

# Anger Interrupted

## A quick & dirty guide for dealing with agitated humans.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

**W**e see it too often in the media: First responders “caught” by witnesses, usually on video, being unprofessional with those we are paid to serve and protect. Most times it seems to be our brethren in blue making the headlines, but every once in a while, it’s us, “America’s Heroes,” who are mistreating our customers.

Before I retired, a neighboring fire department was on an EMS call when a seemingly agitated person began to interfere with their patient care. A crewmember threw the person down, and then another crewmember kicked them. Unbeknownst to them, a security camera captured the event, and the video was played on the morning news. When I got to work that morning, my boss (the fire chief), was standing at the door of my Behavioral Health office. “Did you watch the news?” he asked? I told him I had. He said, “Don’t let that happen here!” then he walked off.

### Is “Angry” Our Baseline?

Why are people so quick to snap? In a January 2016 Time magazine article titled, “Why Americans Are So Angry About Everything,” Rabbi David Wolpe wrote, “Americans are angry.” “They are angry about school shootings and taxes and mistreatment and undeserved privilege and discrimination and government.”

On a local level, people get angry about the weather, about being woken by a siren, about the number of responders on a medical call. They get angry about their work environment (or lack thereof), traffic jams, distracted drivers, cell phones, rudeness, increased insurance costs, etc. Wolpe goes on to explain, “Much of our frustration arises in an age of unlimited expectation when atrocities and injustice are constantly paraded before our eyes.” (Or maybe they just haven’t eaten.)

Can we do anything about it? Let’s say you respond to a scene and meet an agitated person who is upset that your presence is impacting their personal world (chances are, their world was impacted by something long before you arrived). Is it possible to calm this situation? What had my fire chief expected of me? I figured out the basic crisis-intervention techniques I used on my co-workers also apply in the field with angry civilians.

Angry people tend to be poor communicators; they do not articulate or listen well. In the moment, they tend not to care about your side of things and might feel the only way to get their point across is to be angry and loud or disruptive. We can survive in these scenarios by acknowledging their emotion and trying to develop a plan to reduce their distress. The agitated person, for the most part, wants somebody to understand what’s going on in their world, i.e., what’s causing their agitation. Below is a quick guide to de-escalating an agitated person.

*Note:* These techniques might not work if the person has an altered mental state due to drugs, mental illness or other medical conditions.

Let's use the following scenario: You respond to a sick person in the lobby of a residential hotel. It is after midnight, and most of the tenants are sleeping. The exhaust brake on your apparatus wakes up a person who, unbeknownst to you, has a job interview that morning. We will call him Charles. Charles is currently unemployed and really needs a job. Your fire apparatus sits out front with the engine on high idle while the crew tends to the sick person in the lobby. The engine noise is really pissing off Charles. He needs his rest. While you are attending to the sick person, he confronts the crew, completely agitated, to the point of interfering with patient care. What should you do?

***Angry people tend to be poor communicators; they do not articulate or listen well. In the moment, they tend not to care about your side of things...***

*\*These steps reference material from "Assisting Individuals in Crisis," 5th edition, by Dr. George Everly Jr.*

1. *Be aware of your body language, i.e., non-verbal behavior.* Simply rolling your eyes, turning your back, smirking to a co-worker or any other behavior deemed uncaring can and will escalate an agitated person.
2. *Acknowledge the person.* Most people just want to be heard/understood—and they may keep getting louder until they know you've heard them.
  - We can initially let a person know we heard them by simply repeating back what they just said. "It sounds like you don't want us here." You can use the person's words or your own words to restate what has been said.
  - Reflecting back the emotion you see based on verbal and non-verbal behavior helps let the person know you understand them. "You seem really angry right now," or "You seem very upset," acknowledges the person is rattled. That alone might help defuse their anger.
  - Once the person realizes that you understand how annoyed they are, ask them why they are upset if they haven't already told you. "What's causing you to be so angry?" Once they tell you why they're upset/angry, acknowledge their reason. "It sounds like you're upset because our fire engine woke you up."
3. *Provide Direction on What to Do.* (Don't make excuses. Agitated people don't care).

Once you have acknowledged the situation (we don't have to agree with the person to acknowledge!) try to come up with a plan of action. Say something like, "We are sorry our engine woke you. I know those things are noisy," then offer a solution—or at the very least, a timeframe—so the agitated person knows you have listened and will try within reason to help mitigate the problem. "How about this: You let us finish tending to the person not feeling well, and we will get that noisy thing out of here as quickly as we can. I apologize for waking you."

*\*If the call won't be a quick treat and transport event, e.g., the building across the street is on fire, and the apparatus will be noisy for several hours, help them generate ways to ease their distress and for coping with the situation. Help them brainstorm options. "Is there a friend you can stay with?" Can the Red Cross put them up in a different area, and if so, can you help get them there? I once read a quote from a fire-service sage who suggested that we replace the statement, "I'm in charge here," with "What can I do to help?"*

Based on my experience working on the line as a company officer/paramedic and then as a behavioral health specialist, I think when we come across agitated people in the field, it is best to avoid being reactive or attempting to restrain them. Take the time to acknowledge their frustration and ask them why: Why don't they want us to touch a loved one? Why don't they want us to transport? Why don't they want us to have our flashing lights on or to blow our siren? Why don't they want us to be there? We don't have to agree with their reasoning, but a simple "why" communicates our empathy and understanding. It can go along way toward mitigating a disruptive scene. **BS**



*Tim W. Dietz, MA, LPC served for 30 years in the fire service and is the founder/CEO of Behavioral Wellness Resources, a consulting/counseling firm catering to the behavioral wellness needs of emergency-response organizations and individuals. He is an internationally known speaker on human emotional crisis, grief, and staying happy and healthy in emergency-services professions. Tim wrote the book, "Scenes of Compassion: A Responder's Guide for Dealing with Emergency Scene Emotional Crisis." He was a clinical advisor to the U.S. Coast Guard's mental-health response following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and was the clinical advisor to the stress-management team at the Oso, Wash., mud slide. He sits on the board of directors for the Oregon West Coast Post-Trauma Retreat. He lives and has a small private practice in Oregon's beautiful Willamette Valley.*

# Get Ready & Stay Ready with **Blue Card!**

The Hazard-Zone Management Standard requires 40 hours of cognitive command training and 8 hours of safety training. Satisfy these requirements with the Blue Card Command Certification Program. Blue Card's 50-hour online program teaches and reinforces the decision-making skills required for safe and successful hazard-zone management.

## Online Program



## Simulation Lab

After completing Blue Card's online program, students can attend a three-day simulation lab—the final step in obtaining Blue Card certification. The simulation labs focus on the five building types included throughout the online program.



## Continuing Education & Other FREE STUFF!

The Hazard-Zone Management Standard requires 12 hours of continuing education annually. Customers purchasing the Blue Card Program will receive one year of online CE; online versions of **"Fire Command,"** the **"Fire Command Student Workbook"** and **"Command Safety"**; and online access to B Shifter magazine.