



Self-Advocacy: keeping calm, and getting things done when you are calling to complain

Spending time on the phone, particularly if it's calling to make a complaint, can be very stressful. Many people put off these tasks, but this just makes it even more difficult next time you try calling.

The following tips might be useful in reducing stress, keeping calm and getting things done.

To avoid these unpleasant situations, here are a few useful actions that can be taken to make that all-important phone call go to plan and be virtually stress-free.

Practice what you might say and anticipate the responses

You could do this by speaking into the handset without anyone at the end and going through a conversation – just to get the feel of things. Practicing with family and friends (though at first can be embarrassing) can also be very helpful. A good technique can be to arrange to phone a friend (often less awkward than close family members) and go through a trial conversation with them e.g. a mock telephone interview or enquiry and ask for their feedback.

Make bullet points about what you want to say – break each issue into small chunks

Think about what you wish to discuss during the phone call in order (from introducing yourself to finishing the conversation). From experience, it is best to do this in bullet-point form, as if you write the conversation (word for word) as soon as you move away from your written script you will be thrown off course. It is nearly impossible to plan for a conversation even with a close friend and completely undoable with somebody that you have never spoken to before. Having bullet points will allow you to go down the list and pick things out. Also, before finishing the conversation you can scan the list to make sure you have not forgotten to discuss anything.

Be sure of your facts

If you are claiming you have been discriminated against, be sure of how and what your rights actually are. You might not like how you've been treated, and be entitled to complain about that, but it may not be discrimination in the eyes of the law.

Make sure you are prepared

If you are calling about a bill or because of a letter you received, make sure you have that next to your notes for when they ask you questions about it.

Try not to think too much about making the call

The worst part is actually the wait and the thought of making the phone call. The more you think about it, the more stressful it will become and the more difficult it will be to actually make the call. What's more, you may actually talk yourself out of making the call altogether. This can have serious consequences such as debts or utilities being shut off. The best approach is to have everything prepared and before thinking, quickly dial the number and hopefully somebody will answer quickly.

Listen to the automated message and have a distraction activity ready if you are on hold for a time

When calling many larger companies you will probably get through to an answering machine with lots of different options (press button 1 for... button 2 for... etc). Try to listen carefully to these and select the best option. Getting the wrong department and having to be transferred might feel stressful, but it happens ALL the time and the person you are speaking to is used to it. Waiting while listening to some pretty awful music and waiting for a person to answer can make some people anxious – especially those systems where you think a person at the other end has picked-up the phone but instead only

recorded message clicks in telling you that you are in a queue (as if you didn't know already). Having a pen or something to hold can be helpful as well as looking through a book or reading a poster. Just something that will take your mind off the waiting and having one ear listening for somebody to answer.

Use the call centre reps name (and record the name and time of the conversation)

This seems to 'break the ice' and generally puts the conversation on a friendly more relaxed footing. If you don't hear the person's name at first, ask them and then go on to wish them good morning/afternoon and start the conversation.

Make your point efficiently

Try though not to bombard the person with information, but rather take things one at a time, slowly and clearly. Speak slowly and try to relax. Use your bullet points and give each one the time it needs.

IF THINGS GET TOO STRESSFUL (AND IT BEGINS TO INTERRUPT THE CONVERSATION), POLITELY FINISH THE CONVERSATION AND CALL AGAIN LATER.

It is much better to do this than to carry on and really get into a panic – or worse, angry. After all, if you are in a panic or upset then you will probably miss most of what is being said anyway. As a very last resort when the stress really becomes too much, to get out of the conversation easily you could say that something has come up and that you will have to finish the call and will try later. *Thank the person for their time* and end the call. There is no harm in this.

Make notes

Write down what the person on the end of the phone is saying. Repeat back what they have said before you finish the call: "I just want to check I've got this right..." Ask the person to speak slower or explain things you didn't understand.

Before ending the call

Look down at your list and make sure you have discussed everything you need to. This will save having to call back later.

Always leave the conversation on a positive note by thanking the person you spoke to for their help (if they have been helpful of course) and end the call. Whatever happens, try to end the call on a positive and relaxed note, as this will help to make future calls less stressful. Also, at the end of the day just as long as you are polite, what does it matter as to what the other person thinks of you?

Ask the person when you can expect a response to your complaint and in what form: Telephone? Email? Letter? Check that they have your contact details correct.

If you recognise that your stress and anxiety levels are so great these tips don't even begin to help it might be time to see a counsellor or advocate.

You might also want to look at our fact sheet on self-advocacy and making complaints. You can get it from the Disability Rights Advocacy Service website: <https://www.dras.com.au/fact-sheets-resources>