

# Defusing Aggression

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Whether it is a client, customer, stranger or an employee, given the right provocation, and in the absence of inhibitors, anyone is capable of acts of violence. Sometimes someone may escalate very quickly for no apparent reason. Other times there is a progression of thinking and action that occurs. The following steps show the potential progression of violence for an individual.

Grievance: A feeling of being wronged in some way occurs. The perceived injustice requires the individual to pursue justice or some way of coping in order to bring balance to the situation.

Ideation: The belief grows that aggression is acceptable or that only aggressive actions or words can correct the wrong done to the individual. At this point the individual is growing in their feelings that aggressive actions or words are justifiable for their cause or situation.

Anger Leakage: Progression of negative attitudes and beliefs begins to affect behaviour privately or publicly. This may be in the form of cynical comments to others. Anger leakage begins to manifest itself in some of the following manners: reddened face, glaring, raising of voice, excessive questioning.

Defiance: The violent individual a) breaches the target's personal space, positioning himself/herself in close proximity to the victim. Or, b) the violent individual begins to act out their frustrations by: shouting and yelling, slamming doors, throwing objects, pointing fingers, pounding or clenching of fists, etc.

Confrontation: An assault or violent altercation occurs and continues to escalate unless stopped. In this stage they demonstrate lack of response to verbal commands, physical hostility and complete unreasonableness.

For those who work in an environment where there is potential for violence, it is important to be aware of defusing strategies and techniques. While no two situations are ever the same, there are some concepts that may be utilized when encountering a potentially violent situation.

### Safe Distance

Safe distance refers to the minimum gap between you and the perpetrator. Understanding that an aggressor can cover much ground if attacking, a safe distance should be maintained between yourself and the aggressor to compensate for their heightened reaction time. (Please note that personal space varies with culture and age.) A safe and comfortable distance separating you and the individual is around two arm lengths away.

### Territory Awareness

When an individual's anger is heightened, sometimes they unconsciously or consciously take possession of a room or space as a way of having control of at least one aspect of their situation. In this scenario, it is wise to recognize their territory when approaching them.

### Frontal Turn

When facing an angry person, a square shouldered stance can unconsciously seem like a threat. Using a frontal turn involves shifting one side of your body to a 45 degree angle so that your body is not squared off directly facing the aggressor. This stance also allows for your body to be better grounded and does not expose your torso as much.

### Acknowledgment of Signs

Trying to avoid acknowledging someone's agitation often just leads to further escalation. If the signs are obvious that someone is agitated, acknowledge it.

### Tone, Volume and Rate of Voice

Try to use a quieter voice (but steady) when trying to keep a situation from escalating. Sometimes the other person will begin to match your voice and start to calm down.

### Brain Shifting – Right Brain/Left Brain

Everyone's brain is made up of two sides. Each side focuses on different activities. The left side focuses on logic, language and numbers; whereas the right side focuses on imagination, color, emotion and pictures. In an intensely emotional situation, the brain relies heavily on the right side where emotions are focused. Your goal is to use language, which calls on the left side of the brain to help shift the brain's activity away from the right side. Asking any question that shifts people away from their emotional state may be helpful.

### Questioning

The purpose of questioning is to probe for more information with the intention of better understanding the other person. *Closed-ended* questions are not very helpful because they only allow for a "yes" or "no" response. Asking *open-ended* questions are helpful because they invite a longer response, and allow for more options regarding how to respond. Two key words in open-ended questions are *what* and *how*. Stay away from *why* questions as people can become stuck on the *whys*.

### Finding Common Ground

When someone is being hostile towards you they are often expecting you to defend yourself. The last thing they expect is for you to agree with them. If you can find something to agree on, no matter how small, it can help create a feeling that you understand.

### Use of We

It can be helpful to give the impression that you are working *with* a person and not against them. By replacing words like you and I with we, you can give the impression that you want to be cooperative and are working towards the same goal.

If you are in a conversation that continues to escalate, you should consider withdrawing yourself from the interaction. When closing an encounter, the person trying to diffuse the incident needs to assess the individual involved, deciding what the safest next step should be. If it is necessary, firmly interrupt the discussion in a respectful and calm manner, informing the individual that, for now, the conversation must end. If the individual persists, warn them that you will call for help and/or the police and then be prepared to do so.

### ***About the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc.***

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