

DE-ESCALATION: DEALING WITH AN ANGRY PERSON

THE BIG PICTURE

- People who are coping with substance use and related issues often experience high levels of stress.
- When people are stressed or feel that they aren't in control of their circumstances, they sometimes become angry.
- Using de-escalation techniques is usually the best way to resolve an interaction with an angry person.

DEALING WITH ANGRY INDIVIDUALS

Individuals who are living with substance use disorder face many stresses in their daily lives. Any given individual may be dealing with some combination of physical and mental health concerns, stigma and social isolation, financial issues, unemployment, strained relationships with family members, child care or custody issues, and many other stressors. When a person exceeds the limits of their ability to cope with stress, even a minor additional frustration can be enough to provoke anger. When a person becomes angry their thinking narrows, their communication skills decrease, and they display resentment toward the world.

An angry person may lash out—verbally or even physically—against the person or situation that provided the final bit of frustration that provoked their anger, but it is important to remember that most people who become angry are dealing with accumulated stress. Remembering this can help you to respond calmly and to avoid viewing someone's anger as a personal attack, even though it might seem like it is focused on you.

For most of us, our first response to anger is to defend ourselves—to respond to angry or abusive language and an aggressive body posture with

harsh words and posturing of our own. When faced with an incensed person, however, it is important to take a moment for a mindful pause rather than simply reacting. Even a brief pause can help you to generate compassion and avoid escalating the situation by showing anger yourself. It allows you time to control your response so that you are able to respond with calmness and compassion instead of defensiveness or escalation.

Taking a moment to control your own emotional response can also allow you to more accurately assess your own level of safety. While de-escalating a situation and restoring a workable relationship with an irate individual is always ideal, most important is avoiding putting yourself at risk of serious injury. If a person uses force or violence, or makes credible threats, you should remove yourself from the situation and ask for assistance if necessary.

If you believe that you can de-escalate the situation safely, begin by focusing on maintaining your own self-control. Your body language is particularly important, so examine how you are presenting yourself. Clenching your hands and leaning forward, placing your hands on your hips, or crossing your arms over your chest signal defensiveness and aggression. Instead, project calmness by standing at a slight angle and a few feet away rather than directly in front of the person, keeping your hands open and relaxed, and maintaining moderate but not intense eye contact. Avoid eye rolls, sighs, a clinched jaw, or other signs of frustration or irritation. Instead, try to keep your face calm and relaxed.

The next step in de-escalation is to allow the person to feel as if they are being heard. Anger often begins when a person feels that they have

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lost control of some important aspect of their life and that no one is listening to them or taking their concerns seriously. Allowing the person to vent and listening to them respectfully is often enough to defuse their anger.

One of the most effective things that you can do may be to ask, “Can you tell me more about that?” This question has several benefits. First, it shows that you care and take the person’s concerns seriously. It allows the individual to feel heard and also provides information about the factors that lead to their anger. Finally, by inviting them to think (rather than simply feel) about the sources of their anger, it helps to return them from emotional to rational thinking, which can help the person move from anger to constructive engagement.

Allow the person to answer the question without interruption, even if they are mostly venting. Being heard without interruption is often the most important thing that an upset person wants.

When the person pauses, indicate that you have been listening by reflecting their statements. Use comments such as “It sounds like you are feeling...” or “Am I right in understanding that the problem is...?” Validate their emotions without justifying their actions by saying things like, “I see that you’re really upset about this.”

When you speak, use a calm and quiet voice. Speak slowly and use short, simple sentences; the emotional portion of the brain does not process complex information very well. Do not argue with the person or tell them that they’re wrong, even if the things they’re saying are mistaken or false. Avoid saying things like “just calm down” or “don’t get so upset”; such

phrases aren’t helpful and will most likely escalate the situation.

Try to offer the person choices to help them regain a sense of control. For example, you might ask, “Do you want to continue discussing this here, or would you prefer someplace more private?” However, don’t offer alternatives that compromise your safety or your organization’s policies or promises that you can’t deliver. Instead, focus on what you can do rather than on what you cannot do. If the person’s behavior is actively abusive, set polite but firm boundaries: “I want to hear what you have to say, but I can’t continue if you yell at me.”

If you are able to establish a calm conversation with the person, work toward a collaborative solution to their concerns. If necessary, involve a third party as a mediator. When you have reached a mutually acceptable solution, restate the key points to ensure that you and the person both have the same understanding of the solution.

It is important to remember that while a calm and compassionate response to an angry person can often de-escalate the situation, this doesn’t always happen. As mentioned earlier, if the person becomes physically aggressive or threatens violence at any time, remove yourself from the situation and call for assistance as needed.

For more information about de-escalation, check out: 5 Keys for De-escalating Anger, Crisis and Trauma Resources Institute. www.ctrinstitute.com/blog/5-keys-for-de-escalating-anger

CPI’s Top 10 De-escalation Tips Revisited, Crisis Prevention Institute. www.crisisprevention.com/blog/general/cpi-s-top-10-de-escalation-tips-revisited

Please use the QR code at right to access a brief follow-up survey regarding this report; thank you in advance for helping us to improve our services.

