De-Escalating People in Crisis: Non-violent Verbal Intervention

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Karen D. Horan, Team Trainer
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

1. You ask a person if they need help, they shove a chair, swear, walk to the other side of the room and yell “Leave me alone”.

2. The person is complaining about not seeing the doctor. The more he talks about not getting in, the angrier he is getting. Seeing the doctor is not an option, since the doctor is not in.

3. You ask a person to leave the room. She does, but on her way out she turns off your light and states “I’ll make sure you go to hell”.
“De-escalation”

To decrease in intensity, magnitude, etc.
--from Random House Dictionary

To decrease the size, scope, or intensity of
(a war, for example)
--from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th Ed.)
Will My Actions Bring Me Emotionally Closer to Person, or Further Away?
SOURCES OF INDIVIDUAL STRESS

- Social life: dating, friendships, family involvement or lack of these, harassment
- Self image
- Life circumstances
- Drug & alcohol abuse
- Legal issues
- Work stress
- Physical health
- Mental functioning
- Emotional health
- Financial situation
Escalating Person’s View

Escalating person → You → What person wants: their unmet need/s met

What person wants:
their unmet need/s met
Collaborative View

Working together     To achieve     What person wants/needs to achieve

What’s Gained through Verbally Acting Out?

- Person gets something they want or out of something they don’t like
- Likely learned behavior
- People doing best they can to get their needs met

1. Love & belonging
2. Power
3. Freedom
4. Fun

People Are Venting Frustration through Displaced ANGER

- Anger is a response to feeling threatened, frightened, devalued, etc.

- People displace their anger on a “safe target.”
De-escalating the Situation

- Be aware of person’s anxiety level

- Notice when situation first escalates
  - Louder voice
  - Fidgeting, verbal sounds
  - Building energy

- Be proactive, not reactive
  - Attend to person before things escalate

- Be in control of yourself, while actively de-escalating person
First Things First....

Escalating person has increase in energy

Ask: **Am I in physical danger?**

Yes

No

**Crisis plan**
- Assume worst
- Isolate upset person
- Call for help
- Call 911

Review physical environment
- Escape route / exit
- Personal space

**De-escalation**
1. Check your approach
2. Check environment
3. Work on non-verbals
4. Verbal de-escalation
1. “Can I?....”

- Avoid criticizing?
- Avoid being judgmental?
- Keep from trying to control person?
- Keep myself removed from conflict?
- Believe people using anger have right to make decisions about how they meet their needs?
- Try to see situation from escalating person’s point of view & understand what needs s/he is trying to satisfy?
- Remember to put professional role ahead of personal feelings?

From: Olver’s Self-Assessment
2. **Environment**

- Cramped room?
- Overcrowded?
- Other staff visible?
- Staff same gender, race?
- Other clients involved?
- Person kept waiting / ignored?
- Where is exit? Is it being blocked by anything or anyone?
- Tables / chairs? Can they be used for safety?
- Weapons present?
Violence Reduction Strategies

- Limit stimulation, people & traffic in area
- Involve other team members with whom person has positive relationship.
De-Escalating Techniques

- Give person plenty of personal space
  - Arm’s length and a step

- Allow frustrated person time to vent
  - Yelling, talking & physical movement use stored energy

- Ignore personal verbal “attacks”
  - Q-TIP: “Quit taking it personally
    It’s not about you!”
Listen

Listening is an action

Listen to person’s frustration & emphasize with their plight

Understand how they see situation

> Do not argue with their reality

What is it they want/need & aren’t getting?

Address their concerns

Offer solutions or alternatives

> Set limits
Reflective Statements

- Mirror back what you’re hearing is going on

- Allow further explanation of “the issue” by not inserting your “stuff” (rules etc.)

- Avoid: criticizing, questioning, arguing, blaming, shaming, threatening, rationalizing, warning, directing, giving advice, reasoning, withdrawing, lecturing, judging

- Listen for: feelings, themes, motivations
TIPS: Verbal Strategies

- **Set limits**
  - **Reasonable** - outline consequences that will come from behavior (positives first)
  - **Clear** - understood by person in crisis
  - **Enforceable** - consequence actually enforceable

- **Benefit to staff**: cognitive processes required to develop limits are in higher functioning area of brain which helps staff not get drawn into crisis

- **Restate common goals**
Focus on Person, Not Rules

- People don’t care about rules/policies of when upset. They care about meeting their own needs & symptom relief.

- Phrase issues based on purpose (safety, health care issue, etc.)---not because it’s rule/policy.
  - “Why don’t you come inside so a car doesn’t run into you here (in the parking lot)”
3. **Non-Verbal Communication**

- Project confidence; not confrontation.

- Keep gestures small.
  
  Remember **nonverbal communication comes before verbal**

- Space

- Assertive posture

- Voice steady

- Eye contact; no staring

- Safe stance
Risk Factors for Physical Violence

- Past history of violence
- Suicidal tendencies
- Med compliance / changes
- Substance abuse
- Patterns
- Triggers, e.g. loss of loved one
RED ZONE

ASK: Am I in physical danger?

Yes
Use emergency plan

Person is experiencing:
Fear
Frustration
Paranoia
Confusion
Humiliation

No
Check my approach

Use:
Reflective statements
Not defending rules
Accepting criticism
Not arguing
Offering to help
Using kind language
Providing options
Acknowledging
Apologizing
Verbal Acting Out Level: Person Loses Control

1. Need to remain professional & in control of self
   - It’s not personal

2. Use calm voice with simple statements
   - Person cannot process as well as normal
   - IQ has dropped 30-40 points

3. Help person get in control
   “I want to hear what you have to say but I can’t do it when you are screaming.”
Re-establish Therapeutic Rapport

- Person fears after “loosing control” they will be rejected

- Reassure person of desire to help as long as they can respect guidelines of agency/ household/ employer, etc.

- Discuss need for person to address frustrations before they lose control.
Scenarios

Facilitators: Divide people into team of two or more. Have the team’s draw a scenario and discuss it among themselves.

After 2 minutes have the first team (decided by you) give the group a synopsis of the scenario and list two things they could do in the situation to help calm the person. Give each person one point for each thing they state if it is correct. Team with most points wins.
References & Recommended Reading


First Things First…..

1. Think safety
2. What’s the problem?
3. What choices & options are there?
4. What’s my role?
When Do People Become Violent?

DeBecker’s “JACA” formula:

Justified

No Alternative

No Regard for Consequences

Able

Adapted from DeBecker, G. (1997). The Gift of Fear
POSSIBLE CAUSES OF ACTING-OUT

- Frustration or Anger
  - Over-desire or needs not being met

- Retribution
  - Directed towards person, team member or agency

- Loss of Control
  - Medical issues, insufficient coping skills, social conditioning

- Displaced Anger

- Low tolerance for boredom
  - No patience

- Stressed, pushed, confused

- Bio-physiological reasons
  - Meds, hormonal changes, physical conditions, pain
Practice

- You’re stupid!
- Why do I have to do this?
- This is dumb!
- Who are you to tell me what to do?
- You’re an idiot!
- What’s your problem?
- What are you looking at?
- You’re a liar!
- It’s your fault
Practice

☐ You social workers are all the same.

☐ What are you, a psychologist or something?

☐ What, you’ve never had a drink or two?

☐ I don’t need you telling me what to do.

☐ I’m ok just the way I am, thank you.

☐ You’re so dumb!

☐ You’re ugly

☐ Get out of my face!

☐ So you think you’re tough, huh?