



## **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 can be used with people we know—including friends, family, coworkers, fellow students—as well as strangers. It is a good strategy to use before someone gets angry, or when someone is just starting to get upset. It can also be used in very intense situations.

Examples of using de-escalation:

- Acknowledging that your words or actions hurt someone, and apologizing
- Recognizing the emotional or physical harm someone experienced and taking action to rectify it
- Talking to a client or customer who is dissatisfied and working towards a resolution
- Staying calm in a volatile situation and helping the other person calm down before they resort to violence

### **The Thousand Waves Approach:**

- **Challenge the prevailing culture** of fighting fire with fire. Try to find a peaceful solution, and commit to taking action even if you are angry or frightened.
- **Know that most forms of violence start small.** If possible, interrupt violence in the early stages, before the other person is yelling, making threats, or before the situation gets physical.
- **Use across the spectrum of violence.** De-escalation can be effective in situations that run the gamut from irritating to dangerous to life threatening. Use it with family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers. Use it when the injury is emotional or physical.
- **Believe that you can have an impact** even if the person remains upset with you.
- **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 them down aren't working. You may choose to set a boundary, leave, fight to protect yourself, or seek help.
- **Practice your skills!** Start small. Note the everyday situations you witness where you can practice staying calm and helping someone else calm down. Exercise your de-escalation “muscles” so they will be ready when you need them.



## De-Escalation Strategies

De-escalating a situation uses emotional, mental, physical and verbal tools.

### Internal

- **Trust your instincts** about what is going on. Adjust your approach as needed.
- **TAKE TEN:** prepare your mind and body by taking a few seconds to ground yourself
- **Assess your emotions and breathe to stay calm.** Temporarily let go of feelings—such as fear or rage—that may not serve the situation. Know you can vent or process it later.
- **Stay focused on your goals.** Set an achievable goal for the interaction, and avoid getting pulled off course. It may not end in perfect harmony, but try to resolve what you can.
- **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.** If you don't feel this way, be an actor!
- **Listen with your ears:** pay attention to what they say to get more information and remember they may need to vent their frustrations.
- **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
- **Protect yourself.** Keep a safe distance from the other person. Angle your body so you don't 'absorb' the anger. Don't block their escape; know where your access to escape is.

### Verbal

- **Apologize** if appropriate to the situation. "I am sorry that I spilled my coffee on you."
- **Acknowledge their feelings** to let them know they are being heard. "I hear that you are frustrated that my dog dug in your garden again."
- **Ask questions** to find out more. After an accident: "Are you injured?" With a client: "I want to hear more. Can you explain the concerns you have with our policy?"
- **Repeat back your understanding** so they know you've heard them: "I heard you were upset I knocked over the plant on your desk because it was a special gift. Is that correct?"
- **Say what you can do right now.** You may be able to offer several solutions or need to talk to a supervisor/teacher/boss to get more help: "I am sorry I knocked over your tray of lunch food. Can I share my lunch with you? If you want another lunch, lets talk to the head of the cafeteria to see what they can do to help."
- **Move toward a resolution,** knowing that you sometimes cannot solve the situation: To a roommate: "I am sorry that I forgot to mail the rent check. I will drop it off in the morning and explain my mistake to the landlord." To a client: "I or my supervisor will call you by Friday. Here is the phone number in case you have questions before then."