



San Francisco Public Library

LIMIT-SETTING WITH LIBRARY PATRONS

What Do I Do Now?: Handling Challenging Situations with Mentally Ill and Homeless Library Users

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WHY SET LIMITS:

- ❖ It makes you manage your time more effectively.
- ❖ It puts you in control of otherwise confused patrons and/or unmanageable situations.
- ❖ It prevents hostile patrons from escalating and stops the inappropriate behavior.
- ❖ It is good for your mental and emotional health. It prevents you from feeling drained at the end of the day. It allows you to manage your own frustrations or anger instead of “losing it.”

HOW TO SET LIMITS:

***Be brave!** Setting limits means taking a risk that you might offend the patron and that s/he will not be happy with your response. However, taking that risk is **NECESSARY** when setting effective limits.*

Limits should be:

- ❖ **Clear** – Make sure that the patron understands what you want him/her to do. It helps if you give a reason for your request if you can, except for obvious situations (where safety is involved and security intervention is needed). For example:
 - a. “I want you to please lower your voice before we can continue to talk about what you need. I don’t want to bother people around us.”
 - b. “I will give you a pencil one last time but I’m sorry, you cannot come back to ask for another one after this. I gave you 5 already and we need to save the rest for other patrons.”
 - c. “I need you to stop using inappropriate language. Otherwise, I will ask that you leave and come back another time. “
- ❖ **Respectful** – We have to be respectful at all times regardless of our own personal biases, e.g., odorous patrons with very poor hygiene, entitled attitude, not making sense, etc.
- ❖ **Appropriate** – Know when to be gentle and when to be firm and tactful.
- ❖ **Consistent** – It is very important to give the same message to the patron each time the **SAME** situation arises.
- ❖ **Appropriate** – Nonverbal communication is as important as verbal communication. The tone of our voice, facial expression and attitude can set the tone for how the conversation will go and how the patron will respond.

SOME HELPFUL HINTS:

- ❖ Maintain self-control even (especially!) when it is tested.
- ❖ It helps to remember that most homeless and/or mentally-ill people (and even people on a deadline!) can only see what is in the moment and are unable to plan for the future. Their focus is on daily survival: securing their spot in the park tonight; getting to their meals at the soup kitchen on time; etc. It is not your role to solve their crisis unless the situation is life-threatening or a danger to one's safety or well-being. Should these incidents occur, call 911 and secure the assistance of your immediate supervisor.
- ❖ Explain what you can and cannot possibly do, then assist them with what you can.
- ❖ The best way to deal with a patron who is actively delusional and exhibiting disorganized thoughts/speech is to respectfully DISENGAGE. Disengaging might involve listening to the patron for a couple of minutes, neither arguing with the patron nor commenting on what the patron is saying. Then re-direct him/her to a concrete topic. For example, "So, you would like to see if we have [title of the book]?" If the patron continues, disengage by letting the patron know you cannot help him/her any longer and you have to assist other patrons.
- ❖ Use your mind, use your voice and use your co-workers.

TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES:

- ❖ Safety first! If a situation does not feel right, listen to your gut feelings. Remove yourself from the situation and get someone else to help you.
- ❖ Take a break after each difficult interaction with a patron.
- ❖ Talk to a trusted friend whom you know will not judge you and who will allow you to unload your frustrations.
- ❖ Do not take it home. Let each day be a fresh start.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT:

- ❖ It is possible for people to recover from homelessness, alcoholism and/or mental illness. Some have gone back to school and graduated, taken care of family, worked part-time/full-time, became good parents while battling mental illness. On the other hand, some fully-functioning individuals who used to be office workers, doctors, engineers, nurses, teachers, etc. have found themselves dealing with mental illness at some point in their lives. Sadly, many homeless and/or mentally-ill individuals were products of the system themselves. Some had parents who themselves were homeless, mentally-ill and/or addicted to substances. Remember that many people have overcome mental illness and/or homelessness and have been able to enjoy productive and fulfilling lives.