



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Verbal De-Escalation Techniques

When working with program participants, you may encounter someone who is angry or upset. The following verbal de-escalation techniques may help you to calm down the individual. If the participant threatens the safety of themselves or others, call your local police or sheriff, the UW-Madison Police Department at (608) 264-2677, or dial 911.

There are three important points to keep in mind:

1. Reasoning 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 even when we are frightened. Therefore, these techniques must be practiced before they are needed so that they can become "second nature."
3. If there is noncompliance with Extension event policies, the Extension faculty or staff member leading the program is authorized to cancel or end the event.

THERE ARE 3 PARTS TO BE MASTERED IN VERBAL DE- ESCALATION

A. Be in Control of Yourself

1. Appear calm, centered and self-assured even though you don't feel it. Relax facial muscles and look confident. Your anxiety can make the participant feel anxious and unsafe and that 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 or nervous).
3. 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.
4. Be aware of any resources available for back up. Know that you have the choice to leave; tell the participant to leave; or call your local police or sheriff, the UW-Madison Police Department at (608) 264-2677, or dial 911 should de-escalation not be effective.
5. 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 them 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

1. Always be at the same eye level. Encourage the participant to be seated, but if the person needs to stand, you stand up also.
2. Allow extra physical space between you – about four times your usual distance. Anger and agitation fill the extra space between you and the participant.
3. Do not stand full front to the participant. Stand at an angle so you can sidestep away if needed.
4. Do not maintain constant eye contact. Allow the participant to break his/her gaze and look away.
5. Do not point or shake your finger.
6. Do not smile. This could look like mockery or anxiety.
7. Do not touch – even if some touching is generally culturally appropriate and usual in your setting. Cognitive dysfunction in agitated people allow for easy misinterpretation of physical contact as hostile or threatening.
8. Keep hands out of your pockets, up and available to protect yourself. It also demonstrates non-verbal ally.
9. Do not argue or try to convince, give choices i.e. empower.
10. Don't be defensive or judgmental.
11. Don't be parental or convey that "you have a right to feel angry".

C. The De-Escalation Discussion

1. Remember that you are trying to calmly bring the level of arousal down to baseline.
2. Do not get loud or try to yell over a screaming person. Wait until the person takes a breath; then talk. Speak calmly at an average volume.
3. Do not answer abusive questions (e.g. "Why are all Extension people ___?") 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.
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 use abusive language.")
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 participant's cognitive mode: Do not ask "Tell me how you feel. But: "Help me to understand what you are saying to me". People are not attacking you while they are teaching you what they want you to know.
9. Suggest alternative behaviors where appropriate.
10. Give the consequences of inappropriate behavior without threats or anger.
11. Represent external controls as institutional rather than personal.
12. 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. Tell the person to leave, escort them to the door, call for help or leave yourself and call the police.

There is nothing magic about talking someone down. You are transferring your sense of calm and genuine interest in what the participant wants to tell you, and of respectful, clear limit setting in the hope that the participant actually wishes to respond positively to your respectful attention.

Again, if at any time the participant threatens to harm themselves or others, contact your local police or sheriff, the UW-Madison Police Department at (608) 264-2677, or dial 911.

This document was adapted with permission from Eva Skolnik-Acker's (LICSW), Verbal De-Escalation Techniques for Defusing or Talking Down an Explosive Situation.