

de-escalation skills

1) Breathe!

Holding your breath is a very common response to stressful and potentially dangerous situations. You need to remember to breathe, to get oxygen flowing to your brain, and to help counter the feeling of being “frozen”—when you are so surprised or scared that you don’t do anything. Breathing helps you to think of what to do next.

2) Project Calm

Even if you are not feeling calm, appearing to be calm can be helpful. In interpersonal situations, people take their behavioral cues from others in the same setting or situation. If you can keep your cool, it can help others regain theirs. Being (or seeming) calm can also help you to think quickly.

3) Know Your Triggers

This is especially important when you are with someone who is acting out, and/or trying to push your buttons. “Getting triggered” refers to something in the present releasing—automatically, in your brain—memories or reactions from past painful experiences. Common triggers for people include someone doing any or all of the following: pointing fingers, swearing, getting into your space, threatening you, not listening to you, blaming you, or trying to act like your parent or other authority figure. If you feel you can’t stay in control, you may need to ask for help.

4) Position Yourself for Safety

Mentally assess the situation as quickly as possible. Your assessment should include cues and information such as the following:

- How can you tell when someone is out of control? What are the signs?
- Where are exits/doors/etc.?
- Are there people nearby?
- Can you yell for someone to come help or to call 911? (Research on bystander responses to violence shows that most often people do not help because they cannot figure out what to do. If you give a specific direction to someone, it greatly increases the chance that they will come to your aid in a useful way.)
- Can you stand out of range?
- Are there things you could throw down to create a barrier between yourself and the other person, or could you position yourself behind something, like a car, a wall, a chair or a tree?

- Is there anything in the environment (a chair, an umbrella, a pen) that you could use as a weapon to strike towards primary targets (eyes/throat/nose/knees), where you are likely to cause pain or damage to an attacker?
- What are your options?

Keep scanning and thinking as the situation changes. The situation WILL change. It is important to try to keep active and thinking, even if things seem very bad. Look for the moment when you might be able to do something.

5) Match and Lead

The next strategy is called Match and Lead. You want to match the volume and intensity of the out-of-control person in vocal quality. It seems strange, but by matching their volume, you may be able to make yourself heard. People often respond to being told to be quieter or to calm down by getting louder or more aggressive. To avoid giving the impression that you are trying to calm or “shush” the attacker, instead match them in intensity and volume with something like, “WHAT’S GOING ON HERE?” (Really loud!), and then slowly *Step It Down* (See below).

6) Step It Down

As the person starts explaining why they are so upset, keep asking questions, and talking in a little bit softer and less intense voice: “Really? That’s awful. I can see why you are so upset. What can we do right now?” If you can get them to step it down so that you can sit, the other person will probably sit, too. (This is called “unconscious mirroring.”) Remember that the other person is out of control. This allows you to step in and take control, and take the lead in the situation. People will often follow you without even knowing that they are doing it.

7) Get to “We”

“What can we do right now?” is a great question to use. We want to *Get to “We.”* “How can we make this better? What are we going to do about it?” These are examples of good language to use. This is a technique called “forced teaming.” If you make the two of you a “we,” the other person may be less likely to direct their aggression at you. This maximizes your safety.

8) Lose to Win

In the course of a conflict, you may be asked to give up something, or compromise in a way that is undesirable or uncomfortable. Depending on the situation, though, what you are asked to give up may not be a big deal, and it may be something you will happily sacrifice to help get you through the crisis at hand. In de-escalation, this strategy is called *Lose to Win*. Sometimes you have to give something up to maximize your safety. This is useful in other kinds of physical self-defense situations as well, like being mugged—you might choose to give up your wallet to avoid bodily harm. In this case, you lose (your money) to win (your safety/life). You may give up something intangible (being “right”) in order to achieve something tangible (being safe: someone no longer yelling at you and threatening you). You may negotiate and give up something OTHER than what the attacker wants (a piece of jewelry, instead of your wallet with all of your IDs inside). Often helping an adversary to “save face”—i.e. they feel like THEY won, or got what they wanted—is the way to go.

