

## Guide to Trauma-Informed De-Escalation During Actions and Protests



This guide is created for people like safety team members, movement chaplains, and others who are tasked with the role of keeping people safe during actions. This is an initial attempt at creating a trauma-informed, anti-oppression de-escalation guide, but it is still in process and needs work. The current manifestation of this guide is geared toward actions and spaces that are intended to be non-violent. The de-escalation principles herein will work best with protesters on your side or people who wander into an action and become agitated, triggered, or aggressive. Some aspects of this guide were adapted from the Wasatch Homeless Health Care Program.

**The purpose of this guide** is to outline procedures for responding to situations that have the potential to escalate into physical violence. Our priority is to support demonstrators and frontline people so that they can be as safe as possible during actions. It is important to respond to escalated and aggravated situations in a sensitive and trauma-informed manner. The goal is *not* to enter into a power struggle and “control” people and their responses. The goal is to keep people safe and help people feel heard as much as possible. People who become agitated may be triggered in ways we do not understand and they deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion.

### Stress & Extenuating Circumstances

Direct actions and protests can be stress-inducing environments. People from all walks of life are bringing their beliefs, grievances, values, and their past experiences and traumas to the public sphere. Given the legitimate anger at situations of injustice, it is important to be sensitive in our responses. Some people have experienced oppression and exploitation directly. Some people could be frustrated because they may frequently interact with a multitude of people who try to silence them or don't understand why they are so angry. Consequently, their frustration level can become elevated, even in the smallest of conflicts or misunderstandings. Whatever has happened, it is our task to meet people where they are in their frustration, anger, and hurt and to believe them.



It is important to remember *never* to take a person's negative or aggressive behavior personally. There are reasons for the person's frustrations and behavior and 99.9% of the time, *you* are not the reason. Regardless of the person's actions, it is imperative that our reactions do not encourage further negative behaviors or responses. Instead, we can employ simple intervention strategies when a person begins to act in aggravated, aggressive, or harmful ways.

## Guidelines for Engaging People who are Agitated

Strategies for responding to people who are agitated should begin with the least invasive tactic for helping the person feel heard and stay safe and not advance to the next level unless absolutely necessary. The three levels of intervention are:

**Level 1: Prevention**

**Level 2: De-Escalation**

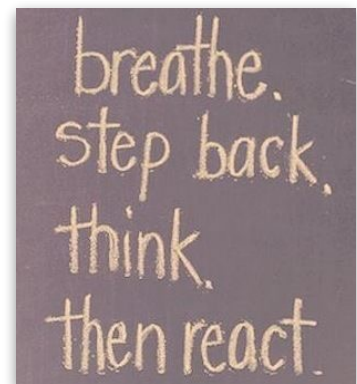
**Level 3: Action Focused On Safety**

Our goal of preventing violence can be achieved by effectively employing these basic steps: self awareness, observation, assessment, and skilled listening, communication, and action.

### LEVEL 1: PREVENTION

The first and best method for responding well to people who are agitated is to anticipate and prevent. We can do this through self awareness, observation, and assessment of needs.

**Self Awareness.** Take a deep breath. How is your body reacting to this situation? Are you able to respond in a present, centered, and calm way? Is everything tense or are you able to be open and relaxed with your body language? If you intervene, introduce yourself by telling the person your name, who you are and that you're there to help. If you can't respond, it's okay—find someone else who can. Be aware of your own privileges and how you come across to others. How do people of other racial/ethnic identities experience you? How do people of other gender expressions experience you? Before attempting to provide care, ask yourself if you are the best person to engage this person/situation or is there someone else on your team who could be perceived as more 'safe' and trustworthy? Do you best to be self-aware, mindful, and sensitive when engaging someone you don't know.



**Observation.** In protest settings, it is common to see people who are shouting loudly and outwardly showing defiance. Things that are typically warning signs for escalating tensions like “a challenging demeanor,” “excessive swearing,” “clenched fists,” and “increased volume of voice” can be part of the action—part of expressing anger at injustice. It's important to be able to notice and discern tensions that are rising that are different from the behaviors of most protesters. For instance, maybe you notice someone who is alone on the edges of the protest and begins to taunt people or direct their anger at individuals. Maybe an argument is developing between two protesters or someone is triggered by something someone is wearing or has on their sign.

Look for these signs *before* things escalate. Check in with the person. Introduce yourself. Ask, “How are you feeling? What do you need right now?” Offer something tangible like a piece of gum, bottle of water, healing oils, or a cigarette.

Also, remember that your understanding of behavioral norms may be different from other people and groups. If someone is just being loud or rowdy because they are angry or excited but is not posing a threat to anyone, it is not our job to police or control their expressions.

**Assessment.** What is the person telling you about their needs through their behavior, words and body language? Can you meet these needs? If not, what options can you offer them? What are they trying to gain? What are they trying to avoid? Is the person's thinking or behavior impaired? If so, they may respond in unpredictable ways. Keep assessing throughout the encounter. Is the way you're responding helping? If not, adjust your response or find someone else who can help.

## LEVEL 2: DE-ESCALATION

**Skilled listening.** The listening and attending skills of therapeutic communication are the most effective tools of averting violent behavior. Even though the situation may be tense, pay attention to what the other person is trying to tell you. Practice reflective listening. This involves finding out information about what a person is thinking and feeling, and what may be done about a problem. Don't assume you know. Listen carefully to what is said. Simply spending a few minutes interacting with the person may prevent an altercation. The more information you have, the better you will be able to work toward a solution. If you are genuine when you listen, this can build rapport and help someone feel like they can trust you.

### Steps for Effective Listening

- Tune in to your personal anxiety level. Assess your feelings and ask yourself if your feelings are interfering with your communication skills.
- Acknowledge the other person's feelings. Identify the anxiety or anger and acknowledge the potential for violence. You might say, "*You seem very upset*" or "*I'm concerned about your safety and the safety of others who are here.*"
- Be sincere and assertive. Convey calmness, confidence and a willingness to help.

**Communicating.** Some researchers say over 90% of communication happens through our tone of voice and body language. That means that less than 10% comes from words. While talking, take an open stance and be aware of your voice. The tone of your voice will have an immediate effect upon the person. It is imperative that your voice remains calm and soft, yet firm. De-escalating relies on listening and is dependent upon embodying and demonstrating a positive regard and respect for others. If you become angry or aggressive like the person, you will not be helpful. Again, try to communicate a genuine concern for their well-being, even if you don't agree with what they are saying.



## The Do's and Don'ts of Therapeutic, Effective Communication

### The Do's — Verbal

- Do ask, *“What can I do to help?”*
- Do suggest getting out of a crowded or intense area. Create space around the person so they are as removed as possible from the source of tension.
- Do use reflective listening. Help them feel heard. Reflect back what they are saying to you through their words and body language. *“I hear how angry and passionate you are about this situation.”*
- Do ask open-ended questions and give brief, direct statements.
- Do ask opinions: *“In what way do you feel that we could help you?”* or *“How would you like to see the situation resolved?”*
- Do offer choices and alternatives: *“If being here is not working out for you, can I help you get somewhere else?”* Try to leave the person with options.
- Try to create rapport that communicates that you are on their team. Ask, *“How can we work together to make this better and make sure everyone stays safe?”*
- See if there is any common ground you can agree on together. Say something like, *“I hear your side of things and I know you're passionate about this. My role is to make sure people are safe and I'm wondering if we can find a way to work together to make sure everyone on our side stays safe.”*
- Do encourage verbalization of anger rather than acting out. (Express your limitation with this verbalization, however, such as expressions or language that is too offensive and not necessary.)
- Do assume that the person has a real concern and that they are understandably upset.
- Do recognize and acknowledge the person's right to their feelings.
- Sometimes changing the topic or providing a distraction can help. Asking something like, *“Are you from around here?”* or *“I really like your shirt. Where did you get it?”* or noting something about the weather can help shift the conversation. If this doesn't work, go back to the other strategies.

### The Don'ts — Verbal

- Don't threaten the person or demand obedience.
- Don't argue with the person about the facts of a situation.
- Do not offer lengthy explanations or excuses.
- Don't tell the person that they have no reason to be angry.
- Don't try to control the person or tell them to “calm down.”
- Don't become defensive and insist that you are right. Don't go against or over them.
- Don't offer placating responses such as *“Everything will be OK”* or *“You're not the only one.”*
- Don't belittle them or dismiss their anger or frustrations.
- Don't use your title or authority.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Never challenge the person or call their bluff. Never criticize or laugh at the person.
- N e v e r a r g u e with the person! (Try to find common ground!)





## LEVEL 3: ACTION FOCUSED ON SAFETY

**Taking Action.** Everything discussed so far culminates when we take action. A key concept in de-escalation is to try to decrease the person's sense of powerlessness and helplessness in order to minimize their frustrations. The following steps promote helpful interactions.



### The Do's and Don'ts of Helpful Interactions

#### *The Do's — Actions*

- Follow your instinct and intuition. Use common sense.
- Detect danger signals. Are you safe? Is the person safe? Are others in the area safe?
- Prioritize safety and know your surroundings:
  - Identify an escape route convenient to you and the person.
  - Position yourself close to an exit without making them feel trapped in.
  - Assess the environment for potential weapons.
- Identify a code word that will alert the need for additional help.
- Ask if the person will find a place to sit down with you. Or try walking with them away from the area of tension. If they smoke, can you find a cigarette for them?
- Establish and maintain eye contact.
- Decrease environmental stimuli by minimizing the presence of distractions and other people.
- Make sure someone knows where you are at all times.
- Attempt to meet as many of their reasonable requests as possible.
- Remind the person that they are responsible for their own actions.
- Remember who you are. Practice sensitive behavior.

#### *The Don'ts — Actions*

- Don't ignore the person.
- Don't come too close to the person or stand/hover over them.
- Don't touch the person.
- Don't analyze, interpret, or judge the person's motivations. Try to observe and assess without assuming or projecting.
- Don't take the person's anger or frustration personally.
- Don't try to control the person.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.

**If a conflict does escalate to verbal confrontation between two people or more,** be most present to talk to the person who is *most* agitated. You might need to position your body, if possible, in between the people in conflict. Face the person who is most agitated. Ask the other person/people to give you space while you talk. Introduce yourself. Let them know you're there to help keep everyone safe. Listen to their concerns. Use a non-threatening stance and a calm tone of voice. Try to find common ground. Try to meet whatever needs you can that are reasonable. Try to enlist their help in helping you make sure that everyone stays safe. Enlist additional help if needed.

**If the person's thinking is impaired by drugs, alcohol, or severe emotional or mental health issues,** they may respond in unpredictable ways. Arguing with them or trying to use points that may seem logical to you often doesn't work in these situations. Speak calmly at a reasonable pace. Repeat yourself using simple, direct statements. Try using brief, closed-ended questions to gain their participation in resolving the situation. Often, people in this state can be distracted or redirected from the agitation long enough to cool down and move on. Changing the subject by saying something like, "*How are you doing today? Are you from around here?*" If that doesn't work, you might say something like, "*Can you help me/us make sure that you/everyone here is safe?*" or "*Will you be able to calm down enough to stay here or would you like to go somewhere else?*"

**If what you're doing isn't working and things continue to escalate,** see if you can pull in outside help. Is there someone else they would be willing to talk with? Is there someone in the area or someone they know whom they could call? Are things at the point where you need to call for emergency help? Because police can make situations more dangerous for people of color, poor people, queer people, and other marginalized communities, many protest spaces are inherently distrustful of police intervention. Calling the police is *always* a last resort and should be avoided at all costs.

## **SUMMARY**

These principles, guidelines, and procedures are basic suggestions to assist in averting abusive and violent behavior. The purpose of this guide is to effectively keep everyone safe. When put into practice, these steps of self awareness, observing, assessing, listening, communicating, and acting can help achieve our goal of preventing physical violence. Using common sense while practicing compassion will go a long way. Always keep in mind the past traumas that people may have experienced. If we can be empathetic and treat everyone with respect and dignity, we have not only provided good care, but perhaps we have helped them to feel less powerless so that they can break cycles of violence in their lives.