

# How To: De-escalate Conflict

Violence has increased in America, and people's tempers may flare even in routine interactions. Here are some strategies nonprofit employees can use to assess the level of conflict in a situation, bring down the heat in difficult conversations, and respond if an action does escalate.

## Assess: How Escalated is the Conflict?

**Observe** the conflict from a safe distance.

**Gauge** the level of conflict, whether you have the emotional resources and any needed support to respond, and whether your intervention could increase the potential for harm.

*If the individual's behavior or the situation is escalating and you believe violence may occur, leave the situation, go to a safe location, and seek help.*



**AGITATION**, the lowest level of conflict, is indicated by signs such as aggressive body language, sighing loudly, and eye-rolling.

(*Note:* at times, some neurodivergent individuals may display gestures such as eye-rolling without aggressive intent.)



**ESCALATION**, the middle level of conflict, including signs such as pacing, finger pointing, using an aggressive tone of voice, raising one's voice, or arguing.



**PEAK CONFLICT**, the highest level, includes verbal abuse (like shaming, humiliating, or harassing someone); spitting or inappropriate touching or gestures; physical aggression; or the display of weapons.

## Take Action to De-Escalate Conflict

**Take a few deep breaths to ground yourself before you act.**

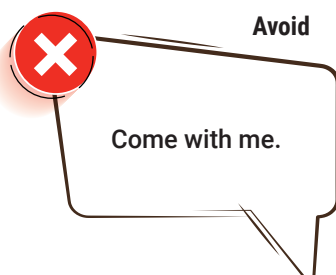
**Change the setting.** If you can, remove people from the area. This could mean asking some of the parties in a conflict and onlookers to leave.

**Respect personal space.** Maintain a safe distance, and do not touch the person who is upset.

**Empathize.** Show genuine concern and a willingness to listen without judgement.

- ▶ Speak calmly to show empathy.
- ▶ Monitor your volume and do not raise your voice.
- ▶ Speak slowly.
- ▶ Be aware of emphasizing words or syllables, which can escalate a situation.

## Language and Actions to Use and Avoid in Conflict



- ✗ **Avoid:** Standing rigid directly in front of the person
- ✓ **Try:** Keeping a relaxed, alert stance slightly to the person's side
- ✗ **Avoid:** Pointing your finger
- ✓ **Try:** Keeping your hands down, open, and visible at all times
- ✗ **Avoid:** Faking a smile
- ✓ **Try:** Maintaining a neutral, attentive facial expression



**Helpful Resources.**

[Our Guide to Conflict De-Escalation, Right to Be](#)

[De-Escalation: How You Can Defuse Potentially Violent Situations](#), Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency