to follow 988 requirements on assessing safety and collaboratively creating safety plans when applicable. For more information, see the Safety Assessment and Safety Planning pages on the Network Resource Center (NRC).

**Differentiating Between Anger and Abusive Interactions**

At times, it might be difficult to tell the difference between an individual who is expressing anger and an individual who is becoming abusive toward the crisis counselor. Crisis counselors need to be able to differentiate between an angry expression and an abusive interaction and determine when it is best to stay and support the individual versus when it is best to set appropriate boundaries, or end the conversation if necessary. For more information on responding to abusive contacts, see the [Guidelines for Working with Abusive Contacts](#) available on the NRC.

Here are some examples of ways to identify the differences:

<b>Anger</b>	<b>Abuse</b>
General use of strong language	Strong language directed at the crisis counselor or the use of derogatory/discriminatory language toward specific groups of people
Yelling/screaming <i>about their experience or situation</i>	Yelling/screaming <b>at</b> the crisis counselor about their inadequacy or incompetence
Expressing frustration with the crisis counselor’s skills or a misunderstanding that has occurred during the conversation	Blaming the crisis counselor for their situation or attacking the crisis counselor’s character

**Crisis Counselor Self-Care**

Encountering anger during a crisis conversation can be challenging and can bring up a great deal of emotion for the crisis counselor, even when the anger is not directed at them. Crisis counselors can support themselves in these interactions by building their own distress tolerance. Distress tolerance refers to a crisis counselor’s ability to utilize coping skills to help themselves self-regulate. When a crisis counselor is able to regulate their own emotions during a stressful crisis conversation, they are less likely to show a reaction that could negatively impact the development of connection between them and the caller/texter/chatter, and are less likely to experience their own emotional stress response as a result of

the encounter. For information that crisis counselors can utilize to support their own emotional states and wellness, For information that crisis counselors can utilize to support their own emotional states and wellness see the [Lifeline Cares Team \(NRC\)](#).

**Resources**

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention: “Anger”  
<https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/emotion/anger/>
- SAMHSA: “Coping with Anger”  
<https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/disaster-survivors/coping-anger-after-disaster>