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## Managing Abusive Individuals for Front Line Staff

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### Common Verbal Responses to Verbal Abuse

When confronted with verbal abuse:

#### 1. Introduce Yourself

Say, "Good morning, Sir/Ma'am. My name is.....  
We need to talk about (issue) ..... and  
I need to understand what your expectations are."

This technique gets their attention and puts the focus on you. It also establishes who you are, and sets the tone of respect.

This puts the focus on them and the problem.

#### 2. Ask Them to Repeat What They Said

Say, "I'm sorry, but I didn't catch that. Would you please repeat what you said?"  
This is part of active listening and shows that you care.

This technique reduces potential anxiety and helps you to begin a conversation. It allows them to save face by rephrasing their statement and to hear what they said. This also gives you time to develop a plan and to clarify the problem.

#### 3. Ask Questions

In a non-threatening in a supportive manner, ask:

*"I wonder if you could tell me..."*

- Who ...?
- What...?
- When...?
- How...?

Preface each question with, "I wonder... I don't understand...I need to know..."

This diverts their attention from anger to talking about the problem and gives you time to think and plan.

#### 4. Repeat What They Have Said

(Also called "Playback" or "Reflection" Techniques).

"Joe/Mary. If I heard you correctly, you said..."

"Joe, let me repeat what I think your point is..."

"Mary, let me clarify what I think you just said..."

This shows your concern, indicates that you are listening, gets a conversation going, and gives you time to think.

**However, if they make a threat of violence, do not repeat their statements because you want to divert their thought processes from these ideas.**

**5. Re-Direct Anger to the Past**

You do this by saying, "I feel that you **were** angry."

Or, "You **became** angry at them (HR, or the situation, etc.) because..."

These techniques cause them to think of their anger as having occurred in the *past*.

**6. Interrupt by Using Their Names**

"Excuse me, Mrs. / Mr. Smith..."

**A person's *name* is the single most important word in their dictionary.**

Using their name puts them on your level and personalizes the encounter.

**7. Use "We"**

When you use "**we**", it indicates that what you are saying is **not** an order.

It also indicates togetherness.

Say, "Why don't **we** see how to resolve this problem.

"This is what **we** should consider to resolve this situation."

**"We" is the second most important word in their dictionary** and puts you both on the same level. It also reduces their anxiety which, in turn, increases your chances of compliance.

**8. Get Them to Walk With You (if feasible).**

This technique has to be decided on under appropriate circumstances.

Say, "Why don't we walk over to the water fountain or into another room?"

Walking reduces anxiety, expends energy and sometimes, removes them from their sources of anger by diverting them.

Walking may also remove them from another party who might reignite the aggression, or from a group of people, where they feel they have to resist you in order to "save face".

**9. Use "I" Statements to help label and transfer their emotional state, to a thinking, problem-solving one.**

"I statements," can de-escalate angry conflict.

"You" statements can be heard as blaming or attacking.

Statements like "I feel..." "I need..." are not directed at anyone else and cannot be refuted.

The speaker is the expert regarding his own feelings, needs, opinions and desires.

"I see / feel that you are upset but what do you see as a solution?"

"I sense that you are angry about this situation but how can we both resolve it?"

By labeling their intense emotions, you then try to move them over to cognitive or problem solving perspectives.

## 10. Use Voice Control

Rate of speech, tone and volume of speech can show:

- fear,
- lack of interest
- honesty
- authority or
- support.

Be aware that **controlling your voice, tone, volume and rate of speech** is critical and is an important part of active listening and how you may be perceived.

## 11. Generate Options and Solutions

If someone seems “stuck” in anger or frustration, try generating ideas and suggestions that they may consider to resolve their situation.

This will help them get out of an emotional state, into a problem-solving one. They may then see you as an ally and a resource, rather than an obstacle.

## 12. Get “More Assistance”

If the person of concern is losing verbal control, and you are starting to feel uncomfortable or at risk, suggest that you will call your supervisor to try to resolve the situation.

This may distract the person and give you an opportunity to exit.

### If You Feel that the Subject May Lose Self-Control:

- **Create Space**
  - Move away or put an object, such as a table or a chair, between you and the aggressor
  - Scan the area for exit doors, windows
  - Start exiting if the threat of harm seems imminent
- **Use Loud Positive Commands**
  - i.e. “Stop. “No.” and take an aggressive, defensive “boxer” stance
- **Aggressively Draw a Defensive Tool**
  - Use a clipboard or tool case to shield possible blows or strikes

### Some Weapons of Opportunity:

keys	coffee cup	utensils	laptop
umbrella	clocks	books	tools
pens/pencils	stick	rocks	cell phone
chemical spray	lamps	plants	coat
handful of coins	gravel/sand	fire extinguisher	

### Shields:

purses	briefcase	jacket	clipboards
pillow	towel	chair	pads
garbage can lid	cars	doors	drapes

- **Divert the Aggressor's Attention with the Use of an Object**

**Attention Getting Devices:**

voice	whistle	shriek alarm
horn	burglar alarm	fire alarm
lights	telephone	fire extinguisher
throwing a chair		

To break a person of concern's train of thought, and to create a distraction:

- Throw a handful of coins in the air,
  - drop a clipboard,
  - tool,
  - hat,
  - have a coughing attack
- **Do not** drop your keys, in case you can run out and leave immediately.
- **Move Quickly into a Boxer Stance**
    - This creates a smaller target to the aggressor and more balance for you, so that you can recover more quickly if attacked. Then, try escaping and calling for help.
  - **Escape**
    - **When in doubt, get out!**

Please review these techniques and practice them.

Frequent practice of these techniques will allow you to feel comfortable when you may have to use them in actual situations, with:

- customers,
- co-workers
- friends,
- family or
- others in public situations.

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