
Deescalation of Emotional and Behavioral States

In most situations, a person who is very agitated is acting out of fear, frustration, anger, or some organic cause. The three emotional and psychological states listed below are ones that are likely to pose a potential safety risk.

Frustration

Frustration is the result of being prevented from accomplishing some goal or objective, or meeting a specific need in a timely manner. Signs of frustration include impatience, verbal signs of agitation, such as swearing, self-degrading statements, such as “I can’t do anything right”, blaming of others, and making demands, or threats. Frustration may change to anger if not dealt with effectively.

It is important when dealing with a person acting out of frustration to be cautious, but also to do everything you can to determine what the person needs or where the basis of their frustration lies. It is quite possible that if the need is within reason, you can assist the recipient in meeting that need and avoid any kind of confrontation. Listen and be supportive. Help the recipient to clarify feelings of frustration.

Behaviors of people expressing frustration:

- roll eyes
- sigh
- furrowed brow
- repeat self
- pace
- fidget
- blame; “you/they/them”
- threaten
- cry
- cuss/swear
- make fists
- clench jaw
- pound, slam
- stare
- glare
- name call
- reactive
- rude/sarcastic
- argumentative
- “always/never”
- tall posture
- look away
- arm/hand movement
- shake head “no”
- “I don’t understand”
- get quiet

Intervention for frustration:

- ▶ Ask a question about unmet goals to reveal the source of the frustration.
- ▶ Identify the goal as:
 - Reasonable
 - Lofty
 - Impossible
- ▶ If the goal is reasonable or lofty, work on ways to obtain it. Lofty goals tend to take longer to achieve.
- ▶ If the goal is impossible, be honest, unless it compromised your safety. Offer alternative goals if possible.

Fear

Fear is brought on by the expectation of danger that is real or imagined, and actual pain, whether physical or emotional. A recipient may also be afraid in unfamiliar situations. Some may react to fear by withdrawing, becoming quiet, and backing away from the situation. Others may make a rather exaggerated and loud display such as verbal threats, posturing, shaking of fists, etc., and maintaining a safe distance from whatever is causing the fear.

It is important when dealing with someone acting out of fear to give the person both physical and psychological room. If a person is challenged and forced into a corner, physically or psychologically, he or she is quite likely to strike out in self defense. It is important to provide support and reassurance to the person. By getting the person to talk, you may be able to determine the basis of the fear. If the verbal threats and posturing are of a defensive nature, give the person room and do not overreact.

Cooperative Communication

Behaviors of people expressing fear:

- move away
- hide (eyes)
- leave
- cuss/swear
- pale skin tone
- tremble
- sweat
- eyes widen
- pupils dilate
- heart rate up
- breathing up
- nostrils flare
- cry
- look around
- get quiet
- cower/slouch
- plead
- apologize
- “I don’t know”
- memory loss
- stammer
- furrowed brow
- no eye contact
- rocking back and forth
- negotiate
- easily startled

Intervention for fear:

- ▶ Ask a question about “discomfort” to reveal the pain (source of the fear).
- ▶ Do not move in toward someone who is in fear until you are sure you are not the cause of their fear or until you are invited to comfort them.
- ▶ Fear is often the result of a lack of or poor information and the mind running away with itself. More information can help.
- ▶ When the fear is realistic, i.e. based on something that is or could really happen, reassure and comfort them. Provide physical and psychological space.

Anger

Anger is an expression of frustration, fear, annoyance, betrayal, helplessness, hopelessness, or some other emotion directed toward some real or supposed grievance. It is a secondary emotion indicating *how* upset someone is. It is an indicator that someone is doing something we don’t like.

It is used to modify someone’s behavior. It is a motivator to get others or ourselves to change.

It can be a way of avoiding some other emotion such as guilt or shame by numbing those emotions.

When an agitated person displays signs of anger, it is important to convey a message that feeling angry is okay, when the anger can be justified. It is the way that the anger is expressed and dealt with that needs to be focused on. Help the person to identify the anger and productive ways of dealing with it. If the level of agitation is increasing, it is necessary to set clear behavioral limits. In doing so, specify what outcomes are needed. Then allow the person to choose how to achieve that outcome. If you confront or challenge, it will likely increase his/her level of agitation.

Behaviors of people expressing anger:

- raise voice
- cuss/swear
- rant
- clench jaw
- make fists
- repeat self
- move in
- red skin tone
- tremble
- sweat
- eyes get small
- pupils constrict
- heart rate up
- breathing up
- stop listening
- threaten
- blame; “you/they/them”
- cry
- pound, slam
- glare
- get quiet
- point
- scowl
- make demands
- loss of humor
- sarcasm

Intervention for anger:

- ▶ If possible, validate the anger. Often their behavior is a means to convey how upset they are.
- ▶ Be aware of your own triggers. Are you reacting to their anger or your fear of their anger?
- ▶ Avoid confronting, challenging, or blaming them. This often occurs when we get triggered.
- ▶ Find the cause of the anger; usually some other emotion is driving the anger.
- ▶ Set clear behavioral limits: “It’s okay to be angry; not okay to threaten, yell, throw, etc.”
- ▶ Pay attention to their visual focus. People in anger tend to look at what they are angry at or going to vent on.