



# Engagement-Based Crisis De-Escalation

## Foundations of Supportive Crisis Management

### The Context of Our Work

Staff and volunteers support individuals facing complex stressors, including hunger, trauma, fear, and mental health challenges. It is vital to remember:

- **Food is a basic human need.**
- **Hunger and food insecurity are traumas.**
- **All human behavior is a communication of a need.** What may seem like "bad behavior" is often a failure to communicate properly.

### The De-Escalation Continuum

Recognizing emotional states is the first step in maintaining a safe environment.

- **Safe/Calm:** Pleasant, neutral, or mildly annoyed affect.
- **Escalation:** Verbal aggression, posturing, rapid speech, and clenched fists.
- **Danger:** Threats, physical aggression, or property destruction. At this stage, the **rational brain is shut down**, and verbal de-escalation is the priority.

### The Golden Rules of De-Escalation

- **Rule 1: Control Yourself.** The only person you can truly control in a crisis is yourself.
- **Rule 2: Tone of Voice.** Use a soothing, positive, and calm tone. Never raise your voice, as your tone sets the overall "tone" of the interaction.

- **Rule 3: Self-Awareness.** Build situational awareness by gathering information through observation and communication.
- **Rule 4: Language Matters.** Avoid labels like "abusive," "rude," or "greedy". Instead, recognize guests as "struggling," "afraid," or "desperate".
- **Rule 5: Q-TIP (Quit Taking It Personally).** Remind yourself that provocative behavior is not about you; it is about the guest's current crisis.
- **Rule 6: Active Listening.** Listen to understand, not to correct or argue. Allow the person to vent to discharge tension.
- **Rule 7: Answer Legitimate Questions.** Only engage with real questions; redirect them from insults back to the matter at hand.
- **Rule 8: Validate First.** Use phrases like "I get it" or "I can see why this is hard".
- **Rule 9: Problem Solve Together.** Address one issue at a time with a supportive, solution-oriented approach. If possible, find a point to agree on.
- **Rule 10: Offer Choice.** Choice restores a sense of personal control. Offer a choice between two positive alternatives, such as "We can talk here, or would you like to move away from the crowd?".

## Body Language and Active Listening

### Body Language: DOs and DON'Ts

Non-verbal cues can either escalate or reduce tension.

- **DO:** Keep hands visible and relaxed with palms open at waist level.
- **DO:** Respect personal space by standing at least 2 feet away.
- **DO:** Try to be at the same eye level as the guest.
- **DON'T:** Use sudden gestures or movements.
- **DON'T:** Corner anyone or allow yourself to be cornered.
- **DON'T:** Use physical intervention or try to lead someone by the arm.



## What to Avoid (Highly Triggering)

- **Never say:** "You need to calm down!" or "You're overreacting".
- **Avoid:** Lecturing, shaming, or moralizing.
- **Avoid:** Veiled threats like "Calm down or you have to leave".
- **Instead say:** "I can see how upsetting this is! Can you slow down so I can understand and help?".

## Communicating Compassion

Always lead and end with using validation and conveying compassionate concern.

- **Validation:** Non-judgmental acceptance of how someone feels. You don't have to agree with their behavior to acknowledge their feelings are real to them.

**Final Reminder: At every stage, pause and ask: "Is my current action reducing tension or fueling it?"**

**By positioning ourselves as allies, we demonstrate genuine care and pave the most effective path toward de-escalation.**

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