



Assertive Communication: De-Escalation

What is De-escalation?

De-escalation is when we use our assertive communication skills to:

- calm down someone who is agitated, angry or temporarily out of control
- take charge of a situation to reduce potential violence
- deal with past hurt, take action in the present, and move toward a future solution

De-escalation is most useful with strangers, but we may occasionally need to use it with acquaintances, friends, or family. If you find yourself often having to de-escalate someone in your life, this may be a sign of an unsafe relationship. Most adults are able to self-regulate their emotions (at least enough to refrain from violence) in most situations. Lack of regulation in adults is typically indicative of people who have experienced significant trauma, either in the distant or recent past. This is an explanation, but is not an excuse – people are still responsible for their own behavior.

Examples of using de-escalation:

- Convincing an assailant to refrain from further violence by forging an alliance with them
- Helping a client calm down so they can remain in a facility long enough to get effective help
- Helping the victim of a vehicular accident to calm down and assess the extent of their injuries

The Biological Basis of De-Escalation

De-escalation is about calming someone down who is temporarily out of control, which means that it is about helping someone get back into their “thinking” brain from their “emergency” brain. This “emergency” brain is very similar to the brains of other mammals – which means that some of the same strategies that you use to calm a frightened or enraged animal can be effective against a human: speaking calmly, giving them a way out, and using non-threatening body language.

The Thousand Waves Approach:

- **Believe that you can have an impact** even if the person remains upset with you. Respect their right to be angry as long as they are not being violent (emotionally or physically).
- **Acknowledge your feelings** and stay calm, switching strategies if you feel you are being manipulated, abused, or are in danger.
- **Choose another strategy** if efforts to calm someone down aren’t working. You may choose to set a boundary, leave, fight to protect yourself, or seek help. With intimates, de-escalation almost always also involves boundary-setting.
- **Take responsibility for self de-escalation.** If you find it difficult to control your words or actions when angry or fearful, seek help. It takes courage to do this, so be gentle with yourself. Avoid self-blame while accepting responsibility.

De-Escalation Strategies

Internal

- **Trust your instincts** about what is going on. Adjust your approach as needed.
- **TAKE TEN:** De-escalate yourself first if necessary.
- **Assess your emotions and breathe to stay calm.** The other person may start mirroring your emotional state.
- **Decide when it is over.** If efforts to calm them down aren't working, it may be time to end the interaction, take a break, and try again later. Or it may be time to get to a safe place, end the friendship, quit the job, or leave the relationship.

External

- **Project calm and concern.** Make a human connection with the other person, and avoid letting their emotional state determine yours
- **Let them know you're an ally.** A person who is escalating is feeling alone and unheard. Letting them know you're an ally and there to help goes a long way to helping them calm down
- **Listen with your ears:** people get louder when they don't feel heard.
- **Listen with your body:** body language and facial expressions are key to what the other person hears. Express concern and attention by making eye contact, uncrossing arms, and keeping a neutral expression.
- **Change the immediate environment:** move away from the scene or accident, go for a walk, or sit down somewhere comfortable
- **Shift the power dynamic** by shifting your posture (sitting if you're standing, and vice versa)
- **Don't block exits** – yours or theirs
- **Protect yourself.** Keep a safe distance from the other person. Angle your body so you don't 'absorb' the anger

Verbal

- **Apologize** if appropriate to the situation. "I am sorry that I spilled my coffee on you." You can also apologize without taking direct responsibility: "I'm really sorry that happened to you."
- **Acknowledge their feelings** to let them know they are being heard. "I know you're really angry right now. I would be too in your situation."
- **Ask questions to focus their attention**, especially if their bodies have been harmed or threatened. After an accident: "Are you injured?"