



De-escalation Techniques

When a potentially violent situation threatens to erupt on the spot and no weapon is present, verbal de-escalation techniques are an appropriate strategy. Reasoning with an enraged person is not possible. The first and only objective in de-escalation is to reduce the level of arousal so that discussion becomes possible.

De-escalation techniques are abnormal in these situations. We are adrenally driven to fight, flight or freeze when scared or threatened. However, to effectively de-escalate a situation, we can do none of these. We must appear centered and calm even when we are terrified. Therefore, these techniques must be practiced before they are needed so that they can become 'second nature.'

A. The staff member in control of him/her self

1. Appear calm, centered and self-assured even though you don't feel it. Anxiety can make the student feel anxious and unsafe which can escalate aggression.
2. Use a modulated, low monotonous tone of voice (our normal tendency is to have a high pitched, tight voice when scared).
3. If you have time, remove necktie, scarf, hanging jewelry, religious or political symbols before you approach the student (not in front of him/her)
4. Do not be defensive—even if the comments or insults are directed at you, they are not about you. Do not defend yourself or anyone else from insults, curses or misconceptions about their roles.
5. Be aware of any resources available for back up. Know that you can always leave, or seek additional support as needed, should de-escalation not be effective
6. Be very respectful even when firmly setting limits or calling for help. The agitated individual is very sensitive to feeling shamed and disrespected. We want him/her to know that it is not necessary to show us that they should be respected. We automatically treat them with dignity and respect.

B. The physical stance

1. Never turn your back for any reason
2. Always be at the same eye level. Encourage the student to be seated, but if he/she needs to stand, you stand up also.
3. Allow extra physical space between you – about four times your usual distance. Anger and agitation fill the extra space between you and the student.

4. Do not maintain constant eye contact. Allow the student to break his/her gaze and look away.
5. Do not point or shake your finger.
6. Do not touch – even if some touching is generally culturally appropriate and usual in your setting. Cognitive disorders in agitated people allow for easy misinterpretation of physical contact as hostile or threatening.
7. Keep hands out of your pockets, up and available to protect yourself. It also demonstrates a non-verbal ally, that you do not have a concealed weapon

C. The de-escalation discussion

1. Remember that there is no content except trying to calmly bring the level of arousal down to a safer place.
2. Do not get loud or try to yell over a screaming person. Wait until he/she takes a breath; then talk. Speak calmly at an average volume.
3. Respond selectively; answer only informational questions no matter how rudely asked, e.g. "Why do I have to follow these stupid rules anyway?" This is a real information-seeking question). DO NOT answer abusive questions (e.g. "Why are all you teacher jerks?") This question should get no response whatsoever.
4. Explain limits and rules in an authoritative, firm, but always respectful tone. Give choices where possible in which both alternatives are safe ones (e.g. Would you like to continue this discussion calmly now or would you prefer to stop now and we'll discuss this after class when things can be more relaxed?)
5. Empathize with feelings but not with the behavior (e.g. "I understand that you have every right to feel angry, but it is not okay for you to threaten me or other students.)
6. Do not solicit how a person is feeling or interpret feelings in an analytic way.
7. Do not argue or try to convince.
8. Wherever possible, tap into the student's cognitive mode: DO NOT ask "Tell me how you feel." But instead: "Help me to understand what your are saying to me." People are not attacking you while they are explaining to you what they want you to know.
9. Suggest alternative behaviors where appropriate e.g. "Would you like to take a break from this assignment now and work on your project instead?"
10. Give the consequences of inappropriate behavior without threats or anger.
11. Represent external controls as institutional rather than personal.

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