

FOR PROFESSIONALS
IN OUTPATIENT SETTINGS

Grace Under Fire

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Skills for Calming and De-escalating Aggressive
and Mentally Ill Individuals: 2nd Edition

*A Comprehensive Guidebook for
Health and Social Services Agencies,
and Individual Practitioners*

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CHAPTER 2

Rigid Personality (Asperger's Syndrome, "High Functioning Autism," and Other Similar Disorders)

Individuals with a "rigid personality" are often very intelligent, socially withdrawn people who may live their lives mostly in an online environment. They frequently display the full range of behaviors that merit the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. They may have tremendous difficulty negotiating social interactions. They find other people to be incomprehensible, confusing, or threatening. They can have tremendous difficulty understanding what others are thinking or feeling from their facial expressions, body posture, and vocal tone. Other people, particularly some individuals with schizophrenia, often show a similar combination of "cluelessness" and rigidity in communication. Such rigid personalities can become fixated on their own preoccupations and imagine that everyone else shares them.

Example: A child with rigid thinking fixates on one subject

A therapist asks a child with Asperger's syndrome what he thought the bully, who was beating him up, was thinking. "Oh, he was thinking of Lewis and Clark." Astonished, the therapist asks why the bully would be thinking of that. The child replies, "What else could he be thinking about? Lewis and Clark took the greatest journey ..." It takes a good ten minutes for the therapist to get him off the subject.

They can also be very literal (concrete), and they can get stuck on thoughts and behaviors (obsessive). Others are simply not interested in or aware of other's feelings. This can lead them to be very blunt or painfully honest.

Examples: The painful honesty of the rigid personality

- "What is that on your face? Rosacea, I'm guessing, unless it's some kind of rash. You better hope it is a rash because there's no cure for rosacea and it just gets worse and worse. Many people end up with deformed faces because of it."
- "You've gained a lot of weight in the last year. I don't mind, but many men think that is disgusting."

When attempting to calm a person who displays a rigid personality, stating and reiterating the rules is the first method of intervention. State each rule in a matter-of-fact way, as if simply providing information. Follow up with a logical sequence of steps to resolve their problem. Attempts at validating their feelings will often merely result in the client becoming increasingly confused or upset, as will talking about *your* feelings. You must be as concrete and literal as they are.

Try to avoid physical contact. Many such people detest even the lightest touch and can react violently.

Example: De-escalation with a person with a rigid personality

Pavel: “Someone has taken my book! No one is allowed to touch my book or any of my things! Someone is going to get socked right now!”

Staff person: “Pavel, I want to hear about this, but the rule is no yelling in the building. Stop yelling, and tell me about your book!”

Pavel: “But I want to yell. I am very angry.”

Staff person: “But you must not yell. It is against the rules here.”

Pavel: “I think that is a stupid rule! I am angry and want to yell.”

Staff person: “It is still the rule. Stop shouting and we will talk.”

Pavel (*in a quiet voice, but clenching his fists and pounding them together*): “I’m really mad about my book. Someone took it.”

Staff person: “Pavel, I really want to hear about this, but you must remember that we have another rule. No pounding your fists together.”

Pavel: “That is another stupid rule.”

(*Eventually, Pavel sits and talks quietly.*)

Staff person: “You are really upset about not knowing where your book is. You are also upset that someone may have borrowed it or touched it. Let’s go to your room and look for it.”

In some group homes or other community settings (and even individual residences), staff or family set up a designated place to express intolerable emotions. Some people with rigid personalities, who do

not want to hurt or hit anyone, still need a way to discharge tension. Without such an option, they feel like they are going to explode. They can go to this safe room and yell for a while, or pound a heavy bag or pillow, and then return to solve the problem. However, please refer to the discussion on venting (Chapter 46). It is only through careful work together and a long-term relationship that you will learn if such strong expressions of emotions are actually calming or stimulating – the latter leading to dangerous escalation.

Review: Communication with rigid personalities

You will recognize the client with a rigid personality because they get stuck on subjects that seem rather odd in relation to the current circumstances. Furthermore, they seem out-of-sync with society and unconscious of their effect on others. When calming or de-escalating these clients, you should:

- State the rules in a matter-of-fact way, as if providing information.
- Follow up with a logical sequence of steps to solve their problem.
- Caution: validating their feelings will very likely confuse and distress them, as will talking about *your* feelings.