

Training: De-escalation

De-Escalation

(1) Empathetic and Non-Judgmental: “If we face these open wounds [of others] in ourselves can we understand them in other people.” Difference between Empathy and Sympathy: **Empathy** is a term we use for the ability to understand other people's feelings as if we were having them ourselves. ...

Sympathy refers to the ability to take part in someone else's feelings, mostly by feeling sorrowful about their misfortune. In this sense we attempt to place ourselves completely in our child's situation. This is where knowing your child is powerful and key. Their stories and hardships are multifaceted. Let's take a moment to think about one of their stories and I want 2 of you to empathize with them and tell me what you are feeling, bringing to light their stories.

Our instincts might tell us to react defensively to the level of energy and emotion that somebody else is pouring out in front of us, but the best thing we can do is take a mindful pause, however slight, and realize that we've been there too. We've all felt incredible pain, overwhelming stress, or been overcome by an indecipherable wave of emotion at some point in our lives. It's what makes us human, and that humanity is the same thing that makes us capable of safely and effectively de-escalating a person or situation away from crisis.

Empathy naturally leads us to a place of grace giving rather than judgement because we begin to feel the weight and burden the child is experiencing.

(2) Respect Personal Space: Personal Space and Stance are incredibly important when interacting with an individual in crisis. You should try to stand at a slight angle to the person you're attempting to de-escalate versus approach them head-on. CPI calls it a *Supportive Stance*, in which the staff member/adult tries to keep at least 1.5 to three feet between themselves and the youth in crisis. Not only does it help promote your collective safety, but it also defuses tension by communicating your non-threatening intent to somebody who is already feeling extremely vulnerable.

Note: Police training and hospital training recommend even greater distances. Police recommend 6-8 ft, and hospitals were in the range of 10.

(3) Use Non-threatening Nonverbals: Nonverbal language include facial expressions, tone and body language - they have profound impact on people as they infuse your language with context.

The more a person escalates into distress, the less they can process your choice of words. So how you speak becomes far more important than what you say. When we speak to somebody we care about and respect, our tone and body language become relaxed, receptive, and nonthreatening. There is a special degree of patience and attention we show to those people. And those same qualities are exactly what a person in crisis needs to see so that they can safely de-escalate. Keeping your nonverbals as neutral as possible begins to defuse the situation at a subconscious level by making the situation feel less

combative. The trick, of course, is being mindful in those moments of adjusting your nonverbal messaging, consciously taking a nonthreatening physical posture, and controlling your tone.

(4) Avoid Overreacting: Rather than overreacting to a child becoming escalated, allow them to attempt to defuse. Frequently we can attempt to correct a child when they are escalated, but when they are screaming, normally, they are not at a place where they can be corrected, and frequently, our attempts will only worsen matters.

Remember Primal Brain: Humans have one brain, but it has really developed over time and become more complex, leaving us with essentially two brains.

A modern brain and a primal brain.

Your modern brain (frontal cortex) is responsible for problem solving, memory, language, judgment, impulse control, and reasoning.

Your primal brain (hindbrain and medulla) is responsible for survival, drive, and instinct.

When your primal brain is engaged (sympathetic response), your modern brain is not working much. When the primal brain turns off and the modern brain kicks into gear (parasympathetic response), rationality returns, bringing back clearer thinking.

The student who is screaming and venting is operating from their primal brain.

Any kind of reasoning or talking during this primal brain operation is most likely to escalate rather than de-escalate. At this point, you are not engaging with a thinking, rational, reasoning brain. You are faced with a primal brain that does not comprehend language effectively.

Think about the last time you were angry and someone told you to calm down.

Did it work? Did you miraculously go from anger to complete calmness?

Of course, you didn't.

In fact, being told to calm down may even have made you angrier.

Later, when you did calm down, you may have felt sorry for your behavior. This is because you were now thinking with your modern rationalizing brain, which allows you to process more clearly.

On many occasions I have found support staff trying to teach students anger control techniques during an anger episode. As you may already know, this is the worst time to teach a technique because the primal brain is not fond of learning. It operates on instinct.

The trick is to teach anger control techniques to students when they are calm, and most importantly to get them to engage in those techniques when they still have their modern brain engaged. This will effectively prevent the primal brain from showing up in full force. This is why **mindfulness** training is so important when you're teaching anger control.

Here are some thoughts to consider when facing the primal brain:

- Am I in a threatening posture, or am I using my *Supportive Stance*SM?
- Am I too close, providing a feeling of entrapment or the need to escape?

- What am I communicating with my body, my hands, my facial expressions?
- What message am I sending nonverbally to the primal brain?

Consider what CPI teaches: Position, Posture, and Proximity.

Now let's reconsider that screaming student.

Reframe the situation knowing that the primal brain is doing the screaming.

Your goal is to send that primal brain the nonverbal message that you are not a threat. Your goal is to try to be supportive.

As the primal brain receives these messages, there's a good chance physiologically that rationality will begin to return. At this point, you use your verbal communication skills to engage that modern brain.

Approaching in this way can really help you effectively deliver the most efficient intervention to an escalating student. Reframing an escalating event as *modern brain switching to primal brain* should give you a better understanding of why a student may act in this way, and hopefully give you the confidence to help someone in need.

Mindfulness Activities

(1) Deep Breathing: Belly Buddies

Material: small lightweight object like a soft toy, beanbag, wooden block, stuffed animal.

- Lie flat on your back and place the object on top of your belly button. Look down toward your object
- Take three slow deep breaths in and out
- In your mind count '1, 2, 3' for each breath in and '1, 2, 3' for each breath out. Pause slightly at the end of each breath out.
- Continue for 3 to five minutes or until the leader says stop.

Guiding Questions:

- Can you feel the weight on the object on your belly?
- Can you see the object moving?
- What is moving the object? Is it the air filling your lungs?
- Can you feel the air moving in through your nose?
- Can you feel the air moving out through your nose?
- Can you hear your breath?

(2) Sense Countdown

Sit or stand straight and still. Close your eyes or look downward.

Take three deep breaths in and out

Open your eyes

- Notice **five** things you can see

- Notice **four** things you can touch
- Notice **three** things you can hear
- Notice **two** things you can smell
- Notice **one** thing you can taste

(3)A moment of Gratitude

- Sit or stand straight and still. Close your eyes and look downward.
- Take three deep breaths in and out
- Think of something you feel grateful for today. This is your grateful moment.
- Think about how this moment affects your life or the lives of people around you
- Notice how you feel when you think about your gratitude moment
- Let the feeling grow bigger, spreading from where it is until it fills your entire body.
- Suggested Gratitude Prompts
 - Something that someone else did for you today
 - A person in your life whom you appreciate
 - An activity or hobby you are grateful to be able to do
 - A positive quality of someone who can sometimes be hard to get along with
 - A skill or ability you have
 - A part of your body you are grateful for and why.
 - An item you love.
 - Something that made you laugh.