3 Phrases That Will Instantly Calm Angry or Emotional People

By Jessica Stillman of Inc.

If only the world were populated exclusively by the sane and rational, your job as a leader would certainly be a lot easier. But as we all know, some people spend much of their lives over-agitated or spoiling for a fight, and even the most level-headed of us sometimes let our emotions get the best of us.

You can’t always avoid having to deal with overly emotional people, but while these difficult conversations are simply part of life, there are ways to make them less painful and more constructive. That’s the message of a useful post that recently appeared on blog Barking Up the Wrong Tree.

The piece features an interview with Dr. Albert J. Bernstein, a clinical psychologist who, while treating the truly psychotic, perfected his techniques for bringing out-of-control conversations back down to Earth. His advice includes tips like, “If you feel like a preschool teacher, you’re probably doing it right,” and suggestions for soothing outraged folks on the phone, as well as these phrases to help turn down the emotional dial on your most challenging conversations.

1. “Please Speak More Slowly. I’d Like to Help.”

The problem may not be that they’re speaking too quickly; the problem may be they’re screaming their head off or sobbing uncontrollably. Nonetheless, this phrase can work its magic, according to Bernstein.

“Why does this work? It breaks the pattern in their head,” the post explains. “They're expecting you to resist them but you’re not. You’re asking them to clarify. You’re interested. This makes them shift more out of ‘dinosaur brain’ and into thinking. And that’s good.”

2. “What Would You Like Me to Do?”

This one works on similar principles to phrase number one. It knocks the over-emotional person out of using their “dinosaur brain”—the primitive, emotional part that only knows flight or fight—and forces them to start using more evolved thinking skills.

3. Any Question at All

It doesn’t matter how loony the other party is being; if you want to get the conversation back on any sort of sane track, telling them they’re insane or explaining how your viewpoint is more sensible isn’t going to help.

Why?

“Explaining is almost always a disguised form of fighting back,” says Bernstein. The other party will sense that and just get more aggressive and emotional.

So even if they’re raving that they’re Elvis back from the dead, you’re better off asking where they’ve stashed their sequined jumpsuit than you are explaining that, in truth, they appear to be an extremely unwell psychiatric patient. “The act of listening is reflecting back the person’s emotional state, not necessarily the content of what they’re saying,” according to Bernstein, and doing that by asking relevant questions is more likely to calm people down and lead the conversation onto firmer ground than any attempt to inject level-headed good sense.
Looking for more advice along these lines? Here's a Harvard psychologist’s tips on dealing with rage at work, advice on channeling your own anger productively, and research showing that one time you really, really don’t want to get over-emotional is during a negotiation.

https://www.themuse.com/advice/3-phrases-that-will-instantly-calm-angry-or-emotional-people