

Verbal De-Escalation Techniques

Now that masks are now required in UVU classrooms, you may encounter the occasional student who is angry or upset. The following verbal de-escalation techniques may help you to calm down the student. If the student threatens the safety of themselves or others, call the UVU Police.

Keep in mind two important concepts:

1. *Reasoning with an enraged person is not possible.* The first and only objective in de-escalation is to reduce the level of agitation so that discussion becomes possible.
2. *De-escalation techniques are abnormal.* Naturally, we default to fight, flight or freeze when anxious or scared. However, in de-escalation, we can do none of these. We must appear calm, centered and in control, even when we are frightened. Thus, you may need to practice so it comes second nature.

A. Remain in Control of Yourself

- a. **Appear calm, centered and self-assured** . . . even though you might not feel that way. Relax. Your anxiety can make the student feel anxious and unsafe, which can escalate aggression.
- b. Use a modulated, low and monotonous **tone of voice**.

DO NOT:

- Be defensive – even if the comments or insults are directed at you, they are not about you.
- Defend yourself or anyone else from insults or misconceptions about their roles

c. **Be respectful** even when firmly setting limits or calling for help. The agitated individual is very sensitive to feeling shamed and disrespected. We want them to know that it is not necessary to show us that they must be respected. We automatically treat them with dignity and respect.

d. **Stay safe.** Know that you have the choice to leave and to tell the student to leave. You may also call someone for back up should de-escalation be ineffective. Please be aware that

some students may have suffered trauma or may come from marginalized groups who have suffered from bias from authorities. Calling additional people or the police may not de-escalate such interactions.

B. The Physical Stance

- a. Take a moment to **assess** the situation, look at the student's body language, listen to their tone of voice and remember what you have learned.
- b. Always be at the **same eye level**. Encourage the student to be seated, but if they stand, you stand also.
- c. **Allow extra physical space** between – about four times your usual distance.
- d. To show you are listening, **incline your head** slightly or **nod slightly**
- e. **Stand at an angle** from the student so you can sidestep away if needed.
- f. **Avoid constant eye contact**; allow the student to break their gaze and look away.

DO NOT:

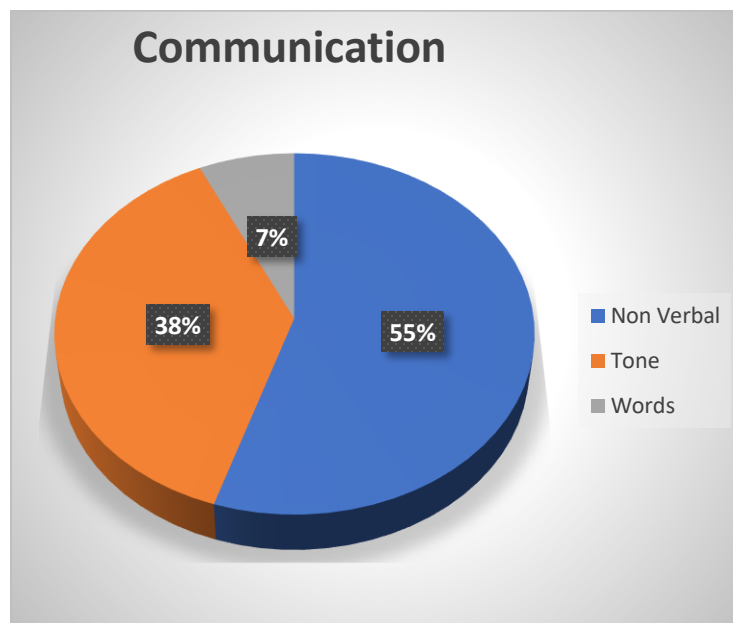
- Smile – could be misinterpreted as mockery or anxiety
- Touch – even if some touching is generally culturally appropriate and usual – agitated people may misinterpret physical contact as hostile or threatening
- Argue or try to convince – instead, give choices, not explanations (i.e. empower)
- Point or shake your finger

C. The De-Escalation Discussion

- a. **Speak calmly** at an average volume.
- b. Treat the student with **dignity and respect**; ignore insults and remain nonjudgmental.
- c. **Empathize** with feelings but not with the behavior (e.g. “I understand that you have every right to feel angry, but it is not okay for you to use abusive language.”)
- d. Explain limits and rules in an **authoritative, firm, but always respectful tone**. Give choices where possible in which both alternatives are safe ones (e.g. Would you like to continue our meeting calmly or would you prefer to come back tomorrow when things can be more relaxed?)
- e. **Give the consequences** of inappropriate behavior without threats or anger.
- f. Represent **external controls as institutional** rather than personal.
- g. Offer **reflective comments** to show that you have heard what their concerns are.
- h. **Trust your instincts**. If you assess or feel that de-escalation is not working, STOP! You will know within a few minutes if it’s beginning to work.

DO NOT:

- Get loud or try to yell over a screaming person
- Ask how a person is feeling or interpret feelings in an analytic way



Remember:

- Communication is more about your body language and tone of voice than it is about your word choice.
- You are not trying to do anything except calm the person down.
- Stay safe and know you have the choice to leave at any time.