

How to De-escalate a Tense Interaction

It is an unfortunate sign of our times that helping professionals – service providers, community health workers, nurses, physicians, physical therapists, dentists, assistants of all stripes – routinely encounter hostile and aggressive people in the course of our workday. We attend to people who need help but rebuff or reject it. In some instances, the behavior we face is threatening, violating, and violent. This is clearly intolerable, indefensible, and infuriating.

These are some ideas about how to de-escalate interactions that have become tense while taking a firm position that **safety comes first. That is, empathy can wait.**

1. Notice the physical and emotional cues you are sending that tell you that you are upset even if you are remaining calm. Physical cues might be that your neck flushes, a knot forms in your stomach, or your heart races. Emotionally, you may feel numb or agitated or afraid. It is important to recognize the signals you send and use them as a warning that you are in an interaction that is uncomfortable or even unsafe.
2. Some negative interactions cannot be salvaged. It is important to distinguish between someone who is upset and “triggered” but still able to engage in a respectful conversation and someone who has become hostile and aggressive. In a setting where there are many other staff, this is the time to move away and notify other team members. If you are out in the field, whether you are alone or with another person, this is a situation to leave. This is exactly the kind of situation in which the expression, “Empathy can wait” needs to apply.
3. If you are encountering someone who shows signs that they are having trouble hearing what you are saying, but they are fairly calm and still respectful, look for signs as you proceed in your interaction that things are turning negative. That is, they have a poor ability to manage emotional responses. Signs might be: the person’s fists are clenched, they are talking very loudly or very quietly, they appear confused, or their speech is rapid. These are signs that you probably need to end the interaction.
4. If the interaction seems to be turning around into a more rational exchange, here are some tips that can help continue to de-escalate negative behavior:
 - a. Maintain a safe distance, creating at least three feet of distance between you and the other person so that each of you has a demarcated personal space.
 - b. Attend to what the person is trying to say about their experience. Do not make a negative judgmental statement.
 - c. Keep your non-verbal communication -- your tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions -- as neutral as possible.

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- d. If it feels safe, ignore verbal challenges and try to answer what seems to be of most concern to the person.
- e. Allow pauses and even silence since the person may need these to make sense of what you are saying.

These four tips are suggestions for techniques that may de-escalate negative interactions. Each person will develop their own strategies for what works best for them through a trial-and-error process. Above all, your mantra should be: *"I need to be safe."*

After a difficult exchange three things are imperative:

1. **Ground yourself:** Everyone should have one or two surefire ways to self-soothe that require no special tools or devices, that are simple and always at hand. It might be singing at the top of your lungs, a minute of deep breathing or counting backwards by three.
2. **De-brief:** Tell someone about what happened. If someone was there with you, discuss what went wrong, what it felt like to you, and what might improve a next encounter.
3. **Take care of yourself:** Know how you are going to practice self-compassion and self-care.

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