

Verbal De-Escalation Techniques for Defusing or Talking Down an Explosive Situation

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When a potentially verbally and/or physically explosive situation occurs, verbal de-escalation is needed.

There are two important concepts to keep in mind:

1. Reasoning logically with a very angry person is not possible. The first and only objective in de-escalation is to reduce the level of anger so that discussion becomes possible.
2. De-escalation techniques do not come naturally. We are driven to fight, flight or freeze when confronted by a very angry person. However, in de-escalation, we can do none of these. We must appear centered and calm. Therefore these techniques must be practiced before they are needed so that they can become “second nature.”

There are 3 parts to be mastered in verbal de-escalation:

A: THE PERSON IN CONTROL OF HIM/HER SELF

- Appear calm, centered and self-assured even though you don't feel it. Relax facial muscles and look confident. Anxiety can make the client feel anxious and unsafe which can escalate aggression.
- Use a modulated, low monotonous tone of voice (our normal tendency is to have a high pitched, tight voice when scared).
- If you have time, remove necktie, scarf, hanging jewelry, religious or political symbols before you see the person (not in front of him/her)
- 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.
- Be aware of any resources available for back up and crisis response procedures.
- 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 must be respected. We automatically treat them with dignity and respect.

B: THE PHYSICAL STANCE

- Never turn your back for any reason
- Always be at the same eye level. Encourage the person to be seated, but if he/she needs to stand, you stand up also.
- Allow extra physical space between you – about four times your usual distance. Anger and agitation fill the extra space between you and the person.
- Do not stand full front to person. Stand at an angle so you can sidestep away if needed.
- Do not maintain constant eye contact. Allow the person to break his/her gaze and look away.
- Do not point or shake your finger.
- DO NOT smile. This could look like mockery or anxiety
- Do not touch – even if some touching is generally culturally appropriate and usual in your setting. Very angry people may misinterpret physical contact as hostile or threatening.
- Keep hands out of your pockets, up and available to protect yourself. It also demonstrates non-verbal ally.
- Do not argue or try to convince, give choices i.e. empower.
- Don't be defensive or judgmental.

C: THE DE-ESCALATION DISCUSSION

- Remember that there is no content except trying to calmly bring the level of anger down to a safer place.
- 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.
- Respond selectively; answer all informational questions no matter how rudely asked, e.g. “Why do I have to do this g-d homework?” This is a real information-seeking question). DO NOT answer abusive questions (e.g. “Why are all teachers (an insult?) This question should get no response what so ever.
- 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 our discussion calmly or would you prefer to stop now and talk tomorrow when things can be more relaxed?)
- 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 treat myself or others this way.)
- Do not solicit how a person is feeling or interpret feelings in an analytic way.
- Do not argue or try to convince.
- Wherever possible, tap into the person's thinking mode: DO NOT ask “Tell me how you feel. But: Help me to understand what your are saying to me” People are not attacking you while they are teaching you what they want you to know.

- Suggest alternative behaviors where appropriate e.g. “Would you like to take a break and have a cup of water?”
- Give the consequences of inappropriate behavior without threats or anger.
- Represent external controls as institutional rather than personal.
- Trust your instincts. If you assess or feel that de-escalation is not working, STOP! You will know within 2 or 3 minutes if it’s beginning to work. Seek help and follow crisis response plan.

There is nothing magic about calming a very angry or agitated person. You are transferring your sense of genuine interest in what the person wants to tell you, of calmness, and of respectful, clear limit setting in the hope that the person actually wishes to respond positively to your respectful attention.