

DE-ESCALATION SKILLS

How to behave when confronted with direct violence

Every violent situation has its own dynamic and is unique: no formula for reacting to a violent situation will work. Key is *awareness* of the moment: what is going on, what is working to keep people from violence.

Below are some ideas of skills and behaviors that have been successful in some situations. Since freezing can be a natural reaction to being involved in direct violence, consider these other options for reacting to a violent situation.

- **Prepare yourself.** Be prepared for all kinds of situations. Think these situations over in advance and discuss them with others. Become conscious of your own personal capacities, limitations, and priorities.
- **Remain calm.** Avoid panicking and hectic reactions. Try not to provoke reflex reactions. Find out about your own means to develop inner strength and calmness and to maintain it in threatening situations. When faced with a violent situation, take your time to become conscious of yourself.
- **Become active.** Do not become paralyzed by fear. It is better to do something small to change the situation than contemplating big actions that you might not be able to do. Very often there are technical possibilities to de-escalate or prevent more violence (e.g., emergency brakes in trains). The military reports that people who handle crisis situations best are those who do not freeze, who do *anything*.
- **Do not cooperate with the role of the victim.** Take the initiative to develop the situation according to your own needs and priorities. Unless you see no other options, do not cooperate with the scenario that the aggressor might want to put you in. Take care to remain authentic.
- **Try to establish communication with the aggressor.** Look at the aggressor, but be aware that eye contact may have escalating as well as de-escalating effects. Look for common ground that moves away from the current situation; instead of "Why are you doing this to me?" you might ask "Do you have children?" Look for human connection, but do not take it personally if you don't immediately get a response.
- **Talk and listen.** Express what you observe in a clear, loud, and calm manner. Listen to what the aggressor says; it may help you to develop your own behavior in the situation.
- **Look for help: enlist allies.** Ask others individually to help, instead of just appealing for help to a larger crowd. Others will feel encouraged by your direct

demand for help. Trust your gut in selecting someone to individually ask. And, if that person does not work, try the next person until you find an ally (don't give up!).

- **Address the victim.** If you observe direct violence, be careful that you do not reduce the victim to just becoming an object in a threatening situation. Not only the aggression, but also your attempt to intervene can have this effect. Pay attention to the person being attacked/hurt, too, and relate to them as a human being (not just a "victim").
- **Be clear about your objectives.** It really helps to have your objectives clearly thought out and in front of your mind. When appropriate, you should communicate them as specifically as possible to your opponent. If you shift objectives you might confuse your opponent--and yourself. Your objectives must be reasonable. You must believe you are fair and you must be able to communicate this.
- **Don't be frightened.** Your fear communicates itself directly to your opponent and eggs them on. It might be difficult to control your fear in the midst of a confrontation, but it's not impossible. Breathe deeply. Keep talking. Talk slowly and in a deep voice. Focus on your opponent as much as possible, while also not challenging them with your eyes. Use only as much eye contact as culturally appropriate. Most important: encourage the opponent to talk. Seek to understand.
- **Don't be frightening.** Someone about to commit an act of violence is likely to be more full of fear than the person being attacked. Make no abrupt gestures. Move slowly. When practical, tell your opponent what you are going to do before doing it. Don't say anything threatening, critical, or hostile.
- **Don't be afraid of stating the obvious.** Nearly always it helps to clarify things and sometimes can have amazing results. One protestor who was being dragged across the pavement by his hair looked up at the cop who was dragging him and said quietly, "You're pulling my hair and it hurts." This got through to the cop sufficiently that he let go of the protestor's hair and started dragging him by the armpits.
- **Seek to befriend your opponent's better nature.** This is at the heart of nonviolent intervention. Everybody thinks of themselves as a decent person. Even the most brutal and brutalized among us have some spark of decency which we can reach. The task is to bring out this decency in your opponent and make them see that the intended act of violence is inconsistent with the person they are or wish to be.
- **Allow a way out for your opponent.** Offer a way to save face for your opponent and allow a way out physically, too.
- **Use the unexpected to create wonder.** Use humor, distraction. Introduce yourself, shake hands. Find creative ways to interrupt the process (sitting down, offering tea). Manners, friendliness, and hospitality are central violence-prevention skills, as they redirect the aggressor into a hard-wired response of courtesy, learned as a child.