

# Service Recovery in Health Care

## Tips for De-escalation



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Hello! I'm Carrie Howard, program manager with Stratis Health, back again with the third session in our 4-part series on Service Recovery in Healthcare. This session describes the Crisis Prevention Institute's, or CPI's, top 10 de-escalation tips to help frontline staff to recognize highly emotional or agitated people and situations and calmly and confidently handle them in real time.

Different than the 8-steps to service recovery, these tips are applied as appropriate in whatever order and combination the situation requires and are deployed when stress and tensions are high. De-escalation skills are extra tools for your Service Recovery toolbox. Once a situation has successfully calmed, frontline staff may then apply the 8-Steps of service recovery to address the root cause of the initial emotional escalation in real time or to refer the person to appropriate department or organizational leader for further follow-up.

## What are they feeling?



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Body language and facial expression can tell us a lot about how someone might be feeling. These people's emotional states look very different. The person on the left looks like they may not be feeling well, or are very tired, or maybe disappointed. The person on the right, however, appears to be in a highly agitated state, perhaps extremely frustrated, angry, or maybe just received devastatingly sad news.

In healthcare, sometimes we deal with people that are in highly emotional or agitated states. We respond to highly distressed people differently. Your response in these situations is often the key to avoiding a physical confrontation with someone who has lost control of their behavior. CPI's Top 10 De-Escalation Tips will help you respond to difficult behavior in the safest, most effective way possible.

## CPI's Top 10 De-Escalation Tips

1. Be empathetic and nonjudgmental
2. Respect personal space
3. Use non-threatening nonverbal communication
4. Avoid overreacting
5. Focus on feelings
6. Ignore challenging questions
7. Set limits
8. Choose wisely what you insist upon
9. Allow silence for reflection
10. Allow time for decisions



The Crisis Prevention Institute, or CPI, offers their top 10 de-escalation tips free online. [Read tips] This session will discuss each of the tips and why and how to use them.

# Be Empathetic and Non-Judgmental



vs.



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## Tip #1 – Be Empathetic and Non-judgmental

When someone says or does something you perceive as weird or irrational, try not to judge or discount their feelings. Whether or not you think those feelings are justified, they're real to the other person. Pay attention to them. Keep in mind that whatever the person is going through, it may be the most important thing in their life at the moment.

Your body language, facial expressions, tone, and words can go a long way in conveying neutrality, empathy, and non-judgment. The images here are of the same person, but hold two entirely different feelings. The first looks like disagreement, disdain, or disgust – or in other words, judgment. The second however looks more like engaged interest and neutral active listening. Using empathetic words or phrases such as, “I hear you. If I’m understanding you correctly...” or “I’m sorry you are going through this” or “I’m here for you, what do you need right now?” can be very helpful.

## Respect Personal Space



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Next is to Respect Personal Space \_\_\_\_\_

Our instinct is often to offer a comforting pat the arm or shoulder or hug someone that is upset, but in emotionally escalated situations when people may not be in control of their emotions or behavior, this is not the appropriate approach. You must be aware of your proximity when interacting with someone in distress. If possible, stand 1 and a half to 3 feet away from a person who's escalating and ensure others keep their distance as well. Allowing personal space tends to decrease a person's anxiety and can help keep you and them safe. If you must enter someone's personal space to provide care, explain what you're doing so the person feels less confused and frightened and does not interpret your advance as a threat.

## Use Non-threatening Nonverbals



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Image by [Helena Jankovičová Kováčová](#) from [Pixabay](#)



### Use Non-threatening Non-verbals

Be aware of your position, posture, and your own emotional state when interacting with someone in distress. The more a person is in distress, the less they hear your words and the more they react to your nonverbal communication. Be mindful of your gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Keeping your tone and body language neutral and calm will go a long way toward defusing a situation.

These two pictures show a sharp contrast in body language – the first is very closed off; crossed arms can be perceived as intimidation, anger, and unwillingness to listen or be swayed. Alternatively, in the second picture, though this person is in PPE from head to toe, you can see they are smiling. This person looks friendly, open, interested, and eager to help.

# Avoid Overreacting



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The next de-escalation tip is to avoid overreacting.

It is perfectly normal for these situations to heighten your own anxiety, but don't panic. You have training and skills to help you in this exact situation! Remain calm, rational, and professional. While you can't control the person's behavior, how you respond to their behavior will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or defuses. Tell yourself that, "I can handle this" and "I know what to do" to help you maintain your own rationality and calm the person down.

# Focus on Feelings



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In escalated situations, we must focus on feelings.

Facts are important but how a person feels is the heart of the matter. Yet some people have trouble identifying how they feel about what's happening to them. Watch and listen carefully for the person's real message. Try saying something like, "That must be scary" or "I can see you're upset". Supportive words like these will let the person know that you understand what's happening and you may get a positive response.



# Ignore Challenging Questions



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The next tip is to Ignore Challenging Questions.

In this context, “challenging“ doesn’t mean thought provoking or difficult, but rather testing or questioning your power and authority. They might say something like, “You don’t even know what you’re doing, how did you ever get a job here?” or “who put you in charge?” or “Why can’t I talk to someone that matters?”

Engaging with people who ask challenging questions is rarely productive. When a person challenges your authority, redirect their attention to the issue at hand. Ignore the challenge, but not the person. Bring their focus back to how you can work together to solve the problem.

## Set Limits



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### Set limits

As a person progresses through a crisis, give them respectful, simple and reasonable limits and boundaries. Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences that will help steer them in the right direction, while still allowing some room for autonomy. A person who's upset may not be able to focus on everything you say. Be clear, speak simply, and offer the positive choice first.

## Choose Wisely What You Insist Upon

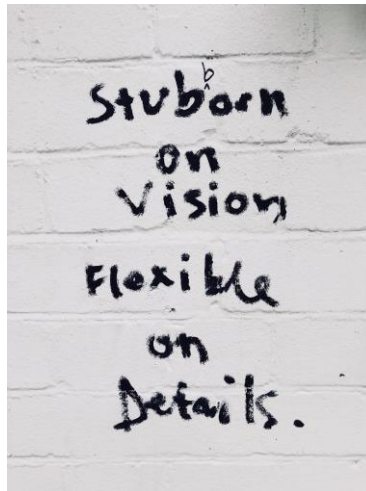


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Though it can be difficult, we must choose wisely what we insist upon when dealing with a distressed person.

It's important to be thoughtful in deciding which rules are negotiable and which are not. With the end goal or vision of safe and effective care, if you can offer a person options and flexibility, you may be able to avoid unnecessary altercations. For example, if a person gets agitated because they don't want to shower in the morning, can you allow them to choose the time of day and schedule that feels best for them?



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## Allow Silence for Reflection



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When emotions are running high, it is important to allow silence for reflection.

We've all experienced awkward silences. While it may seem counterintuitive to let moments of silence occur, sometimes it's the best choice. It can give a person a chance to reflect on what's happening and how he/she needs to proceed. Believe it or not, silence can be a powerful communication tool. Silence applies not only to your voice, but also to your body – fidgeting, multi-tasking, or changing locations can be distracting or interpreted as disinterest or even theat. Find your Zen, or state of quiet and calm attentiveness.

## Allow Time for Decisions



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Finally, allow time for decisions.

When a person is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them a few moments to think through what you and they have said. A person's stress rises when they feel rushed. Allowing time in a safe place brings calm. Take all the time that is needed.

## Summary

- There are approaches to recognize, address, and de-escalate problems in real time
- Service recovery, including de-escalation skills, needs to be practiced and embedded in everyday practice



In the light of the many recent hardships, it feels almost glib to suggest that de-escalation is really ever this simple. The truth is that there is no magic recipe for keeping troubling things from happening in the world. But there are ways that you can respond to these kinds of events that are constructive, positive, and impact real resolution. That's why CPI's tips are not so much a series of steps as it is a philosophy for viewing humanity as good and full of potential. These de-escalation tips from CPI are about support, not suppression, and about seeing each other with the humanity and compassion that each of us wants to be seen with.

In summary, there are approaches to recognize, address, and de-escalate problems in real time. These approaches are skills that need to be practiced and embedded in everyday practice.

Thank you for your time and effort to ensure excellent service in our healthcare settings!