

Keeping Everyone Safe

Throughout the year, incidents may arise on campus involving students, parents/guardians, coworkers, or others that staff must address. Effectively managing these potentially emotional situations involves maintaining appropriate interactions, including the avoidance of both over and under reacting. There are strategies that can be used to prevent such situations from escalating, including the following:

1. Personal space

Distance between parties is one of the most important issues. Personal space needs vary from person to person and from situation to situation. When dealing with an agitated person, be cognizant of the nonverbal behavior displayed (tightening of facial muscles, clenching of hands, movement away from you). Nonverbal cues are equally as important as verbal. As a general rule, most people feel comfortable with a distance of about 1.5 to 3 feet around them. Respect personal space accordingly.

2. Body Language

a. Posture

Posture or stance can communicate a challenge and send a mixed message. The best and least threatening stance is keeping your body at an angle to the individual and at least one leg length away, versus face-to-face or shoulder-to-shoulder. This posture provides personal space to the individual as well as a safety margin for you.

b. Arms

Arms folded across the chest can be perceived as hostile or defensive in all types of situations. Minimizing arm movements and keeping them as calm as your voice and demeanor is very important.

c. Hands

Keep your hands in a visible position. Avoid concealing them in your pockets or behind your back as these positions can be perceived as threatening and-or as if you are hiding something.

d. Physical Touch

In general, do not touch an agitated individual. For some, this could be reassuring, but for others, this could escalate the agitation.

3. Speech and Language Factors

a. Para Verbal Communication

The tone, volume and rate of our speech comprise a large part of what we actually communicate. Using an unemotional tone, normal volume, and a slow rate of speech are best. Monitor and listen carefully to responses in order to evaluate comprehension of your message.

b. Empathic Listening

Demonstrate active listening to truly understand what the individual is trying to communicate. Look at the individual with a nonjudgmental approach and do not allow other individuals or situations to divert your attention. Communicating that the situation at hand is your priority is very important.

c. Verbal Interventions

Clear and simple verbal communication is key while using the strategies listed above. Providing clearly stated directions, solutions, and behavioral expectations are very important while avoiding a long, complex monologue that may not be comprehended by the individual.

4. Interpersonal Issues

Stay in control of your own behavior and emotions. Do not take the actions or words of the agitated individual personally. These behaviors are not directed at you, even if it may feel like it at the time.

Using these strategies will assist you and the other individual during difficult situations as well as keeping everyone safe.