**Challenging Conversations**

**Introduction**

Our guests are screened carefully before being accepted into our shelter, and generally there are rarely challenging incidents. However, all of us have bad days, and not all our guests have developed healthy coping strategies. This can from time to time mean that their behaviour will have an impact on other volunteers and guests in the shelter.

Robes believes it’s important that all our volunteers know some techniques to assist them when talking to a challenging guest, and we hope this guide will help.

**Move Others Away**

When someone is upset, it’s important to recognise that the more of an audience they have, the longer it will take them to calm down. It is always best to have one person talking to the upset guest (with another volunteer in the background for safety), and to try and keep others away.

This will reduce the stimuli, it will mean the guest won’t feel like they have to “save face” in front of others, and will stop other well meaning guests or volunteers from jumping in and escalating the situation.

The volunteer who is in the background could also be removing anything that potentially could be used as a weapon.

It is really important to respect the upset guest’s personal space. If possible, keep at least 2 – 3 feet distance between you. It is also important not to tower over a guest, and if they are willing try and get them to sit down to talk to you. Do not make them feel cornered – ensure they have a clear way to an exit if they need one.

**Ground Yourself**

You will find it really difficult to calm someone down, if you too have heightened emotions. It can be hard to calm yourself when faced with someone who is being challenging, but take a few seconds to ground yourself and take a deep breath.

You cannot control the behaviour of the person that is upset, but you can control the way that you respond to it, and your reaction may influence if they calm down or their behaviour escalates. Try to remain calm, rational and professional.

**Non-Verbal Communication**

The tone of your voice and your body language will convey more to the upset person that your words, especially whilst they are still in a heightened state. You need to show through your non-verbal communication that you are relaxed, receptive and non-threatening.

Be mindful of your gestures, facial expressions, movements and tone of voice. Relax your body, and keep you hands in front of you, palms out.

Your tone of voice should be gentle and soothing if possible, and speak more slowly than usual.

**Be Empathetic & Non-Judgemental**

The reason the guest is upset may appear trivial, but we all have different journeys, and are triggered by different situations. Many people who are homeless have a history of trauma, and can react more strongly to something than is typical. It is important to acknowledge, no matter how trivial the issue may seem to you, whether or not you properly understand it, it is having a very real and obvious impact on the guest due to either their history or poor coping strategies.

The empathy that you show the guest can transform the situation.

**Listen, & Focus on Feelings**

Many vulnerable or disadvantaged people feel as though they are not listened to. This is particularly true in the majority of homeless people – most of the general public ignore them, and it can be difficult to get help. Feeling as though you are not heard is very disempowering.

The most important thing you can do is really listen to the guest who is upset – let them vent, and don’t interrupt. Try and understand the person’s feelings. Whether or not you think those feeling are justified, they’re real to the guest, so listen to their perspective even if it is different to your own.

Some people have trouble identifying how they feel about what is happening to them. When there is a break in the conversation, paraphrase what they have said so they know that you have been listening, eg, “tell me if I have this right?”

Ask questions that support them in exploring their feelings, eg “help me understand what you need”, “what has helped you in the past?”

It is important to note that there may be a few cycle’s of listening to the person before you can move on, as they gradually calm down.

**Ignore Challenging Questions**

Answering challenging questions often results in a power struggle. If a person challenges your authority, gently redirect their attention to the issues at hand. Ignore the challenge, not the person.

Remember, you are not advice workers, and your role during challenging conversations is to calm the person down until they can discuss their issues with an advice worker the following morning.

**Set Limits**

If the guest’s behaviour is aggressive or disruptive, you need to give clear, simple and enforceable limits. If the behaviour escalates further, offer concise and respectful choices and consequences.

“I want to listen to you, but I’m finding it difficult because you’re raising your voice. If you could lower your voice it would help me understand you better”.

“I want to help, but I need you to be calm in order for us to talk.”

“I want to listen to you, but if you cannot calm down to talk to me, then I will have to ask you to leave the shelter for half an hour, until you are calmer”.

**Allow Silence**

Don’t be afraid of silences – by letting silence occur, you are giving the guest a chance to reflect on what’s happening, and to reflect on how to proceed.

**Allow Time for Decisions**

When someone is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them some time to think through what you have said.

Offer to give them a bit of time to think about what you have discussed – perhaps suggest making them a cup of tea once they are a bit calmer, and give them space on their own to take stock of the situation.

**Safety is Paramount**

If you have tried de-escalating the situation with the guest, and it has not been possible, then there are options for you.

If the person continues to make a large disturbance, and appears unable to calm down, it is not safe or sensible to keep them at the shelter, potentially putting other guests and volunteers at risk.

It is possible to exclude a guest for a short period of time, for example, half an hour or an hour to give them time to leave the shelter and calm down.

It is also possible to exclude them for the whole evening. Although this might seem harsh, the safety of all the guests and volunteers must come first.

If a guest does not want to leave, you are able to call the police to assist with their eviction.

Please make sure you are talking to your team leaders/ shift leaders about how your venue wants to manage these situations.

Only Robes staff can permanently exclude a guest from the shelters, but the shelters can for one evening if they are causing a disturbance.