CRISIS INTERVENTION

Ten Steps to Effective De-escalation

There are a variety of protocols for dealing with people in crisis. *Know what to do for each before you take action.*
There are a variety of protocols for dealing with people in crisis, depending on their situation. You could be dealing with someone who is having a really bad day, a medical emergency such as a diabetic reaction, a person reacting to drugs, or someone who is mentally ill. Know what to do for each before you take action.

When dealing with an agitated patient, you should keep four major goals in mind: 1. Ensure the safety of the individual, staff, and other bystanders. 2. Avoid coercive tactics that may escalate the individual’s agitation. 3. Avoid the use of restraint, when possible. 4. Help the individual regain control of their behavior and begin to self-manage their own distress and anxiety. This will require that the person trust you and become a collaborative partner in their own de-escalation. Key to this effort will be your ability to communicate calmly with the individual. If you successfully engage the individual verbally, they will become an active partner in reorienting their own locus of control. Verbal de-escalation will reduce the possibility of restraining or secluding the individual.

A difficult and potentially dangerous situation involves engaging with a person who may be mentally ill. These encounters may occur at any time, even with individuals who simply walk into the agency seemingly at random. Most individuals with mental illness are not dangerous, but a special set of skills is required to bring a mutually successful end to the encounter. Here are ten steps to effective crisis intervention to help you de-escalate situations safely:

**Ten Steps to Effective De-Escalation**

**1. DEVELOP A PLAN AHEAD OF TIME**

Devise a plan before one is needed. Decisions made before a crisis occurs are likely to be more rational than those made when on the receiving end of emotional outbursts. Think about those things that are upsetting and practice dealing with those issues ahead of time. This is called strategic visualization and is effective in stressful and even dangerous moments. Just as with other professional skills, this training will kick in when needed.

**2. REMAIN CALM**

One of the most important actions in any crisis is for you to remain in control of yourself. This factor, called “rational detachment,” will be the key to whether you help de-escalate or escalate the situation. This may seem easier said than done, especially when a person is screaming at you, threatening you, or calling you offensive names. Don’t take it personally, become defensive yourself, or “act-in” with an individual. Keep in mind that when a person is verbally escalating, they are beginning to lose control. If the person senses that you’re losing control too, the situation will get worse. So try to stay cool, even when the person challenges or insults you. Know how you react under stress. If you are not in control of yourself, you cannot calm another.
3. ASSESS THE SITUATION

Assess the individual before approaching. Although your inclination may be to intervene immediately, that may not always be the best response. As long as the individual isn’t an immediate danger to self or others, there’s time to make a quick assessment. Evaluate the person’s behavior before acting, if at all possible, by talking to the person and evaluating their responses. If the person is unable or unwilling to speak, listen to what the person is saying—not only with words, but also with body language and tone of voice. Perform a mental inventory and analysis to determine if you can handle this alone, or whether you need to call in help, such as additional staff or other resources.

4. ISOLATE THE PERSON

Onlookers often fuel a situation by encouraging a person’s behavior. The person may be less likely to back down in front of an audience. Try to take the person aside or lead them toward another room. Your approach to crisis intervention will be more effective in a private space. Signal to other staff members that you may be in another area with this individual.

5. BE FLEXIBLE IN YOUR APPROACH

Agitation exists on a spectrum from anxiety through aggression. Staff should use objective terminology when referring to specific types of behavior. Behaviors indicate the degree along the continuum of agitation to which the individual has progressed. Properly assessing the level of agitation will give some additional insights into earlier intervention, when you might be able to de-escalate on your own, or when you may need to call in extra help. Additionally, using standard terminology amongst staff will assist in conveying what is necessary for help from additional staff members, such as how many and which type of staff will be required with the assist (whether security should be called, etc.)

One behavior assessment tool in common use is “The Lalemand Behavior Scale.” The tool is not intended to label or diagnose, nor is it intended to be a precise, scientific instrument. It merely provides a relatively objective method to assess an individual’s behavior when it becomes challenging. This enables employees to respond in an appropriate manner that will make everyone safer. Your agency may wish to adopt this terminology, or find another appropriate tool. Only make sure that all staff is utilizing the same verbiage when communicating internally.

There are several types of aggression, and dealing with each is different. Fear based aggression occurs when a person is afraid of being hurt and lashes out to protect themselves. This is best countered by giving the person plenty of space and reassurance. Instrumental aggression is a tactic for those who have found that aggression is a useful way to manipulate a situation. In these cases, it is best to calmly hold your ground and set limits. Irritable aggression is when people feel humiliated or angry and are seeking an escape valve for their emotional wounds. They may enjoy causing fear or confusion, and they may attempt to intimidate you. This is the most difficult aggression to deal with. It is generally best not to react in any defensive or scared way, to remain generally unemotional, and let the person know that you will only work with them if they are cooperative.
RED BEHAVIOR SCALE
The Lalemand Behavior Scale

Agitated (pacing, mumbling to self, rocking, storming into room, crying to self, etc.)
What a person is really saying: “I'm Distressed.”
Staff Response: Relieve Stress

Disruptive (yelling, tapping a pen in a quiet room, sobbing loudly, etc.)
What a person is really saying: “Pay Attention.”
Staff Response: Perform 360 sweep (assessing area/person… can they hurt themselves or others?) Try to relieve distress, & set limits

Destructive (slamming doors, ruining property, using large motor skills/swinging fists but not connecting with a person, attempting to flee, etc.)
What a person is really saying: “I'm Losing Control.”
Staff Response: Keep everyone safe, remove audience, initiate crisis plan, call for support

Dangerous (hitting self or others, pulling out hair, biting, etc.)
What a person is really saying: “I'm Out of Control.”
Staff Response: Emergency response, extra support, call 911

Threat of Lethal Force (threatening suicide or homicide)
What a person is really saying: “Help/Stop Me.”
Staff Response: Follow suicide prevention protocol, call 911 if needed
6. USE A TEAM APPROACH

Being a professional doesn’t mean that you must be able to excel at everything. That is an unrealistic expectation. Know what your limits are. Know that sometimes the most professional decision is to let someone else take over, if that’s an option, or call in extra help. Give yourself some time and distance to get more resources. It is easier to maintain professionalism when assistance is nearby. Support and back up are both crucial pieces when trying to rationally detach.

HAVE AN ESTABLISHED PROTOCOL FOR CALLING IN EXTRA HELP

Establish a protocol for summoning back-up support. The exact procedure should be addressed, maintained, and supervised at an agency level. Make sure that all agency staff is trained in the protocol the agency adopts. Some elements of the protocol should include:

- Designate teams of persons trained in de-escalation in each area staffed during any time that the agency doors are unlocked and open to the public. Be sure there is adequate staff at all times to handle a crisis. If staffing is low, consider locking doors or having other security in place.
- A code word or phrase should be selected that is known to all staff to call for extra support in the event of any crisis consisting of escalating verbal abuse; verbal threats; failure to leave premises when requested; physical fights; or other similar situations deemed emergency or crisis situations requiring the help of further staff to control or de-escalate. The first person on the scene is responsible for initiating an overhead page in such situations using the code word or phrase and the area in which the crisis is occurring. (An example is “Please bring the ‘red folder’ to the ‘intake area.’”)
- At the time of crisis, team members will respond and attempt to de-escalate the situation. Even in a team approach, only one team member should verbally interact with the individual. If at all possible, situations should be handled within the agency.
- Should de-escalation fail internally, procedures will be put into effect to remove the individual from the building, when appropriate. If recognized as a mental health crisis, a referral or other call will be made to an on-line crisis service, mental health or suicide prevention hot-line, or other resource.
- If necessary, call 911.

7. WATCH YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

As people become more agitated, they pay less attention to what you say and more attention to your body language. More than half the information you convey is communicated through body language, and not through spoken words. Be aware of your posture and what gestures you use, and be sure to give the individual enough personal space. Ensure that your nonverbal behavior is as non-threatening as your spoken words. Avoid entering another person’s space or touching them without invitation or consent. A distance of two arm’s length is suggested to keep both you and the agitated individual safe. Keep your hands visible, open, and relaxed. Keep your stance to the side. Never block a person, move forward abruptly, or get in the person’s face.
8. SPEAK EFFECTIVELY AND COMPASSIONATELY

- **Keep It Simple.**
  Be clear, direct, and respectful in what you say and how you say it. Because an escalating person may be too anxious and preoccupied to hear many words, avoid giving complex choices.

- **Use Reflective Questioning.**
  Let the person vent, then restate what you think he’s saying. This will help him clarify his meaning. By repeating or reflecting his words in the form of a question, you’ll help him gain valuable insight.

- **Use Silence.**
  Silence on your part allows the person to clarify and restate their viewpoint. This can lead you to better understand the true source of their conflict and help them to address it.

- **Watch Your Paraverbals.**
  Two identical statements can have opposite meanings, depending on the tone, volume, and cadence of your voice. Make sure your vocal inflection is consistent with the words you use. This will help you avoid sending the person a double message. Your words and how they are delivered must harmonize. In other words, don’t scream “Calm down!” at a subject and expect it to work.

- **Repetition is Essential.**
  De-escalation often involves a verbal loop in which the individual is repetitive and uncooperative. Training should emphasize that it may take several cycles of the same conversation before the individual is successfully engaged. Do not give up, and do not show frustration. Continue to be calmly persistent, and know that it may take up to a dozen verbal loops to make headway. Taking into account that each repetition may take approximately one minute, remember that the majority of crises can be verbally de-escalated in less than twelve minutes, most taking between five and ten minutes.

9. LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

Try to understand where the person is coming from. Like other skills, empathic listening can be learned. The key to de-escalation is effective communication.

**Give Undivided Attention**
People feel important when they are validated. The converse is also true: people who feel less important sometimes “up the ante” if they feel like they need attention. Look at the person, making eye contact if culturally appropriate, and listen with your whole body. By really listening, and conveying that through body language as well as words you can often take away the person’s reason for escalating the situation.

**Be Nonjudgmental**
Any negative reaction, especially if verbalized, will probably upset the individual even more. Even if not said aloud, your attitude may be conveyed through your body language. If someone is psychotic, that person may tune into the nonverbal communication much more than words. So besides paying attention to what is said, ensure that body language and tone are nonjudgmental as well. This will go a lot further in calming the individual.

**Focus on Feelings**
If an individual makes statements that seem nonsensical, do not argue or try to discern their meaning. Simply focus on the feelings and try to validate those feelings. Statements like, “That sounds like it must be difficult,” or “that must be scary,” will more likely elicit a response that is positive, since the individual will feel that you understand the impact of what’s happening. It is helpful to adopt the stance that what the person is saying feels true.
Allow Silence
Sometimes, allowing a moment of silence can be the best choice. If an individual doesn’t immediately answer a question, it doesn’t mean they didn’t hear you or even that they are refusing to answer. It may mean they are thinking about his answer, or even that they want to make sure they are saying the right thing. Allow a moment of silence. If the person’s face registers confusion, then repeat the question calmly and let the silence happen again.

Clarify Message
Whenever a person makes a statement, you may think you know what the person means. The only way to be sure is to ask. Sometimes a question may be perceived as challenging and can make the subject defensive. Restating the message, instead, is a way to show an interest in the individual and keep the lines of communication open.

10. DEBRIEF
Be sure to debrief with coworkers, team members, or a supervisor after a major incident. Talking about it can relieve some of the stress and is also a good time to start planning for next time: what was done correctly, what could have been handled better, how could the response be improved the next time a similar situation occurs. This serves to assist in being able to rationally detach in the future.

Assisting someone with a possible mental illness is only one example of a crisis intervention. There are many other examples, even calming down an out-of-control colleague. No matter what the situation, keeping the lines of communication open can help to de-escalate a potentially dangerous crisis.
References