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

*(prepared by NASW's Committee for the Study and Prevention of Violence Against Social Workers)*

When a potentially violent situation threatens to erupt on the spot and no weapon is present, verbal de-escalation techniques are appropriate.

There are two important concepts to keep in mind:
1. 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.

2. De-escalation techniques are abnormal. We are driven by adrenalin to fight or flight when scared. However, in de-escalation, we can do neither. 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 Worker in Control of Him/Her Self

1. Appear calm, centered and self-assured even though you don’t feel it. Anxiety can make the client 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 see the client (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. Become aware of any resources available for back up. Know that you can always leave, tell the person to leave, or call the police, 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 client 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 your client.

4. Do not maintain constant eye contact. Allow the client 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 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 fill out these g-d forms?"). This is a real information-seeking question. DO NOT answer abusive questions (e.g. "Why are all social workers ass holes?”). This question should get no response what so ever.

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 our meeting calmly or would you prefer to stop now and come back tomorrow 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 my staff.”)

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 client’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 telling you what they want you to know.

9. Suggest alternative behaviors where appropriate e.g., "Would you like to take a break and have a cup of coffee (tepid and in a paper cup) or some water?”

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! Tell the person to leave, escort him/her to the door, call for help or leave your-self and call the police.

***There is nothing magic about talking someone down. You are transferring your sense of calm, respectful, clear limit setting to the agitated person in the hope that he/she actually wishes to respond positively to your respectful attention. Do not be a hero and do not try de-escalation when a person has a gun. In that case, simply cooperate.***