

## 5 Steps on How to Handle a Negative Review

### Step 1 - Breath

I know for me, as the owner of a clinic, when I receive a negative review, it is like they are attacking my child. It hurts, it seems nasty, unfair, and I want to respond in kind. Hold on! This is the time where you need to understand those feelings are normal, and that is ok; but you now need to take a time-out and accept that you have this negative review. You may be angry with the person who made the review, but you may also be angry with your team. You may think “whose patient was this?” Did they follow all the procedures? What did they do that resulted in a negative review!

Your natural instinct may be to respond as soon as possible, but do not. You have to remember that most reviews were written a few days prior to their actual posting, you do not need to respond to them just because it is now published. I’ve seen reviews written 5 or more days prior to them being posted. It is ok to give yourself a day or two to respond.

Again, this is not the time for action. This is the time to pause, and take 3 big deep breaths.

### Step 2 - Stay Positive

Once you are calm, you will now need to accept the fact someone did not like the service they received at your clinic, and you will get to the bottom of the complaint. Realize that every complaint is an opportunity for you and your team to do better, there are always learning opportunities with each negative review or patient complaint.

A negative review doesn’t mean that something went wrong or broke down, albeit in +95% of the cases it usually does. Some people have a negative outlook on life, and nothing can be done to make them happy. These are the people who have a negative energy, and bring a room down when they enter. When you have the combination of a breakdown of customer service at your clinic and a negative personality, you are going to need to be vigilant in maintaining your positive energy!

I love the best selling book [The Four Agreements](#) by Don Miguel Ruiz, in fact, I give it out to all of my employees when they start at the clinic. The second and third agreements should be kept top of mind during this step: “Don’t Take Anything Personally” and “Don’t Make Assumptions.”

### Step 3 - Investigate

I’d like to quote Columbo here, “just the facts ma’am, just the facts” however, I think I would be dating myself! But that sums up step 3, you need to investigate, take personalities out of it, and get the facts (keep “Don’t make Assumptions” top of mind). No one is perfect, so you can expect some combination of a clinic team or process breakdown, and a patient who is very angry to be at play here.

It may sound obvious, but in some cases, patients have posted negative reviews about the wrong clinic, so you will want to make sure this is in fact your patient. As great as this may sound, it doesn’t happen as often as you would like. In other cases, it’s a competitor posting the negative review.

First, find out who the patient is. They generally do not put their real name on the posting if it is Google, but many do if they post on Yelp or Facebook. Once you know who it is, pull up their chart and find out the procedure and read the notes. As a side note here, it’s a good idea to take 20-30 minutes a month, and randomly pull up patient charts to make sure your team is charting properly with full notes.

Once you know who the patient is, you should chat with the provider alone, and get their story. Then I would also chat with the patient care coordinator, receptionist and anyone else who may have interacted with this patient. Get your staff’s side of the story first.

Keep the following in mind, expect your team member, whether they are at fault or not, to be very emotionally invested in the review as well. If they are an engaged team member, it will most likely be devastating to them as well. Just as you had to pause, breathe, and stay positive, you will need to coach them to do the same. Also, this is a time to learn about their character, are they a blamer or do they take responsibility?



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#### **Step 4 – Make Contact**

Now that you have all the facts from the patient’s chart and your staff, you will need to do something that perhaps will be uncomfortable, and that is to contact the patient. It is always best if the physician makes contact, not your team member, but in some rare cases you may have your clinic manager contact the patient. The fact is most people respect the “white coat,” and if you make contact, it’s like being contacted by the CEO of a big company. People will be impressed, happy, and feel like they are being heard, more so than if the clinic manager contacted them (also it could that person who is part of the problem). It is not a good idea ever for the team member in question to be the one to contact the patient.

Physicians are already trained to listen more than talk, so again, just listen. Whether they are right or wrong, do not judge the patient. The patient needs to be heard, and have their concern acknowledged. Many years ago, when I worked at Fairmont Hotels (I don’t think this is in the official training manual!), we had a saying “the guest is not always right, but they need to think they are.” Keep this in mind during your interaction with the patient. Always acknowledge how they feel, it may not make sense to you, but it does to them, for example “I can see why you feel that way, if that happened, I would feel the same way.” And if necessary, you may need to apologize, “I am sincerely sorry for how you were treated, I will speak to the person involved, and we have already made changes to our check-out process to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

The goal of this all-important step is for the patient to feel heard, have their concerns acknowledged, and have them come to their own conclusion to remove or update the review. If they don’t offer to remove or revise their review, you may need to encourage them, “I think we had a great conversation, and it sounds like you understand that we have made the necessary changes to prevent this from happening to another patient, may I ask if you could remove or modify your rating?”

Often, the process ends at this step. However, if it does not, then you will need to go to Step 5.

#### **Step 5 – The Response**

If you did not do step 4, you need to go back and do it! Trust me, for most situations, contacting the patient will usually resolve the complaint and remove the negative review. If not, you are now going to respond to the negative review, and this will require a plan. Again, you may feel like the clock is ticking, but do not rush this part of the process.

The goal of your response is to show that you acknowledge the situation, apologize and make it right if necessary and you may also want take this opportunity to educate other prospective patients on the procedure. This often happens with body sculpting procedures, for example, patients seem to forget it can take up to 3 months to see the full results, and that more than one procedure is sometimes necessary (even though they sign that they understand these facts in the consent form).

When apologizing, don’t apologize for a specific procedure or team member; be more general, “I am so sorry to *hear about your recent experience* at our practice.” A first sentence that apologizes for the “experience” they receive allows the reader to interpret it in a more positive manner.

The goal is turn lemons into lemonade, not to attack or belittle the writer (even though you may want to!) When crafting your response, always think about how you can turn the negative into a positive. Here are some tips when writing a response:

##### **Tips for Writing a Response to a Negative Customer Complaint**

- Be positive and upbeat
- Be understanding
- Show fairness
- Apologize when necessary
- Show a resolution to the problem
- Do not be accusatory
- Do not attack the writer
- Write it, leave it for a few hours, and review it
- Have someone who does not have a vested interest review it
- Google has more tips

### **Step 5 (Cont'd)**

Here is an example of a review that was posted and a clinic's response:

**1-Star Yelp reviewer, Cynthia:**

Everyone in the front office was very nice here but I'm sorry I have to give a poor review. I purchased a Groupon for Laser Hair removal (bikini line). It was incredibly painful - I almost couldn't endure it. The machine used is not good. I've been to another local spa for the same treatment and did not need the numbing cream because it was not painful at all (a breeze in fact). So I didn't ask for it at #####. The nurse was just okay. Not very sensitive to my painful experience - I probably won't go back even though I have 4 more sessions included on my Groupon. So I lost money on this too sadly. I cannot recommend Laser Hair Removal.

**Owner's response:**

Cynthia, thank you for your comments. The laser we use is actually the newest on the market and the most effective. We offer 3 different numbing applications in case the patient is sensitive. Other lasers might be less painful, but may compromise the results. I recommend using numbing cream, because you don't want to sacrifice results by using less power. Some places in our area are notorious for using lower power settings so you have to purchase more sessions. Our patients see results very quickly because our protocols are more aggressive, yielding better results without compromising patient safety.

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Now, not every response is going to be perfect, there are always going to be some "improvements" that can certainly be made. The point is, don't beat yourself up, you can always do better next time (or go back and "edit" your response). A second point to this example is to stay away from daily deal sites like Groupon and Living Social, it is very hard to convert a Groupon customer to become a customer of your clinic.