Open Table Nashville’s Guide to De-Escalation

The purpose of this guide is to outline procedures for responding to situations that have the potential to escalate into violence. Safety is our top priority at all times. It is also important to respond to aggravated or violent situations in a professional and sensitive manner. Our friends on the streets are individuals who deal with grave physical and emotional difficulties daily and deserve to be treated with the dignity, respect, and compassion.

Stress & Extenuating Circumstances
When serving our friends, it is important to keep in mind the extremely adverse living conditions and backgrounds people come from. Stressful living situations break down morale and social behaviors such as courtesy and patience. Under these circumstances, it can be challenging to respond well to such a person. If the person is involved with drugs or alcohol, suffers from a mental health issues, or has a serious traumatic or antisocial background, they can be especially difficult. Another factor exacerbating a person’s frustration is the fact that they may frequently interact with a multitude of private and public agencies to get basic needs met. Consequently, their frustration level often becomes elevated, even in the smallest of conflicts or misunderstandings. By the time that they come to work with us, they may be—understandably—in the mood to react negatively towards conflict and/or others.

Although a person’s negative behavior may appear unwarranted, this behavior may be a learned survival technique and may have resulted from past trauma. Through hard living, some people have found that an aggressive, demanding behavior will get their needs met no matter how inappropriate. In addition, there are individuals who blame the system for everything that has happened to them. These people give up very easily using passive-aggressive behaviors (i.e. walking out) to express frustration.

It is important to remember never to take a person’s negative or aggressive behavior personally. There are reasons for the person’s frustrations and behavior and 99.99% of the time, you are not the reason. Regardless of the person’s actions, it is imperative that the reactions of staff and volunteers do not encourage further negative behaviors or responses. Instead, we can employ simple intervention strategies when a person begins to act in aggravated, aggressive, or inappropriate ways.
Guidelines for Addressing Aggravated Friends

Strategies for responding to aggravated people should begin with the least invasive tactic for calming the person and not advance to the next level unless absolutely necessary. The three levels of intervention are:

**Level 1: Prevention**
**Level 2: De-Escalation**
**Level 3: Action Focused On Safety**

Our goal of preventing violence can be achieved by effectively employing these basic steps: self awareness, observation, assessment, and skilled listening, communication, and action.

**LEVEL 1: PREVENTION**

The first and best method for responding well to physically or emotionally assaultive behavior is to anticipate and prevent. We can do this through self awareness, observation, and assessment of needs.

**Self Awareness.** Take a deep breath. How is your body reacting to this situation? Are you able to respond in a present, centered, and calm way? Is everything tense or are you able to be open and relaxed with your body language? If you intervene, introduce yourself by telling the person your name, who you are and that you’re there to help. If you can’t respond, it’s okay—find someone else who can.

**Observation.** Always pay attention to the following warning signals that may hint of escalating tensions:
- Defiant attitude
- Excessive swearing
- Aggressive or fidgety motions
- Unusual demands
- Increase or decrease in voice volume
- Challenging demeanor
- Pacing, deep sighs
- Clenched fists, tight jaw
- Advance or retreat actions

**Assessment.** What is the person telling you about their needs through their behavior, words and body language? Can we meet these needs? If not, what options can we offer them? What are they trying to gain? What are they trying to avoid? Is the person’s thinking impaired by drugs, alcohol, or severe mental health issues? If so, they may respond in unpredictable or illogical ways. Keep assessing throughout the encounter. Is the way you’re responding helping? If not, adjust your response or find someone else who can help.
LEVEL 2: DE-ESCALATION

Skilled listening. The listening and attending skills of therapeutic communication are the most effective tools of averting violent behavior. Even though you may be having a stressful day, remember to clear your mind and pay attention to what the other person is trying to tell you. Practice reflective listening. This involves finding out information about what a person is thinking and feeling, and what may be done about a problem. Don’t assume you know. Listen carefully to what is said. Simply spending a few minutes interacting with the person may prevent an altercation. The more information you have, the better you will be able to work toward a solution.

Steps for Effective Listening
- Tune in to your personal anxiety level. Assess your feelings and ask yourself if your feelings are interfering with your communication skills.
- Acknowledge the other person’s feelings. Identify the anxiety or anger and acknowledge the potential for violence. You might say, “You seem very upset” or “I’m concerned that you might hurt yourself or others here.”
- Try to elicit the deeper issue. What is behind their anger?
- Be sincere and assertive. Convey calmness, confidence and a willingness to help.

Communicating. Some researchers say over 90% of communication happens through our tone of voice and body language. That means that less than 10% comes from words. While talking, take an open stance and be aware of your voice. The tone of your voice will have an immediate effect upon the person. It is imperative that your voice remains calm and soft, yet firm. De-escalating relies on listening and is dependent upon embodying and demonstrating a positive regard and respect for others. If you become angry or aggressive like the person, you will be giving away your control of the situation.

The Don’ts and Do’s of Therapeutic, Effective Talking

The Don’ts — Verbal
- Don’t threaten the person or demand obedience.
- Don’t argue with the person about the facts of a situation. Their version of reality may be skewed, but what does it tell you about where they are and what they need or want?
- Do not offer lengthy explanations or excuses.
- Don’t tell the person that they have no reason to be angry.
- Don’t try to control the person or tell them to “calm down.”
- Don’t become defensive and insist that you are right. Don’t go against or over them.
- Don’t offer placating responses such as “Everything will be OK” or “You’re not the only one.”
- Don’t use your title or authority.
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- Never challenge the person or call their bluff. Never criticize or laugh at the person.

The Do’s — Verbal
- Do ask, “What can I do to help?”
- Do use reflective listening. Help them feel heard. Reflect back what they are saying to you through their words and body language: “On top of having a terrible day, you’re upset because you feel that people here haven’t been treating you with respect.”
- Do ask open-ended questions and brief, direct statements.
- Do ask opinions: “In what way do you feel that we could help you?” or “How would you like to see the situation resolved?”
- Do offer choices and alternatives: “If being here is not working out for you, may we assist in referring you somewhere?” Try to leave the person with options.
- Try to create rapport that helps them feel like you’re on their team. Ask, “How can we work together to resolve this issue or at least make it better?”
- Do encourage verbalization of anger rather than acting out. (Express your limitation with this verbalization, however, such as expressions or language that is too offensive and not necessary.)
- Do provide reassurance while setting limits and identifying behavioral expectations in a kind manner.
- Do assume that the person has a real concern and that they are understandably upset.
- Do recognize and acknowledge the person’s right to their feelings.

LEVEL 3: ACTION FOCUSED ON SAFETY

Taking Action. Everything that we have learned so far about interacting with difficult people becomes part of the process and culminates when we take action. A key concept in de-escalation is to try to decrease the person’s sense of powerlessness or helplessness in order to minimize his or her frustrations. Communicate verbally and nonverbally that the person is responsible for his or her own actions. The following steps promote successful interactions:

The Don’ts and Do’s of Successful Interactions

The Don’ts — Actions
- Don’t ignore the person.
- Don’t come too close to the person or stand/hover over them.
- Don’t analyze, interpret, or judge the person’s motivations.
  Try to observe and assess without assuming or projecting.
- Don’t take the person’s anger or frustration personally.

The Do’s — Actions
- Do unplug the power struggle.
- Follow your instinct and intuition. Use common sense.
- Detect danger signals. Are you safe? Is the person safe? Are others in the area safe?
- Prioritize safety and know your surroundings:
  - Open the door to the room.
  - Identify an escape route convenient to you and the person.
  - Position yourself closest to the room exit without making them feel trapped in.
  - Assess the environment for potential weapons. Keep furniture positioned with safety in mind.
- Identify a code word that will alert the need for additional help.
- Ask if the person will sit down with you. Or try walking with them. If they smoke, can you find a cigarette for them?
- Establish and maintain eye contact.
- Observe social distance. Don’t touch the person.
- Decrease environmental stimuli by:
  ▪ Minimizing the presence of distractions and other people.
  ▪ Turning down any loud music or turning off the TV.
- Make sure someone knows where you are at all times, but promote the person’s privacy when possible.
- Attempt to meet as many of their reasonable requests as possible.
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
- Remember who you are. Practice professional and sensitive behavior.

If the person’s thinking is impaired by drugs, alcohol, or severe mental health issues, they may respond in unpredictable or illogical ways. Arguing against them or trying to use logic rarely (if ever) works in these situations. Speak slowly and calmly. Repeat yourself using simple, direct statements. Try using brief, close-ended questions to gain their participation in resolving the situation. You might say, “Can you help me/us make sure that you/everyone here is safe?” or “Will you be able to calm down enough to stay here or would you like to seek professional help?”

If what you’re doing isn’t working and things continue to escalate, see if you can pull in outside help. Is there someone else they would be willing to talk with? Is there someone in the area or someone they know whom they could call? Are things at the point where you need to call for emergency help? Calling the police is always a last resort, but in situations where safety is compromised, do not hesitate to call for their support.

SUMMARY

These principles, guidelines, and procedures are basic suggestions to assist in averting abusive and violent behavior. The purpose of this guide is to effectively serve our friends and protect staff, volunteers, and others from dangerous behavior. When put into practice, these steps of observing, assessing, listening, talking, and acting can help achieve our goal of preventing violent behavior. Using common sense while practicing courtesy, concern, and compassion will greatly enhance everyone’s experience. Always keep in mind the adverse living conditions that our friends who experience homelessness deal with on a daily basis. If we can be empathetic and treat them with respect and dignity, we have not only provided good care, but perhaps we have helped them to feel less powerless and break cycles of negative behavior in their lives.

Adapted from Wasatch Homeless Health Care Program
www.opentablenashville.org