

Strategies for Maintaining Personal Safety

Mass Health Officers Association
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Begin Safety Awareness with Yourself

TRUST YOUR GUT

- ▶ If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. DON'T PROCEED without checking things out.
- ▶ Research on “gut instinct” says it is really your subconscious noticing small things that show that something is different or wrong*.
- ▶ It's not your imagination, it's your subconscious trying to warn you.

*Gavin de Becker “The Gift of Fear”



Gut Instinct Exercise

- ▶ Close your eyes.
- ▶ Remember a time when you got a bad feeling about a situation, place, or person for no reason, and later on it turned out you were right. Or you got a bad feeling for a good reason.
- ▶ Focus in on the feeling you had that something was wrong. Remember that feeling.
- ▶ When you get that feeling at work, pay attention to it. It might be time to leave the situation.



Safety Awareness

- ▶ Look in EVERY DIRECTION, left, right, in front of you, behind you.





Safety Awareness

- ▶ Really SEE what's around you.
- ▶ The brain fills in the blanks with what you expect to see.
- ▶ Notice, with focus, what is really there, what is happening, how people are behaving.





Pretend It's New

- ▶ Shake up your brain occasionally (when you can do this safely) to help create new pathways in your brain to really SEE what's there when you are working.
 - Walk or drive a different route.
 - Do things in a different order.
 - Write with your non-dominant hand.



- ¹ HOW I TYPICALLY WRITE WITH MY RIGHT HAND. WITH
- ² Hs~
- ³ HOW I TYPICALLY WRITE WITH MY LEFT HAND. WITH
- ⁴ HOW I TYPICALLY WRITE WITH MY RIGHT HAND. WITH
- ⁵ HOW I TYPICALLY WRITE WITH MY LEFT HAND. WITH
- ⁶ HOW I TYPICALLY WRITE WITH MY RIGHT HAND. WITH



Code of Conduct

- ▶ Set a code of conduct for participants in your program, if this is possible.
- ▶ This creates an understanding of what is acceptable behavior for them to get what they want/need. It also strengthens your ability to stop the process or leave.



Check In / Check Out

- ▶ Do people in your office know where you are going? When you are expected back?
- ▶ Are there check-in / check-out procedures that can be implemented?
 - Text
 - Call
- ▶ Lone Worker Technology
 - Check-in feature
 - Panic Button
 - Motion Sensor
 - GPS tracking





Think About...

- ▶ Where you park.
 - How close is it to your destination?
 - How is the lighting? Will it be dark when you come back to your car?
 - Are there shrubs or hiding places?
 - Will you be blocked in if another car comes (e.g., driveway)?
 - Do you have to walk past anything that makes you uncomfortable?
 - Is there a better parking option?





Think About...

- ▶ Carefully observe the route from your car to your destination and back.
- ▶ Notice any sources of help, places you can go into (e.g., store, fire station, etc.).



- ▶ What people are around? What are they doing?
- ▶ Notice potential sources of help, and potential threats.



Think About...

- ▶ If you go indoors:
- ▶ Check your communication device before going inside.
- ▶ Keep doors open/ajar if you can. Do not allow the doors to be locked “my co-worker may join us”.





Think About...

- ▶ If you go indoors:
- ▶ Scan and identify all the exits and escape routes.
- ▶ How are you positioned relative to the person who may become agitated and the exit? Do not become trapped, be the closest person to the exit. If you can't, and sense someone become agitated, make an excuse to go get something and get closer to the exit.
- ▶ Can someone come up behind you? Stand with your back to the wall.
- ▶ You can politely ask others who are there to move to a different position, for example if you are providing medical screening, ask them to give you room.



Think About...

- ▶ At the office:
 - What is the building security, who can access what parts of the building?
 - If you are alone or there after hours, are the doors to the outside locked? Does anyone know you are there?



Think About...

▶ In a Car:

- Bring a co-worker or escort with you if you have any indication of a problematic interaction.
- Don't start the trip if you have a bad feeling, or any indication of a problematic interaction.
- Don't deliver bad news or discuss anything that may be agitating for the client in the car.
- Don't let someone sit in the back seat behind you.



Think About...

▶ In a Car:

- Deterrents:
 - Open line on the phone.
 - Dash Camera.
 - Panic button on phone.
 - Indicate/show you are being tracked by GPS by office.
- Physical barrier between you and the passenger.
- What route are you taking, is it isolated or are there potential safety stops along the way?



Think About...

- ▶ For all situations:
- ▶ Maintain awareness of everyone there and where they are.
- ▶ Pay attention to the subtle and active behaviors of the person(s) who could become agitated.



Think About...

- ▶ For all situations:
- ▶ Conduct your business with calm confidence and authority.
- ▶ If things start to escalate, get outside or get away if outdoors.
- ▶ **IF THINGS DON'T FEEL RIGHT, BELIEVE THAT FEELING AND ACT.**



Think About...

- ▶ Where and how you deliver bad news.
 - Do not do this in a situation where you could become trapped with the person.
 - You can deliver the news by phone or email later.





Think About...

▶ Deterrents.

- Call the office, keep an open line. “I have my supervisor here on the line with me to help answer any questions.”
- Have them think someone else is coming, “My colleague may be joining us.”
- Security Cameras.
- Body Cameras.





A Means to Call for Help

- ▶ Cell Phone. Two-way radio, panic button, other methods?
- ▶ Keep an open line on your cell phone and let them know that.
- ▶ Have local police number programmed and ready to go on your phone. 911 may call state police.





History

- ▶ If there have already been agitated visits or phone conversations, or the person has been difficult with another co-worker, bring an escort.





History

- ▶ Check your departmental records, and the records of other departments to see the history of the person you will be dealing with. Has this person had a case history or difficulty in the past with other officials in your organization?
- ▶ Does the person have a history with the police?
- ▶ Based on the history, consider an escort or other increased safety measures.
- ▶ **TRUST YOUR GUT!**



Law Enforcement

- ▶ Local police may be able to provide training and tips.
- ▶ Bring a police escort if necessary, state or local.



You Do Not Have to Be Polite



- ▶ If you feel threatened or uncomfortable, **LEAVE.**
- ▶ You could make a neutral/reassuring statement that can help you exit.
- ▶ “I have information on this in my car.”
- ▶ “I don’t think I’m helping you, I will have my co-worker come back and finish up”.
- ▶ “Let me get more information about your concerns and come back another time.”



De-Escalation

- ▶ Benefits of de-escalation:
 - Sometimes you can bring an agitated person back to calm with the things you say and do, preventing it from turning physical.



De-Escalation

▶ Limits of de-escalation:

- Sometimes there is just nothing you can do to help calm down someone who has become agitated.
- Do not spend too long trying to make it work if it isn't working.
- Focus instead on how you are going to get help, distract, escape.



Pre- De-Escalation

- ▶ If you are calm, that increases the chances the situation will not escalate.
- ▶ If the situation starts escalating and you can stay calm, that can slow down or prevent full escalation.
- ▶ “Mirroring” of breath and your state of calm.

Change Your Energy – it's contagious



- ▶ Heart focus



Change Your Energy – it's contagious

▶ Heart breathing

- ***1. Bring all of your attention and awareness to your heart and the center of your chest. Breathe a little bit slower and deeper than usual. Find a slow, steady rhythm you are comfortable with, for example breathe in for 5, breathe out for 5.***
- ***2. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart and chest. Find a steady rhythm that is comfortable for you.***
- ***3. Now think of someone or something in your life that makes you feel a sense appreciation, gratitude or love. It can be anything, a person, a pet, a time in nature, a special place, an accomplishments***
- ***Practice for at least 3 minutes***
- ***Do some of this breathing before going into the situation. Breathe with your focus on your heart if things become heated (steps 1 and 2).***
- ***Source: Heartmath.com (Heart Math Institute)***



De-Escalation – You Set the Tone

- ▶ You are communicating with:
 - Your eyes
 - Your facial expression
 - Your body language
 - Your tone of voice
 - The words you are saying
 - Your body position (personal space)
 - Your breathing





De-Escalation

- ▶ People want to feel heard and want to feel respected.
- ▶ Sometimes you just need to give someone time to get out everything they want to say.
- ▶ Even if what they are saying is wrong, or you cannot help them, you don't need to tell them that while they are agitated. Calm the situation down first, then handle the realities when you can do that safely.



De-Escalation

- ▶ If they are beginning to become agitated:
 - Do you understand what their concern is? Can you help be sure they feel heard?
 - Can you accommodate what they are upset about?
 - Can you solve or partially solve their problem?
 - Drop the particular item and move on to something else.
 - Change what is happening, move to a seated position, “let’s sit down”. Positive disruption can break the arc of escalation.

- ▶ Don’t worry about being right in an escalated situation or enforcing what needs to be enforced, worry about staying safe.

- ▶ Bringing in a different co-worker can serve to de-escalate the situation, or calling back to the office for different person.

MAINTAIN STRONG AWARENESS



Keep Observing the Person Carefully for ANY CHANGES –

–BELIEVE YOUR GUT FEELING–



Some Earlier Warning Signs

- ▶ Clenching and unclenching jaw.
- ▶ Raising their voice, change in what they are saying.
- ▶ Pacing or fidgeting.
- ▶ A change in eye contact, e.g., may scan
- ▶ A change in body language.
- ▶ A change in mood / attitude
- ▶ Behavior becomes disruptive, non-compliant.
- ▶ Keep Observing the Person Carefully for ANYTHING THAT CHANGES – BELIEVE YOUR GUT FEELING



De-Escalation

▶ DO:

- Take some deep breaths, calm yourself
- Move away from the person*
- Make soft eye contact
- Speak in a soft, neutral tone
- Really listen, show empathy
 - Reflect phrases back, “so what you’re saying is...”
 - Say “I think I understand...” or “help me understand how I can help (or what you need)”
- Try and create a solution
- Use “we” and “us”

- *Remember to always position yourself closest to the exit, don’t allow yourself to become trapped.



De-Escalation

▶ DO NOT:

- Tell them to Calm Down
- Point your fingers at them
- Get closer to them
- Touch them
- Threaten them
- Match their escalation (oh yeah? Well I'm going to...)
- Have threatening or challenging body language
- Make threatening or challenging eye contact



Some Imminent Danger Signs



- ▶ The person is going into fight or flight mode
- ▶ Face:
 - Pale, flushed, lips tighten over teeth
 - Eyebrows drop to cover/protect eyes
 - Chin drops to cover throat
 - Stares at intended target
- ▶ General:
 - Breathing rapid
 - Clenched fists, or clenching and unclenching
 - May stop all movement or may rock heel to toe
 - Lowering/settling of body, getting ready to lunge
- ▶ Keep Observing the Person Carefully for **ANYTHING THAT CHANGES – BELIEVE YOUR GUT FEELING**



Unpredictable Behavior

- ▶ Drugs
- ▶ Mental Health Challenges
- ▶ Suffers from trauma and is triggered
- ▶ Other Causes
- ▶ When behavior is unpredictable, focus on your immediate safety, standard de-escalation may not be effective.



Psychological First Aid

- ▶ Dangerous acting out is often because the person feels unsafe or threatened.
- ▶ “What do you need right now?”
- ▶ Take care not to corner the person.

Goals of Psychological First Aid

- ▣ Psychological first aid (PFA) promotes and sustains an environment of:

SAFETY

CALM

CONNECTEDNESS

SELF-EFFICACY

HOPE



If You Feel an Immediate Threat to Your Person

- ▶ Distract
- ▶ Escape
- ▶ Call 911





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