

# Case Study 1: Encountering Aggressive Patron Behavior

## SCENARIOS:

*NOTE: The following four scenarios will be addressed as one case. Although there are slight differences between them, the one recurring thread in all of them is patron aggression, which may or may not be related to a mental disorder.*

Patron has a question that he is unable to communicate, attempts to get behind the circulation desk. Attempts to climb over the desk to get in.

Patron becomes very angry that the book he wanted was not available. Was aggressive in his interactions at the circulation desk, shouts obscenities and kicks/slams the door as he was leaving the library.

Two female patrons complain that a male patron was following them around, and at some point tried to grab one of them.

Patron spends a lot of time in the library saying that he's doing research. He continually talks to staff to the point of disrupting their work, and there have been reports of him disturbing other patrons as well.

## RESPONSE:

As we consider the role of the librarian in each of these instances, let's remember that libraries have Codes of Conduct for a reason. Despite the implication in this training that we should attempt to engage and build rapport with patrons so that "bad behavior" is less likely to happen, sometimes it does. In that case, we resort to the policies instituted in the Code of Conduct and involve relevant staff members.

In the case of someone trying to climb over the circulation desk, shouting obscenities and kicking/slamming doors, or stalking other patrons to the point that they feel threatened, then, the AEF model shared in the training just doesn't apply. These are flagrant violations and need to be treated as such. Call the branch manager, security, and/or police (if necessary) for your own and other patrons' safety.

What if these back-ups are not available or you feel like you are able to set a firm boundary with the patron? I would say that your primary goal here is to ensure safety. Remember the following de-escalation tips:

- Don't say, "Calm down." Acknowledge that the patron is upset by reflecting on that fact: "You really seem upset."
- If you have the opportunity to ask the patron's name, do so. It can make all the difference in the world how he/she perceives you and your willingness to engage.
- Give the patron the message, "I want to help" rather than saying, "You cannot do that." There is a time and place for setting a firm boundary and stating the latter, but don't make it your "go

to.” Think about how the patron will interpret “Stop it or I’m going to call the police” vs. “If you continue to do that, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

- Remember the power of nonverbal communication. Standing close to the patron, pointing, or excessively gesturing could escalate the situation. Assuming distance, keeping your hands down, and using slow, deliberate movements could calm the patron down.

Certainly, the first two scenarios above require immediate and firm action so that the interaction is defused. How you present in that action could de-escalate the situations so that both you, other patrons, and the offending patron are all kept safe.

The third scenario requires a bit more “detective work” and it is important to know and enforce library policies about patron harassment. Getting a branch manager and/or security involved is imperative. One staff member considered the following approach and acknowledge that while it wasn’t optimal, it did address the patron’s behavior without simply asking him to leave: “The patron was approached and provided with a “section” of the Library in the mezzanine where he could stay. He was advised that he cannot follow any patrons around the building which he denied doing. This is not an optimum solution as it takes away the space from other patrons.”

How you engage the female patrons who are complaining is worth considering. Using empathic, respectful communication is key. So is being patient and giving space and permission for the patrons to share their concerns. Finally, one needs to remember the importance of respecting confidentiality. The female patrons might feel like they would be targeted if they shared information about the offending patron with you. Assure them that the matter will be investigated (according to protocol) and suggest a plan for them moving forward if the patron infringes on their space again. Again, refer to Code of Conduct policy in this case.

What about the final scenario? This one feels a bit different than the others. Here we have a patron whose behavior is more annoying than aggressive or violent. Our tendency as staff members may be to ignore the behavior, as there seems to be no policy violation and the patron is, after all, entitled to use library resources (including staff members) to do what is assumed to be research.

However, is there an opportunity here to reframe the behavior so that the patron is made aware of his impact on others in the library? What comes to mind first are the “Five Simple Words” from Chris Westfall referenced in the training curriculum: “What else can this mean?” Is there an underlying message behind this patron’s behavior? Can we reach for it instead of assuming he is there simply to annoy everyone? This is work done as part of the ASSESS phase of the patron involvement model. If you ask that question of yourself, the conversation with him will likely take a turn for the better.

In terms of the ENGAGE part of the model, consider the value of calling out the patron on his behavior: “It seems like you have a lot of questions about your research. How about you consider writing them all down and setting up a time to talk to one of our reference librarians?” Here is another contributing member’s thought about this scenario: “After talking with Library colleagues and confirming this is a daily issue ,the librarian contacted the local Health Department. In turn the Health Department spoke with the patron and reviewed the services they could provide. The Health Department also set up a time to meet with the patron.” This may or may not be part of what the library can offer, but the point here is to control the narrative without invalidating the patron’s need.

Doing so in a way that communicates calm, warmth, and empathy is recommended as well. If the patron is bothering other patrons to the point that they are complaining, a firmer approach, as indicated above, might be in order. The overall “moral of this story,” though, is not jumping to conclusions about what the needs of this patron might be and checking them out in a way that does not cut off dialogue, but impels it, and in the process, perhaps gets to what is really going on with this patron.

What about FOLLOW-UP? This phase of the model is always important, whether we are talking about a patron who flagrantly violates policy or one who merely annoys others. If a patron is asked to leave or the police are involved, understanding and adhering to proper documentation/reporting procedures is called for. Following up with security personnel about the “stalking patron” is a good idea, not only for staff’s knowledge, but to reassure the patrons affected by his behavior. Follow-up also means taking the time to debrief the incident with someone and, in the process, practice self-care. These incidences can rattle us and to ask for a moment to step away from your post to gather your thoughts is not asking too much. In that case of the “annoying patron,” follow-up can look like making a mental note to engage with him the next time he is in the library. Building rapport takes time and asking him if he followed up on your offer to make an appointment with a staff member shows that you care for him, as well as reinforces the boundary you tried to set.