

DEESCALATION STRATEGIES

During the initial stages of managing violence, when you first become aware that the person you are interacting with is upset or likely to soon escalate to aggressive behavior, the following strategies will be useful in providing a guide as to how you can stay alert while at the same time deescalate a potentially violent confrontation.

When used individually, the following techniques have limited utility, but when implemented smoothly and in sequence, **INTERRUPT**, **IGNORE**, **REDIRECT**, and **REWARD** can be quite effective and powerful.

INTERRUPTION

First thing to do is to break the chain of behaviors by interrupting the flow of events. Sometimes this can be achieved by merely saying the upset person's name or by getting them to focus on something else in the environment. Here are a few things to consider:

- **Give extra attention** to their apparent problem. This must be done before any undesirable behavior is exhibited.
- **Remind of the consequences of his/her actions**. This should not be a threat, but merely a neutral statement regarding the natural effect of the individual's behavior.
- **Provide reality testing**. Point out what is actually going on (i.e. "You were laying in the middle of the sidewalk.")
- **Communicate expected behaviors**. In a matter-of-fact manner, communicate the type of expectations you have for the person.
- **Give reassurance**. Often people show anger when they are afraid. A warm smile, words of reassurance or even a touch on the shoulder (unless contraindicated by other factors) can calm an anxious or frightened person.
- **Model the appropriate behavior**. If you are relatively calm, you can often have a calming effect on others.

- **Use humor.** Good-natured humor works wonders. Not sarcasm or complicated word plays which may be misunderstood, but simple appreciation of the humor inherent in the human condition.
- **Introduce the unexpected.** The element of surprise is sometimes all that is needed to interrupt a potentially negative sequence of individual behavior (i.e. during an altercation you might ask a question totally unrelated to the actual chain of events so as to get the upset person's mind off of the issue for a moment).

IGNORING

Ignoring means that the early part of the maladaptive behavioral sequence is not visibly responded to in order to avoid inadvertently reinforcing it. It does not mean that early danger signs are truly ignored and it certainly does not mean that truly dangerous behaviors are ever ignored.

The effectiveness of ignoring depends, in part, on the strength of the relationship between individual and caregiver. We all know that being ignored by someone we're attached to feels different from being ignored by someone we could care less about! Recall, "bonding" is a healthy behavior that may occur between individual and caregiver, and provide an entryway into establishing more appropriate behaviors in individuals.

Depending upon the behaviors involved, Planned Ignoring can take three main forms:

- **Planned ignoring.** If the behavior is not harmful and if you are reasonably sure that it will not escalate to a dangerous or intolerable level, you may decide simply not to respond to it. If the behavior is not already entrenched, it will usually get worse, then slowly fade.
- **De-value the maladaptive behavior** while redirecting the individual. To maximize the effectiveness of the alternate behavior, which you wish to reinforce, give no indication, the undesirable one is worth anything (positive or negative).
- **Keep calm** as you plan your next response. Just as it is beneficial for the individual to be motivated toward something positive, it is also important for you to focus upon desired outcomes. This usually results in a more effective intervention.

REDIRECTION

Attempting to just stop a behavior usually results in a confrontation which may escalate to a physical crisis. In general, it is easier and safer to deflect a potentially dangerous behavior by re-channeling it. In this way, the more appropriate behavior can then be reinforced and a cycle of positive exchanges can begin.

It is crucial that the individual be given ample opportunity to engage in this new behavior without first having to demonstrate any of the original undesirable behavior. If the latter were to happen, the inappropriate behavior would be reinforced!

Here are some ideas for redirecting upset individuals:

- **Ventilation of feelings.** Often individuals (and caregiver, too) need to ventilate their anger or frustration. “Blowing off steam” in a non-destructive way often is helpful. Putting feelings into words, talking about the frustrating situation, or just simply yelling in a situation where you don’t have to worry about disturbing others, feels great!
- **Help the individual with his/her problems.** Caregivers offering just enough help to allow the individual some success can ease frustration due to failure. Remember, doing it all for the other person could be experienced as frustrating and could also be communicating a negative expectation, “I don’t think you can do anything.”
- **Incompatible behaviors** can be selected and reinforced. By selecting behaviors that resemble the original ones, but without the destructive component, you can reinforce an alternate behavior more easily than if you selected a totally different one.
- **Physical activities** can help dissipate destructive energy. Physical games, helping activities (such as moving heavy furniture) and exercising can cause chemical changes in the body, which calm the emotions. However, it is important to perform the activities long enough and with enough energy in order to move through the initially stimulating effect that such activities may produce. Modeling and verbal reinforcement can help.
- **Verbal persuasion** may work if the individual is reasonably in control of him/herself. If your relationship with the individual is positive, you may only have to ask him/her to stop and provide a brief explanation (for purposes of learning).

REWARDING/REINFORCING

If we wish to foster new behaviors in the individual, we must reinforce them with some kind of rewards. Remember, what is rewarding to one individual may not be rewarding for another. There tend to be some kind of “universal” rewards, but many others are unique to the individual.

- **Praise** is something most of us value. Be sincere, vary your statements, make eye contact, and let your body language support your words. Praise the individual for the behavior in such a way that s/he can take pride in what was done. Try to make it relevant to the desired behavior.
- **Affection** means that we value the person simply for being who they are. Keep it simple and honest (i.e. *“You know Julian, I really had fun being with you today!”*).
- **Tactile rewards** are powerful and do not require the individual to have verbal skills to appreciate the reward. Touching interesting, textured materials and holding favorite toys can be useful.
- **Valued activities** can be paired with desired behaviors. Sometimes an activity that the individual already enjoys can be slightly altered to replace a maladaptive/undesirable behavior.
- **Edibles** are powerful primary re-enforcers, though somewhat overused. Huge quantities are often unnecessary, as it is not hunger per se that we are trying to satiate. Small quantities of interesting or desired flavors are just as powerful as larger portions.