

When Clients Get Hostile

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When Clients Get Hostile

1. Try to remain calm and think ahead. Think about your next move. Ideally, it should be escape. Watch for opportunities.
2. Don't do anything to get yourself or others hurt. Do not physically or verbally confront the client unless it is absolutely necessary to protect yourself from injury. Focus on defensive moves that could open up an escape route.
3. If you must use force, use only as much as is necessary to control the situation. Remember that your behavior will be reviewed by supervisors or administrators. Their standard will likely be "Did the employee react in a reasonable and prudent manner as would be expected by a professional who deals with the public?"
4. If the client says he or she has a weapon, assume it's true even if you do not see it. Comply if you must but be watchful for an opportunity for escape.
5. Memorize the client's features, clothing and other identifying information. The most reliable way to do this is by recalling the client one section at a time, from the top down. Write the description down as you remember it. Do not discuss your memory with anyone or the accuracy of the information is likely to be influenced by the employee with the strongest personality.
6. When the client leaves, try to watch where he or she goes. If he is going to another section of the building, be sure to let other employees know what is going on. If the suspect leaves the building, try to get a direction of travel, the vehicle description and/or license plate number. In the case of assault, theft, property damage or robbery, immediately lock the door when the suspect leaves. Open it only when police have arrived.

Behavioral Cues for Violence

Anger responses vary widely as any other personality trait. There is no way to determine with any certainty whether or not a disgruntled client will escalate to anger and whether the anger will escalate into violence. The following

guidelines were put together for mental health care workers for use with their clientele. While counselors who deal regularly with the mentally ill experience a higher degree of angry and violent responses, it is wise to remember how rapidly emotions can change. When judging a client's violence potential, look for verbal and nonverbal congruency. Are the words, vocal tones, and body language logical and consistent? Is the client losing control or not making sense?

View the following as indicators for potential violence but not as absolutes:

NONVERBAL CLUES:

1. Facial Expressions

- * Jaws tense, clenched teeth, biting lip, pursed or quivering lips.
- * Frowning
- * Eye contact vigilant, staring with no break, dilated pupils.
- * Skin flushed red or blanched looking (more obvious with lighter skin tones).
- * Facial sweating, especially if it is not warm weather.
- * Pulsing carotid artery or temple.

2. Breathing Pattern Changes

- * Breathing becomes shallow or rapid.

3. Body Language

- * Attitude changes.
- * Is the client "squaring off?" (Facing you confrontational style?)
- * Does the client appear to be making him/herself "ready for action?"
- * Does he/she show signs of restlessness?
- * Is he/she pacing?
- * Is he/she becoming "stony" or withdrawn?

4. Extremities

- * Learn to watch hands, and note tension.
- * Clenched fists or white knuckles indicate fear, anger, or frustration.
- * Is there a noticeable shift from a relaxed to a tense or "tight" position?
- * Is the client hiding his/her hands, perhaps trying to "hide" his/her anger?
- * Are you noticing discharge movements like pounding fists, stomping feet, pushing, or kicking objects?

DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECT(S):

Name: _____

Address: _____

Gender: Male Female

Height: _____

Weight: _____

Hair: _____

Eyes: _____

Clothes: _____

Distinguishing Features: _____

Vehicle:

Make: _____ **Model:** _____

Color: _____ **License Plate No.** _____

Direction of Travel: _____

If police are called, list name(s) of responding officer(s), case number of report filled, and disposition case.

REMEMBER-you will have much better luck in filling out this form accurately, immediately after the incident happens, if a crime occurs complete the form after calling police.

Coping with the Aftermath

Listed below are some reactions common to people who experience crime, events that made them feel as if victimization was imminent, or encounters with people who are verbally abusive or threatening. This includes incidents that were witnessed and those that occurred in a familiar place or to familiar people. The reactions vary in intensity and duration according to the victim's personality and prior experiences. A minor incident to one person might be quite traumatic and life altering to another.

These thought, feelings and behaviors can be upsetting to the point where the victim questions his/her emotional stability. It is important to remember they are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Many victims benefit from receiving support from professional counselors, caring friends and co-workers. Don not be reluctant to seek or recommend assistance if the reactions become overwhelming.

Thoughts

Repeated thoughts or memories of the event that are hard to stop. Recurring dreams or nightmares. Being caught off guard by a person, place, or event that reminds you of the victimization. Reconstructing the event in your mind in an effort to regain a sense of control. Trouble concentrating or remembering things. Questioning your "world views" or spiritual beliefs.

Feelings

Pervasive fear. Feeling emotionally numb or withdrawn. Lack of enjoyment in everyday activities. Feeling depressed or anxious. Lack of trust in others. Anger, including a desire for revenge or vengeance.

Behaviors

Being "hyper" alert or startling easily. Being overprotective of you and your family's safety. Avoiding activities that are reminders of the incident. Avoidance of real or symbolic violence (news, television, movies). Increased communication problems with family members or co-workers. Staying artificially busy to avoid thinking about the event. Isolating yourself from other people and/or former pleasurable activities.

PREVENTION THROUGH PREPARATION:

Preparation is the key to success when dealing with hostile or difficult clients or emergencies. We practice fire and earthquake drills not because we don't know what to do, but because an emergency causes most people to panic, sometimes with disastrous results.

Employees should participate in regular training sessions that reinforce successful resolutions to difficult and hostile situations. Procedures for summoning police or fire and evacuation of the building in an emergency should also be established and practiced.

Considering the following guidelines when developing safety policies and procedures:

- (1) **Be alert as to what is going on around you.** Employees tend to become territorial and are sometimes reluctant to request or offer assistance to a co-worker or supervisor in another department.
- (2) **Pre-arrange a code word, phrase, or signal that says you need help or support.** If you are alone you can use your signal over a telephone, intercom, or someone else in the office or a neighboring office or building.
- (3) **Learn to use the 9-1-1 system effectively.** Contact your local police jurisdiction for guidelines. Ask about response times, and whether an enhanced 9-1-1 system is in place. Enhanced 9-1-1 tells the operator the address and phone number from which you are calling. So, if a telephone connection is broken, police or fire can still respond.

In any case, affix a permanent label on the phone that lists the street address of your office and indicates if "9" must be dialed to get an outside line. In an emergency, we forget things we know well. It is also possible a client may be asked to make the 9-1-1 call. If you are ready with pertinent information, you are less likely to have delays in response time.

- (4) **Designate tasks in an emergency.** One person should call 9-1-1, one should be monitoring the situation for updates or changes, another should be clearing the building of uninvolved clients, etc. In cases where you must ask a client to assist, tell them what to do in a clear, direct and authoritative manner.

- (5) **Make it a habit to keep office supplies out of easy reach.** Scissors, letter openers and similar objects can easily be used as weapons.
- (6) **Maintain your balance and ability to move in any direction.** In an emergency, you may have to move backwards and sideways before you can turn to run.
- (7) **Make it an everyday practice to maintain physical space.** Do not slouch or lean over counters, chairs or other furniture. If you must be physically close to assist a client, then step in to answer the question or concern and step away when you are done.
- (8) **If an incident occurs that is upsetting or frightening to one or more staff members, be sure to take the time to meet and debrief.** Analyze staff reactions and feelings in a constructively critical way. Avoid blame and guilt, the goal is to minimize risk and learn to work well as a team.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Learn to clear up confusion and frustration before it develops into a hostile encounter.

- (1) **Listen carefully and patiently.** Confused or frustrated clients need to feel they are being heard.
- (2) **If they are confused or unable to clarify what the problem is, ask questions.** Paraphrase what you think you're hearing. Help them define the problem and decide what they need.
- (3) **Let them know you are trying to understand their feelings.** The simple statement, "I understand that you are frustrated," can make the client feel you care.
- (4) **Let them know you really want to help.** Ask; "What can I do to help?" They need to know you are concerned and want to see their needs met if at all possible.
- (5) **Review and clarify each step.** If you're still unsure about what they want, backtrack to where the problem began.

- (6) **Define your role and abilities for them.** Let them know what you can do. IF you can't solve the problems but someone else can, direct them to that person.

DIFFUSING ANGER

Unfortunately, there is no guaranteed method or magical phrase that can diffuse a client's anger. If we learn not to make a situation worse by our own reactions, the anger will often dissipate on its own.

- (1) **When tempers flare, your best response is simply to listen.** Let them ventilate. Anger that is listened to will often diffuse. Anger that is not diffused will build to hostility.
- (2) **The best way to maintain your cool when clients lose theirs is to understand that their anger is not a personal attack.** They are mad at a situation, not you. Don't contribute to their stress and yours by getting defensive and taking their anger personally. Be objective.
- (3) **Remember you choose how to respond to an angry client.** You need not answer anger with anger. You choose your words, and are responsible for them.
- (4) **If you make a mistake, admit it.** An honest acknowledgement of error can calm an angry person.
- (5) **Record their complaint in writing.** While this does not indicate that you agree with their complaint, it does assure them that you are taking the dissatisfaction seriously.
- (6) **Keep the discussion centered on the problem rather than on each other's personalities.** However, if the client resorts to verbally attacking you as a person, you don't have to listen.

Explain that you want to help, but cannot when they speak to you in such a way. Get someone else to assist you if the client will not control him/herself. Two to one odds can give you the psychological advantage. Alert your supervisor and the police if you and your co-worker cannot calm your irate client. If the client appears dangerous, **IF YOU THINK YOU ARE IN IMMINENT PHYSICAL DANGER, WALK AWAY IMMEDIATELY.**