

FCC Part 97.405 Explained: Station in Distress

FCC Part 97.405 explains how amateur radio operators must respond when a station is in distress. This rule requires other stations to **give immediate priority to emergency communications** and assist when possible. In plain English, if a true distress situation appears on the air, normal communication stops being the priority.

 **Bottom Line:** If you hear a distress call or emergency traffic, you must yield the frequency, avoid interference, and help if you are able.

□ View the complete guide: [FCC Part 97 Guide Index →](#)

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What does the station in distress rule require?

FCC Part 97.405 requires all amateur stations to give priority to stations in distress and to assist emergency communications when possible. When distress traffic is present, other stations must not interfere and should help clear the path for the emergency communication.

If a distress situation is on the air, it becomes the most important communication on that frequency.

What Is FCC Part 97.405?

FCC Part 97.405 is the amateur radio rule that specifically addresses **stations in distress**. While Part 97.403 gives emergency flexibility to use whatever means are necessary, Part 97.405 focuses on what other stations must do once distress traffic exists.

In practical operation, this means that emergency traffic is not merely “important.” It has priority over ordinary QSOs, nets, testing, contest activity, or casual operating.

□ □ Continuing routine communication while a legitimate distress situation is underway can interfere with emergency communications and may violate FCC rules.

Priority of Emergency Traffic

Emergency and distress communications take priority immediately. Once a station in distress is identified, other operators should recognize that the normal use of the frequency is no longer the first concern.

- All other non-emergency transmissions must yield
- Emergency traffic takes priority over routine operation
- Stations must not continue ordinary conversation on top of distress traffic
- Operators should help maintain a clear path for the emergency communication

□ The correct response is not just to “be quiet.” It is to make sure the distress communication can proceed effectively.

Operator Responsibilities

Part 97.405 creates practical responsibilities for operators who hear or become aware of a distress situation.

- Listen carefully and determine whether emergency traffic is present
- Stop ordinary operation on that frequency or nearby if needed
- Assist if you are capable of helping
- Relay critical information if the distressed station cannot reach others directly
- Help maintain order and clarity on the frequency

Assistance does not always mean taking over the event. In many cases, the best help is simply clearing the channel, listening carefully, and relaying information only when useful.

Responsible emergency assistance means helping the communication succeed, not adding confusion to it.

Difference Between 97.403 and 97.405

These two rules are related, but they are not the same:

- **97.403** allows emergency use of any means necessary to protect life or property
- **97.405** requires stations to give priority to distress traffic and assist when possible

□ Part 97.403 gives emergency flexibility. Part 97.405 creates emergency responsibility.

A simple way to remember the difference:

- 97.403 helps define what may be done during a real emergency
- 97.405 helps define how other stations must respond once distress traffic exists

Real-World Examples

✓ Proper Response

- Stopping a QSO immediately when emergency traffic is heard
- Relaying distress information when the station in trouble cannot reach help directly
- Helping clear the frequency so the distressed station can be heard clearly
- Monitoring the situation and assisting only as needed

✗ Improper Response

- Continuing a casual QSO during ongoing distress traffic
- Talking over an emergency call
- Creating confusion with unnecessary comments or transmissions
- Ignoring a distress situation because it is inconvenient

Distress traffic is not background noise. It is the priority communication on the frequency until the emergency is resolved or moved appropriately.

FAQ

Do I have to stop transmitting during an emergency?

Yes. Emergency traffic takes priority, and normal communications must yield when a station in distress needs the frequency.

Do I have to help during a distress situation?

If you are able to assist, you are expected to help by clearing the frequency, relaying information, or supporting the emergency communication appropriately.

What happens if I ignore a distress call?

Ignoring a legitimate distress situation or interfering with it may violate FCC rules and could prevent critical emergency communication from getting through.

Is Part 97.405 the same as Part 97.403?

No. Part 97.403 provides emergency flexibility, while Part 97.405 focuses on priority and operator responsibilities when a station is in distress.

Should I always transmit during emergency traffic to offer help?

No. Sometimes the best help is to remain silent and keep the channel clear. Assist only when it improves the communication.

Checklist

- ✓ Stop normal operation when distress traffic appears
 - ✓ Give immediate priority to emergency communications
 - ✓ Assist if you are capable and useful
 - ✓ Avoid interference and unnecessary transmissions
 - ✓ Help keep the frequency clear and orderly
- The goal of Part 97.405 is simple: when a station is in distress, everything else takes second place.