

Keeping calm and safe – tips for de-escalation

People may become agitated or upset for a wide range of reasons.

When people feel uncertain, confused or unheard they can become distressed, anxious or angry and can present challenging behaviours.

Planning ahead for how to respond when this occurs, can help us to stay calm and able to cope with challenges when they arise.

Check your safety space

- Respect personal space: 2-3 metres away. If someone becomes agitated, aim for 3-4 metres
- Know where your exits are and/or retreat options
- Know what the escalation plan is for your team

Use your eyes and ears

- Sometimes even before a person speaks, their facial expression or the way they are walking or standing will give you a hint as to how a person is feeling
- When a person is agitated, they will often speak more quickly or with a louder voice. This can be a clue that a person is upset
- If you see someone becoming agitated, check whether it might reflect a communication challenge or indicate a support need (e.g. vision, hearing, neuro-diversity)
- For some, agitation may reflect a negative experience with the health system in the past

Be calm and welcoming

- Introduce yourself, smile and make eye contact to establish rapport, take your time, the person may be very nervous and your compassion will help
- Be respectful: give the person your full attention and listen carefully to what they say
- Use please and thank you when making requests (rather than issuing commands or demands)

Communicate your desire to help

- Aim to understand their concerns: ask open questions and check with them to ensure you have understood
- Listen for the underlying needs in their message: tone of voice, emphasis and body language can be clues as to what is important to them
- Speak slowly and allow time for the person to think about options and responses
- Be empathic and non-judgemental in your words and your actions

Set boundaries

If a person raises their voice, makes threats, or is uncivil in words or behaviours:

- Be calm
- State the unwanted behaviour
- State the behaviour you want to see, in order to be able to help them
- If the behaviour persists, end the communication
- IF YOU FEEL UNSAFE REMOVE YOURSELF AND SEEK HELP

Talk to someone

- Find time to talk with someone (a colleague or your leader) afterwards

You can expect to feel the effects of adrenalin in the period after the event.