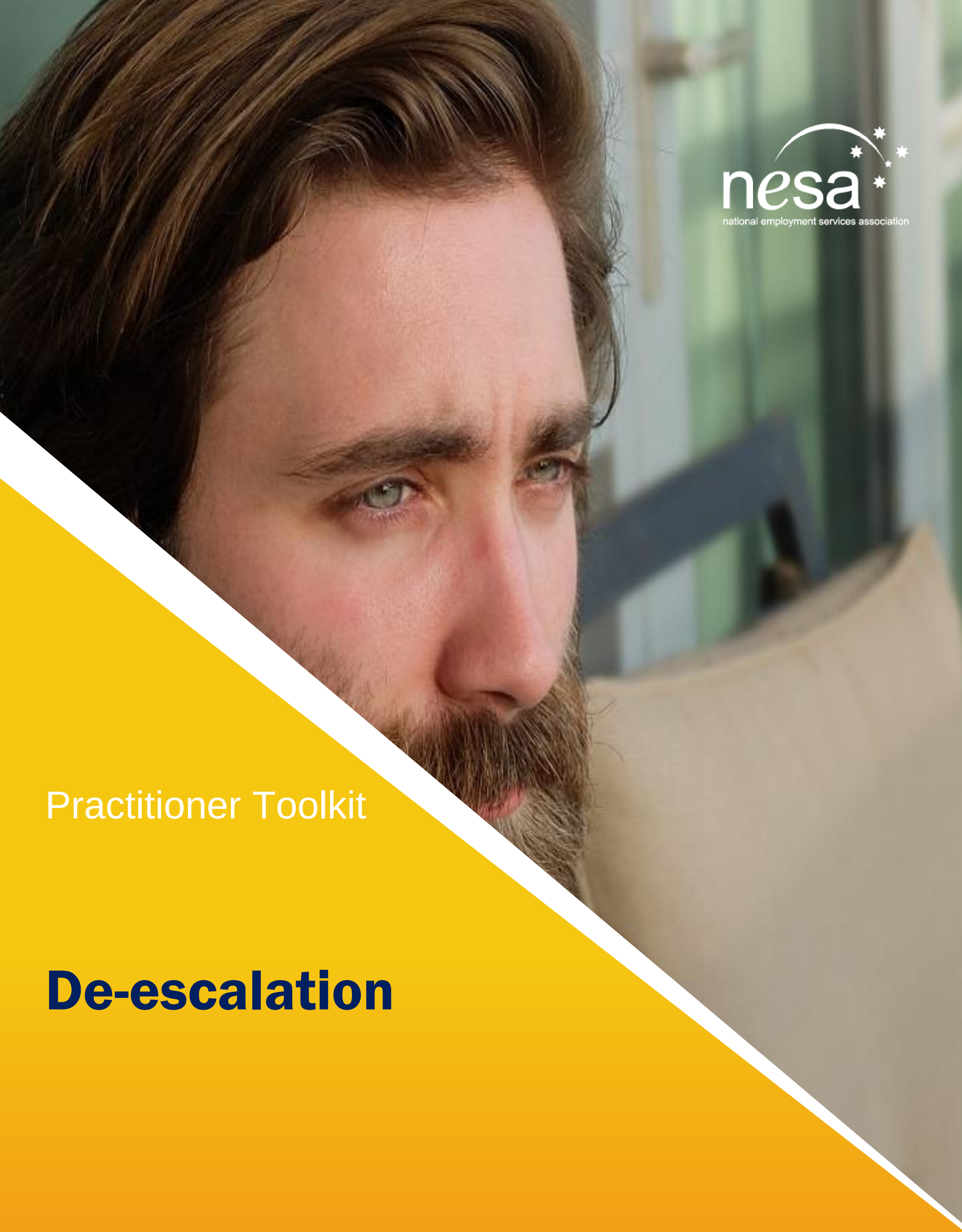

Practitioner Toolkit

De-escalation

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De-escalation

Introduction

We work in such an important field.

We can help people turn their lives around, and we get great rewards when we see that happen. Most of our clients are quite easy to work with, but as with everything, the law of averages will apply: there will be a job seeker who is often difficult to work with, or a job seeker who is upset about something.

Think about yourself. Have you ever become angry with someone you don't really know? Have you ever gotten angry at a counter, or in a queue, or on the phone? I think most of us have at some point. Maybe with the bank, in a bar or restaurant, at a medical facility, dealing with airlines, insurance companies, education providers, tradespeople and salespeople. Now think about what was driving *your* behaviour.

Take a minute to reflect on a situation where you got angry: think carefully about *what* made you angry, and *why* it made you angry. Did you think you got poor service, or did you feel that they didn't care? Maybe you thought you hadn't been shown respect, or maybe you just didn't get the result you wanted. Now think about how that situation played out. Did it end on a positive note? If so, think about what you and the other person did that made you feel better. If it ended with you getting even angrier, then think about why it didn't end on a positive note.

Keep your own experiences in mind as you read through this paper!

Verbal and non-verbal de-escalation skills

Verbal and non-verbal de-escalation techniques are now the standard approach to de-escalation in most industries, including health and law enforcement. What used to be common approaches in those industries – restraint and medication (in the case of emergency health interventions) – tend now only to be used as a last resort.

Difficult behaviour is a Risk Management issue

"There is a risk that some clients will exhibit difficult behaviours."

I see 'difficult behaviour' as a risk management issue. Risk management is about working out the *likelihood* and *consequence* of something negative happening, and then coming up with *mitigations* (what can you do *before* it happens to stop it from happening) and *contingencies* (what will you do if and when it does happen).

Risk mitigation is like preventative medicine. As the old adage has it: 'prevention is better than cure'. It's always easier and cheaper to fix a potential problem than an actual problem.

Contingencies are the things you put in place to deal with the risk if it eventuates: if a client does exhibit difficult behaviour.

Does your organisation and site have a risk management plan that includes client behaviours?

Having all staff participating in a Risk Management workshop to work through a risk topic such as '*There is a risk that some clients will exhibit difficult behaviours'* might be a very worthwhile exercise. It will give you all a chance to look at the causes of difficult behaviour and see what you can do to minimise the chances of it happening.

In a perfect world we'd be able to put things in place that would eliminate any chance of job seekers exhibiting difficult behaviours. But we live in the real world rather than a perfect world. Putting good mitigations in place will reduce the number of incidents.

Before we look at mitigations and contingencies, let's think about two important things: *what's driving the behaviour* and what is the *real issue*?

1. **What is driving the behaviour?**

Try to work out what's behind the behaviour. What is motivating the job seeker to behave like this? Is it…

- … a sense of injustice and frustration: a feeling that they are not getting what they want, or that they are being treated unfairly? They may believe they are not being treated with respect, and are not seen as important. They see it as an insult.

  So how do people respond when they think this way? Some people respond by getting angry. When we get angry our body changes. We go into what psychologists call 'fight or flight' mode. Our adrenalin levels rise, our hearts beat faster, our mouths may become dry, and our body tenses. Sometimes our minds don't work as effectively as they normally do. Our thought processes may become skewed and our ability to communicate the way we normally would may be compromised. We may speak louder and more quickly, and the pitch of our voice may change.

  Our anger may be driven by an inability to communicate what we are feeling in any other way. The words are in there but we can't structure our thoughts clearly – and this frustration is borne out through our behaviour. It can elevate.

- ...a learned and practiced behaviour? Over time they have learned that the best way to get what they want is to intimidate others. It keeps working so they keep doing it.

- …an inability to manage anger? They are aware of their behaviour but haven't got the tools to control it.

- … a symptom of a mental health condition, such that their behaviours can sometimes be involuntary?

- …substances?

2. **What is the real problem?**

The first step in problem solving is to define the problem. It could be real or perceived, but it's a problem for them so that means it's a problem! In the immediate term, your priority will be to de-escalate the difficult behaviour.

The real problem might not be the one they present with. Have you ever heard someone explain their anger in terms such as:

"I'm sorry. It's not your fault. I've had a bad day."
"I'm sorry, I've got a lot on my mind."

Their anger might relate to other things happening in their lives, and it might be that a quite small or insignificant event can trigger it.

A Risk Management Approach to Difficult Behaviours – Mitigations (how can you reduce the likelihood of difficult behaviour?)

Time for some more self-reflection…

How do you feel when you have to wait, even though you made an appointment for an agreed time? The longer you wait the more frustrated you get. You think to yourself "If I can be on time why can't they?" You might see it as a lack of respect. The longer the wait, the more frustrated you get. You say to yourself: "What could be more important than me?" or "They can't be that busy – there seems to be people doing nothing – why can't they help me?" You move from being calm, to annoyed, to angry – especially if no one comes to explain or apologise.

But delays do happen – life includes changing circumstances (illness, families, transport, and accidents) mistakes and emergencies. That's a fact of life.

Think about what happens in your site when you are running behind. What do you have in place to minimise the chances of job seekers becoming angry. Here are some possible mitigations. Do you do any of these, or do you have other things in place?

Risk:	There is a risk that a job seeker may become angry
Condition:	Job seekers might not be seen at their appointment time
Possible Mitigation(s):	• If you know in advance that the job seeker won't be seen on time, try to contact them before they come in. • If they do come in let them know when they come to the counter that there might be a delay, and explain why. • Keep them regularly updated while they wait, and maybe offer them a coffee or water. • Keep them involved while they wait. If they are here for an initial interview tell them about some of the things that will be covered so they can start

	preparing, e.g. “We’re going to work out a Job Plan so have a think about what could be in that”, or give them some information about your services they can read, show them how to use the jobactive web site, or have a TV in the waiting area. • Have management staff prepared to conduct some interviews.

Think of other reasons why clients could get angry and think about what you can do to try to minimise the chances of that happening.

Here are some other scenarios to think about:

Condition:	The client could get a message to come in but the person at the counter knows nothing about it.
Possible Mitigation(s):	Make sure all messages are recorded in an agreed place in the IT system, so any staff member can see the details.

Condition:	The client could be referred to a job interview but when they get there the job has been filled or withdrawn.
Possible Mitigation(s):	Keep in regular contact with employers and stress to employers the importance of contacting you when a job is filled. Record placements and close jobs in the system as soon as you can.

Condition:	The client could be advised to come and see you by another local support agency (not DHS) but you tell them they are not eligible for services or that they need to see DHS for referral. They feel they are getting the run-around.
Possible Mitigation(s):	Work with local agencies so they understand about programme eligibility and referral.

Condition:	A client could pick a job off the jobactive web site (AJS). You keep their details but the client isn’t selected for interview by the employer, so you don’t contact them. The client comes in and says “I applied for a job but I never heard anything more!”
Possible Mitigation(s):	Keep a record/contact details of job seekers who select a vacancy but aren’t referred to the employer so you can let them know when jobs are filled, or explain to job seekers that you will only contact them if they are shortlisted for interview with the employer. If your client applied for a job managed by another provider then ring that provider to check on the progress of the recruitment.

Condition:	A client could say “You were going to contact me yesterday about this but you never did.”

Possible Mitigation(s):	It’s about managing expectations. If you make a commitment then keep it. If you said you would do something then do it. Don’t make commitments you can’t keep. If you are going to be away ask a colleague to make the contact.

Condition:	A client could say “You guys have never rang me about a job.”
Possible Mitigation(s):	Make sure you explain the services to job seekers so they understand the realities. It’s probably true that many job seekers won’t be matched to jobs. Emphasise your role in helping people to get into a position to help themselves. Make sure your job seekers know that it’s not about them waiting for you to find them a job. Make sure they know they are active rather than passive participants of services. Make sure they know how to use job sites including jobactive web site.

Condition:	A client could say “How many times do I have to tell you?”
Possible Mitigation(s):	Make sure all relevant information is recorded in the system and use an agreed page (e.g. Comments page) to make notes on each interaction, so that any colleague can quickly access the record and pick up the story.

Condition:	A client could say “You guys have got no idea what it’s like.”
Possible Mitigation(s):	You’ll hear the words ‘empathy’ and ‘rapport’ so often in employment services. But you’ll hear them for a good reason: they are just so important! Understand what the words mean and why they are so important to you and your job seekers. Displaying empathy and being able to build rapport are critical skills for an employment consultant.

Contingency (How will you respond when it does happen?)

The second part of risk management is contingency planning – how do you respond when something *does* go wrong? In risk management this is called contingency planning.

There’s a lot of information on the web about *verbal and non-verbal de-escalation techniques*. The good thing for us is that people in different industries (e.g. health, law enforcement, retail, education, security and hospitality) tend to agree on what works best.

Once again, we know that sometimes we can use all of our skills to try to de-escalate a challenging behaviour and still not get the result we want. In employment services you know that we work with some of the most disadvantaged people in the community, and we know that many people on our caseloads will have multiple disadvantages. So the reality is that as well as the great days where we see the joy in a person whose life we have helped change for the better, we will also have some days where things don’t quite work out like we wished they would.

So how can we respond when job seekers are exhibiting difficult behaviours?

1. **Have procedures in place, know what and where they are, and have trained staff**

Your org/site will have emergency procedures in place for e.g. fire and natural disaster and you should also have emergency procedures in place for extreme behaviours – where there is an imminent threat to personal safety. Having these procedures in place is just the first thing. You also need to know what they are and where they are. The priority will be to ensure the safety of staff, clients and the person exhibiting the behaviour, as well as ensuring that emergency services (including any security services) can quickly assist if necessary. Most of us have experienced fire drill procedures, but I wonder if we practice 'emergency client drills'? If not, maybe think about doing it. Role play is an important part of learning and reinforcing skills that we don't use too often in the real world.

The DoE guidelines also say that providers must have an incident management plan in place that outlines the organisation's approach to managing situations where job seekers display challenging behaviours, or where staff identify that a situation has the potential to result in this behaviour.

2. Reading the signs of anger

Sometimes you can read the signs that a person's behaviour is changing. Reading the 'non-verbal' signs is very important: They might include:

- They may become restless or fidgety
- Their speech may become louder or they may stop talking
- They may start shaking or their eyes may either focus on you or, conversely, they may start to avoid eye contact (but remember that there may be cultural communication reasons for this)
- Their body may start to tense up, their face may redden or their breathing may change

So sometimes you'll be able to pick up on signs that a person is becoming agitated. Now let's look at some of the widely used verbal and non-verbal de-escalation techniques. Remember, these techniques have been adopted as *better practice* in a number of industries.

Widely accepted verbal and non-verbal de-escalation techniques

1. Don't 'fight fire with fire!'
Be aware of your own emotions and behaviours. Some people are expecting and are prepared for you to adopt their behaviours. They are prepared for the situation to escalate. Adopting a contrary behaviour, such as being calm and speaking slowly and quietly, can be a good disarming tactic.

2. Your language and tone of voice/acknowledging feelings
Calm and gentle and non-confrontational. Acknowledge their feelings immediately. Tell them your name and know theirs – and use it. Using a person's name is an important part of building rapport. You feel like you know someone and have a connection when they use your name. Speak slowly, softly and calmly: fast, loud and agitated speech may be mirroring their behaviour.

3. Use calming language
"Let's come over here and we can sit down quietly and chat about it". "Let's" is an inclusive word, and words like "sit", "chat" and "quietly" are calming words.

4. Your body language

Open and non-confrontational. Don't cross your arms or have your hands in your pockets. Don't stand toe-to-toe. Think about keeping a 1 – 1.5 metre distance, and stand at a slight angle to the person - it's seen as less confrontational. Think about being on the same eye line as the client. If the client is sitting then you sit. If the client is standing then you stand. There can be a power imbalance when one person 'stands-over' another.

5. Your listening

Be genuine in giving the person undivided attention. Use all your active listening skills to show that their concerns are of the highest importance. Show you understand through paraphrasing, minimal encouragers (e.g. yep, uh-huh), nodding and questioning. Asking questions is a good way to show that you are interested, and for you to gather or clarify information. It can also be a way of getting the person to think and focus on something different – listening to, analysing and answering your questions can help to refocus them away from their behaviour.

6. Agree with them

Think about the importance of agreeing rather than challenging at this moment. That's easy to do if the person is correct. In reality, you might disagree. But agreeing doesn't mean you have to accept their position or condone their behaviour. Think about this:

Client: *"I'm getting really bad service here."*
Consultant: *"Yes. I don't like it when I get bad service." (We are agreeing with the principle rather than the specific claim.)*
"I'm really sorry you don't think you are getting good service."
"I agree that we don't like to get the run around."
"I agree that hearing voices would be scary."
"I think everyone would agree that they deserve respect".

7. Be non-judgemental

Be non-judgemental and focus on feelings. Try to find a 'truth' in what the person is saying:

Client: *"People are after me all the time."*
Consultant: *"That must be pretty upsetting. Tell me more about that.."*

Client: *"I'm not happy about what's happened."*
Consultant: *"Yes, I can see you are upset. Can you tell me exactly what happened?"*

8. Be persistent in letting the person know what you want them to do

"I can see that you are upset Tom and I am keen to help you. Tom, I need you to come and sit with me so I can get some more information from you."

Let them know what you want them to do. Keep repeating if necessary. Stick to this message. It's about being assertive, not aggressive.

9. Grandstanding

Some people will like an audience – the presence of others may embolden them. A lot of us admire people who are 'cool under pressure'. Your calm and empathic manner will most likely impress others more than the difficult behaviour of the person. If your person is a 'grandstander' look to lead them to a quieter part of the office – away from the 'stage'.

10. Allow silence

Silence makes most people uncomfortable – you'll often see that people have a need to fill the silence. But silence can be a valuable tool. It may give your person time to reflect on their behaviour, gather their thoughts, or to process what you are saying. It might prompt them to want to fill the space by telling you something that can help you understand more about their circumstances.

11. Resolution

You might not be able to resolve things immediately but you can possibly put some things in place, such as a plan of action, a referral to someone who can help, or a follow up appointment to talk some more. People like to see that wheels are in motion and that there is concrete progress.

12. Finishing up

We often talk about building rapport up front, but it can be an ongoing thing. If you've been able to help the person into a better state of mind then you've already earned some trust and respect. You can build on that. It may set a good tone for future visits. As you're finishing off you might see an opening to chat about other things:

"Tell me a bit about yourself?"
"Did you grow up around here?"
"What do you do in your spare time?"
"How did you get here today?"

13. Following up

When we spoke about mitigations we talked about the importance of meeting expectations. Have you arranged to do something for the client? To ring them with some information perhaps, or to set up a referral for them? If you did make a commitment, it's very important that you do what you said you were going to do when you said you were going to do it.

Think about this scenario:

You've had a difficult discussion with the bank. You were very upset but the person you spoke to was very pleasant and said they'd definitely get back to you this afternoon with a resolution to your problem. You felt you could talk to them, and that they understood what you were saying and were keen to help you. You developed a rapport and you trust them.

They don't ring.