Levels of Violent Behavior

Violence exists on a continuum, from verbal abuse to physical assault to homicide. The escalation from verbal abuse to physical assault can occur quickly. Recognizing the levels of violent behavior is key to preventing violence.

Early Signs of Stress

- Disorganized behavior
- Heightened anxiety
- Change from usual behavior (such as a talkative person suddenly becomes silent)
- Personality magnification

Mid-Level Signs of Stress

- Questioning, skittish
- Refusal
- Verbal release
- Intimidation/belligerence (making threats)
- Agitation; becomes defensive whenever someone comes near them; speaks in raised voice; uses rapid speech; uses body language that includes a tightened jaw, tense posture, clenched fists, increased activity (such as pacing)

High-Level Signs of Stress

- Recurrent suicidal threats
- Recurrent physical fights
- Destruction of property
- Utilization of weapons to harm others
- Commission of murder, rape and/or arson

De-Escalating Potentially Violent Situations

There are some things we can do in our daily interactions with people to de-escalate potentially violent situations.
1. Position yourself so that the other person cannot block your access to an exit. Don't invade the individual's personal space. A good distance is three to six feet away.

2. Project calmness; move and speak slowly, quietly and confidently.

3. Be an empathetic listener by encouraging the person to talk and listen patiently and seriously. It is often helpful to use the other person's name when you respond. Do not reject all of his or her demands at the start. Do not speak while the person unloads. Wait for him or her to wind down.

4. Focus your attention on the other person to let them know you are interested in what they have to say. Don't pose in challenging stances - standing directly opposite, hands on hips, arms crossed, in physical contact, pointing fingers or with long periods of fixed attention. Take notes, ask open-ended questions and reconfirm the details.

5. Maintain a relaxed yet attentive posture and position yourself at a right angle, rather than directly in front of the other person. Maintain intermittent eye contact (careful, a fixed stare can be considered threatening) and don't make sudden movements that can be interpreted as threatening.

6. Acknowledge the person's feelings. Indicate that you can see he or she is upset. Don't challenge, threaten or dare the individual; don't belittle the person or make him or her feel foolish. Don't criticize or act impatiently toward the agitated individual.

7. Ask for small, specific favors, such as asking the person to move to a quieter area. Don't attempt to bargain with a threatening person.

8. Establish ground rules if unreasonable behavior
persists. Calmly describe the consequences of any violent behavior.

9. Use delaying tactics, which will give the person time to calm down. Offer a drink of water (from a paper cup).

10. Be reassuring and point out choices. Break big problems into smaller, more manageable problems. Don't try to impart a lot of technical or complicated information when emotions are running high.

11. Accept criticism in a positive way. When a complaint might be true, use statements like you're probably right or it was my fault. If the criticism seems unwarranted, calmly ask clarifying questions.

12. Ask for the other person's recommendations. Repeat back what you feel is being requested of you. Don't make false statements or promises you can't keep.

13. Be aware that anything in the room can be used as a weapon.

One of the most important things to remember is that if a person's behavior starts to escalate beyond your comfort zone -- DISENGAGE.

**Responding when a Violent Situation Occurs**

1. Establish personal safety. Face the individual (never turn your back), but stand well away.

2. Know where all emergency call buttons are located and keep it in reach.

3. Follow the intervention policies at your organization. Establish safety for people in the work area (employees, customers and visitors).

4. Call Security for help -- or call local law enforcement if there is no on-site security.
Know and Use Your Resources

1. Employee Assistance Program
   At the first indication that an employee is having personal or work related issues, direct them to an Employee Assistance Program.

2. Security/Public Safety
   Make sure they are aware of a person behaving erratically. They can provide escort service, patrolling officers, and non-violent intervention. Can contact local law enforcement when necessary.

3. Community Resources
   For employees who may be involved in domestic violence, you may direct them to the Council on Domestic Abuse (see list of resources).

4. Chain of Command
   Keep your supervisor in the communication loop. The supervisor needs to be aware of potentially violent behavior on the part of employees. They need to follow through with Human Resources in the case of employee-initiated violence.

5. Workplace Violence Policy
   If you have a policy, be aware of your responsibilities under the policy and make your employees aware of their responsibilities; communication is key.