

1.2 Mental Health Emergencies

Minimising risk and harm to patients and the GP

1. When a person is distressed they are often confused and frightened. They may not behave in a manner that you may have seen in previous consultations.
2. When a person is mentally unwell and in distress, the complicated and difficult side of their personality may become apparent.
3. Be empathetic to the client without being condescending.
4. Allow the patient to tell their story and don't interrupt them or minimise the way they are feeling.
5. Be unobtrusive and non-confrontational in your contact with them, and try not to act shocked by their words or behaviour as this will often set up a barrier and make it more difficult to reassure them.
6. Ensure that you minimise the environmental factors around them, as you do not want them to become more agitated.
7. Be careful not to over engage in conversation as someone who is distressed has thoughts that are rapid and cannot tolerate too much input or stimulation.
8. Listen attentively and do not challenge their attitudes or ideas (no matter how irrational). **Remember you are not looking for a solution at this stage just an idea of the level of distress.**
9. Speak clearly, using simple language. Try not to raise your voice or gesture quickly with your body language, as this may be misinterpreted as threatening.
10. Be mindful of barriers that you may have in your office that could affect the communication between you and the patient. It is best to sit directly in front of the patient and not behind a desk (especially if the patient is paranoid).
11. Always be aware of safety when dealing with a distressed client. Ensure that your practice is adequately set up, either in procedures or policies, when having to deal with a mental health emergency.
12. Often being able to acknowledge patients feelings and allow them to voice their concerns will reduce the risk of harm (in most cases), and will enhance the patient doctor relationship.

Disclaimer: The above tips are aimed to assist the GP when dealing with a patient in a mental health emergency. These tips are variable and will not work for all patients that present. It remains the responsibility of the GP and their judgment at the time of consultation regarding the handling of the patient in a mental health crisis.
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