



De-escalating
Conflict
in the Healthcare
Setting

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A National Trend

Conflict in the healthcare arena is on the rise. Once considered safe havens, health care organizations are facing a steady increase of conflict in various forms including the most extreme expressions of conflict--verbal and physical violence.

Preventing violence in the health care setting. The Joint Commission,
Sentinel Event Alert, Issue 45, June 3, 2010.

Conflict happens....

Patients and their families may sometimes present us with challenging and potentially dangerous situations. Loss, fear, chronic pain, chemical dependency/withdrawal, or psychiatric condition can lead to difficult behaviors.

While no training, much less online learning, can substitute for experience and judgment, the following slides may provide a useful starting point for the de-escalating process.

Keep in mind...

Although patient behavior may escalate very quickly—zero to 60 in seconds—you probably cannot, in one step, make a very agitated person completely calm. It may be more productive to think about how you can make the situation just a little better, one step at a time.

Defuse.....

As long as the person is not an immediate danger to self or others, there is time to try to defuse the situation.

Whatever action you take (including doing nothing) may be helpful, have no effect, or make things worse. Pay close attention to the effect of your interventions and try something different if necessary.

A Few Basic De-escalation Skills

In a nutshell, *listening to the individual with empathy is a primary skill in moving a tense situation to a better place.* **Empathic listening** can be divided into a few basic skills:

- **Give your undivided attention**
- **Validate feelings**
- **Tolerate silences**
- **Be accepting and nonjudgmental**
- **Reflect the communication**

Give Your Undivided Attention

A grayscale photograph of a woman with long, dark hair, looking slightly to her right with a focused and attentive expression. Her hand is resting near her chin. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with other people.

Providing your full and genuine attention communicates respect and validation. Although verbalizing, *I hear you.* or *I'm listening.* can be helpful, making eye contact and using body language that indicates that you are listening with your whole body, may drop the crisis one small step.

Validate Feelings

Reflective feeling response is a simple skill to learn, but a challenging one to master. Listen to what the person is saying and focus on understanding her feelings.

My head is busy all the time. I can't shut it off!
That must really leave you exhausted.

I don't control anything in my life.
Wow, you must feel so frustrated.

Tolerate Silences

Silence is your friend! It can move confrontation to a gentler place all by itself.

If the patient does not immediately answer a question, he may be thinking or wanting to be sure he is communicating effectively.

Research shows that most people tend to start talking when silence lengthens. The crisis often drops down one more step!

Be Nonjudgmental

Whatever the person communicates to you, be sure that your words and body language communicate full acceptance.

The world is really messed up.

I get where you are coming from...

I get the message that you really don't care if I suffer.

I hear you. Let's see if we can get this to a better place.



Reflect the Communication



The only way to be sure what a person is trying to tell you is to ask.

I don't want to take this anymore.

Are you saying that you are tired of the pain?

No, I am sick of the roller coaster.

Help me understand what you mean by the roller coaster.

Pills and shakes and more pills and more pills and...

Remember...

If you do something or say something to de-escalate a tense situation, and it makes the crisis worse, stop and try something else.

Crisis resolves one small step at a time!

If your intervention brings some calm, you are on the right path. Try more of it!

Referral sources

- Know ahead of time how to keep yourself safe, (contact security, egress from a room, etc.).
- Know how to signal for help from other staff without escalating the crisis.
- Keep a list of professionals across disciplines that you can readily access for consultation or referral.