



Verbal De-escalation and the Keys to Assault Prevention

Scarcely a week goes by when we do not read about or witness on the nightly news cases of how *not* to resolve conflict. Time and again we are witness to the aftermath of arguments and conflicts with people that result in tragic acts of physical violence. Crime prevention philosophy and practice emphasize and demonstrate that almost all interpersonal violence is preventable if key verbal de-escalation strategies are practiced.

What we want to emphasize is that most violence is preventable and that the chances or odds of violence are greatly reduced if people practice good crisis communication skills. Regardless of your profession – law enforcement, retail, hotel services, health care, grocery and produce – the same techniques and principles apply. I have outlined some verbal de-escalation strategies and some of the triggering events of precipitating factors that may contribute to violence.

1. You have one opportunity to make a good first impression. Always try to make a positive first impression with every client/individual that you interact with. How you act – your choice of words, how you stand – all these factors contribute heavily to a successful outcome.

Keys to making a good first impression:

- A) Give the individual your undivided attention.
 - B) Greet an individual using their name if possible.
 - C) Respect an individual's personal space. Keep in mind that a fearful person may need more personal space.
 - D) Be aware of your "body language." Do not cross your arms, point a finger, roll your eyes or appear disinterested or apathetic. Non-verbal communication is huge. Letting an escalated, angry individual know that they are both respected and taken seriously will greatly reduce the likelihood of dangerous escalation.
2. Try to avoid giving an individual an ultimatum. "It's my way or the highway." Instead, give an individual choices, options and time to make the right decision.
 3. Ask an angry individual, "May I help you?" and ask them if you can take notes. Taking notes will let an individual know that you are serious about listening to them, and that you value their input. This can be a huge calming factor.
 4. Allow venting. If an individual is yelling/venting, remember that they are responding verbally, which is the desired outcome. We have two ways to resolve any conflict – verbal and physical. We want verbal resolution every time.
 5. Use restatement to clarify and verify messages. Restatement will tell an individual that you are listening, and that you value their input. This is another effective de-escalation tool that benefits everyone.

6. Avoid using jargon or big words. Speak calmly, clearly, and in a concise fashion.
7. Avoid words like “you” and “why.” Words have power and we want to use words like “we” and “what.” “You” and “why” may immediately put an individual on the defensive.
8. Never agree to meet an angry or escalated individual in a closed office area where help is not readily available. Avoid one-on-one confrontations with angry individuals.
9. Practice teamwork – true teamwork. Always let a co-worker or teammate know when you are meeting with an upset individual. True teamwork supports everyone.
10. Honor your intuition – your “gut” instinct. If an individual or a situation seems wrong and you are uncomfortable, act on this feeling. Leave the area and get help. Your intuition is there to serve you. Do not minimize or ignore it.
11. This is a key point – Assume that every individual you interact with has some precipitating factors or triggering events that are driving their behavior. A precipitating factor or trigger event is an event in an individual’s life that we may have no knowledge about. Precipitating factors include but are not limited to:
 - A) Financial crisis – economics. This is a huge factor. Recent economic reports confirm that the American middle class have been in a negative downturn economically for over two decades, a spiral that rivals if not eclipses middle class losses suffered during the Great Depression. This economic downturn is a “triggering event” that is affecting more and more people.
 - B) Major illness
 - C) Death in the family
 - D) Unemployment – recent firing. Again, economics.
 - E) Alcoholism – substance abuse. Alcohol is a huge causal factor for violence.
 - F) Divorce – family strife
 - G) Post-traumatic stress
 - H) Traffic
 - I) Work stress – loss of promotion
 - J) Mental illness – disrupted ideation

There are many more. The crucial point here is to recognize that almost every individual we intervene with may have and probably does have life pressures and stressors that may be pushing them to the breaking point. Indeed, the Federal Government reports that 1 in 4 adults suffer from some form of mental illness, and the number is increasing. One can argue that the number of – or the magnitude of precipitating factors and triggering events that impact people today are at an unprecedented level never seen before. By treating people with respect and making a good first impression we will be able to prevent and minimize the potential for violence.

