

Remaining effective under pressure

The following tried and true tips will help you to look after yourself and remain professional in your role as workplace investigator.

Your own well-being

- Be aware of your own stress levels and emotional responses.
- Build a strong foundation of wellness from sufficient sleep, healthy food, good personal and professional relationships, meditation, regular exercise, and involvement in meaningful activities outside work.

Spend time preparing for a potentially stressful situation

- Before a potentially stressful interview or meeting, spend some time preparing yourself and thinking about what you might encounter.
- Remind yourself of how you can practically address process challenges and manage aggressive behaviour (see Chapter 14).
- Remind yourself that the investigation process you are following is planned and procedurally fair. Have confidence in the process and remember this issue is not about you personally.
- Remind yourself that the person you are meeting may be upset, angry, blaming, or helpless; however, that this is not your problem to solve.

In the interview or meeting

- **Focus on matters that you can control.** In your job, how participants behave when they are upset, angry and stressed is largely outside of your control so there is not much point trying to grasp control of those reactions. You can, however, control *how you respond*, what you do next, and how you choose to engage with such participants.
- **During the interview, if the participant becomes distressed or begins to cry, give them time and space to feel the emotion and express themselves.** Do not try to hurry them along or change the subject. They are upset because the subject matters to them. While difficult to witness, responding empathetically and reasonably can build rapport and trust in the investigation process. It may ultimately lead to a more productive and less emotional participant. Acknowledge their emotion, saying, *“I can see how painful/difficult/upsetting this is for you and that you are doing your best to explain this to me. You can take whatever breaks you need”*.

- **Remain professional and calm even in the face of extreme emotion.** The participant will pick up on your emotional state. Your composure can calm them, and they are more likely to mirror your behaviour back to you. Speak slowly and gently. It will lower tension.
- **Try to diffuse stress levels** by making it clear how long the interview may take, how many more questions/allegations/topics you have or how much longer it will take.
- **Take breaks yourself, every hour.** Say, *“To get the best evidence, we need to take a break every [hour], let’s take a break now.”*
- **You cannot and should not step into the role of counsellor or therapist,** but you can have information about the employer’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Mention that it is common for people in workplace investigations to use this service for support. Identify what other support is available if it is clear that the EAP service is not going to be used.
- **If a participant expresses an intention to self-harm, or to harm others, take action immediately and do a well-being check.** Do not proceed with the investigation until the person has a medical clearance to participate and you are comfortable it is safe to continue.
- **If you are strongly agitated by a participant** or experience a strong “fight or flight” response, remember to breathe, slow down, and take a break.
- **Be aware of any antipathy you may develop towards a participant.** Talk with someone else about it to maintain your impartiality.