

Personality Disorder: Communication Strategies to **AVOID** and to **TRY** in Difficult Moments

Avoid Controlling Language and Power Struggles - Instead, communicate using neutral and objective observations, relaxed and open body language, and calm tone of voice. This sets a positive example for the person, and reduces the risk of escalation.

Person says: *"I rang the call bell and you didn't come. It's your job to answer when I call! I am going to report you and have you fired for this."*

Avoid this: "You can't talk to me that way!"
"I don't have to answer the call bell every time you call, only every hour."
"You're not the only one who lives here you know!"

Try this

"We agreed the team would do check-ins every hour and that you would not use the call bell more than one time per hour. That time is now, how can I help?"

Person says: *"The call bell is for emergencies and this was an emergency! You ignored an emergency! You're going to be fired for sure!"*

Avoid this: "I am going to report you for how you're speaking to me!"
"I did nothing wrong!"
"I was following the plan, you're the one who is breaking the agreement!"

Try this

"This is the plan you agreed to and I am here now to help you. If you don't need my help now, a team member will be back in an hour".

Accommodating Various/multiple requests - It can be tempting to accommodate multiple requests because it can feel like you are building rapport. However, this can have unintended consequences of setting unreasonable expectations for all team members. Instead, remind the person of the agreed upon limits.

Person says: *"Yes, I need your help now. I need you to fix my pillow, straighten my bed and get me a drink. I am also hungry, need a snack, batteries for my radio and a charger for my phone because this one is not working."*

Avoid this: "Sure, let me help you with all of that."

Try this

"I am able to help you with two things that are most important to you now. What will they be?"

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Offering Too Many Choices - Too many options disrupt routine and are difficult to manage long-term. Instead, stick to routine and offer fair and sustainable choices.

Person says: *"I am really hungry and thirsty and I don't want what they have on the snack cart."*

Avoid this: "If you don't like what is on the snack cart, I can see about getting you cheese and crackers, cookies, toast, or a sandwich? Maybe some soda?"

Try this

"We have juice, muffins and fruit available on the snack cart. If you don't like those options, supper will be served at 5pm."

Internalizing Negative Criticism - Although it feels personal, it really isn't about you. Remember, the person has likely had lifelong difficulty with interpersonal relationships. Their responses, including critical comments, are a symptom of the personality disorder - not a reflection of you. During difficult moments, try to reflect on positive feedback you have received from others.

Person says: *"I have been ringing the call bell, sitting here waiting for over an hour. You are supposed to answer when I ring! Are you stupid?"*

Avoid this: "I am doing my best here".

"There are other people that need my help, not just you".

"Talking to me that way is inappropriate!"

Try this

"You agreed that you would not use the call bell more than one time per hour. The team agreed to check in with you every hour. Calling me names is not going to change the plan you agreed to."

Developing a Special Bond- Work as a team, remember your professional boundaries, and avoid personal disclosures. Ask yourself, am I spending this amount of time and doing these things for others? If not, reconsider your boundaries and the expectations you may be setting for you and the rest of the team.

Person says: *"I only want you to be the one checking in on me when I ring the call bell. You're the only one I trust, who knows what they're doing. I don't trust anyone else".*

Avoid this: "I understand how you feel. It's hard trusting other people. I have a hard time trusting people myself."

Try this

"We all work together as a team. A member of the team will be back to check in on you in an hour."

For a full reference list, please see: *Personality Disorder in Older Adults: Understanding the Person, Building Skillful Approaches and Fostering Wellness in Care Teams.*

