

# Enhancing De-Escalation and Risk Management Skills in a Clinical Setting: *Keeping the Peace*

Pollack Peacebuilding Systems

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## The Root of Escalation

Escalation can arise from a variety of sources, but primarily from disrupted or unmet needs. Particularly, we find four psychological needs that tend to put a situation at an increased **RISC** for escalation.

### Respect

A person may feel that their feelings, wants, and opinions do not matter, and that their voice is not heard. This can be a source of conflict if they perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully.

TIPS to restore Respect: Treat others like they are important. Get a sense of their feelings, empathize with them, and listen to their concerns. Show them that their feelings are important and that their voice is being heard.

### Identify

A person may feel that their role in a situation does not feel right, or that they are not being understood. This can be a source of conflict if they feel that their identity is not being respected.

TIPS to restore Identity: Make it clear that you understand what the other person cares about and that you value their perspective. When they feel like you understand what they care about and their underlying values, they will be more likely to reciprocate that back to you.

### Safety

A person may feel that it is not safe to speak their mind, fearing retaliation or humiliation. This can be a source of conflict if they feel that their safety is being threatened.

TIPS to restore Safety: Create a safe environment for others to voice their concerns. Ensure the space is private and comfortable for both of you. Listen to their perspective first, before responding or sharing your perspective.

### Control

TIPS to restore Control: Remind others that they do have some control over the situation, even if it may be limited. Go a step further and give them control over the environment, in which you need to have a conversation. Offer them the choice of when and where the conversation will occur, as well as, ask for permission to share your perspective and feelings with them.

# The Psychobiology of Conflict Escalation

When we experience a real or perceived threat, it creates physiological and cognitive changes in our bodies (triggering our sympathetic nervous system/ “amygdala hijack”). During stressful events, our bodies release cortisol and adrenaline into our bloodstream and neural pathways, which promote our bodies to prepare for a physical response to a threat in the environment.

Cortisol, in particular, works to inhibit brain communication to your prefrontal cortex. Your prefrontal cortex is responsible for your ability to regulate emotions, reason, have a sense of morality, and perspective-taking. With our prefrontal cortex inhibited, our emotional brain takes over, and we tend to react in ways that escalate the stress (**Autonomic Stress Response/Automatic React Mode**). We have four basic physiologic primal responses to stress: **Fight/Flight/Freeze/Fawn**.

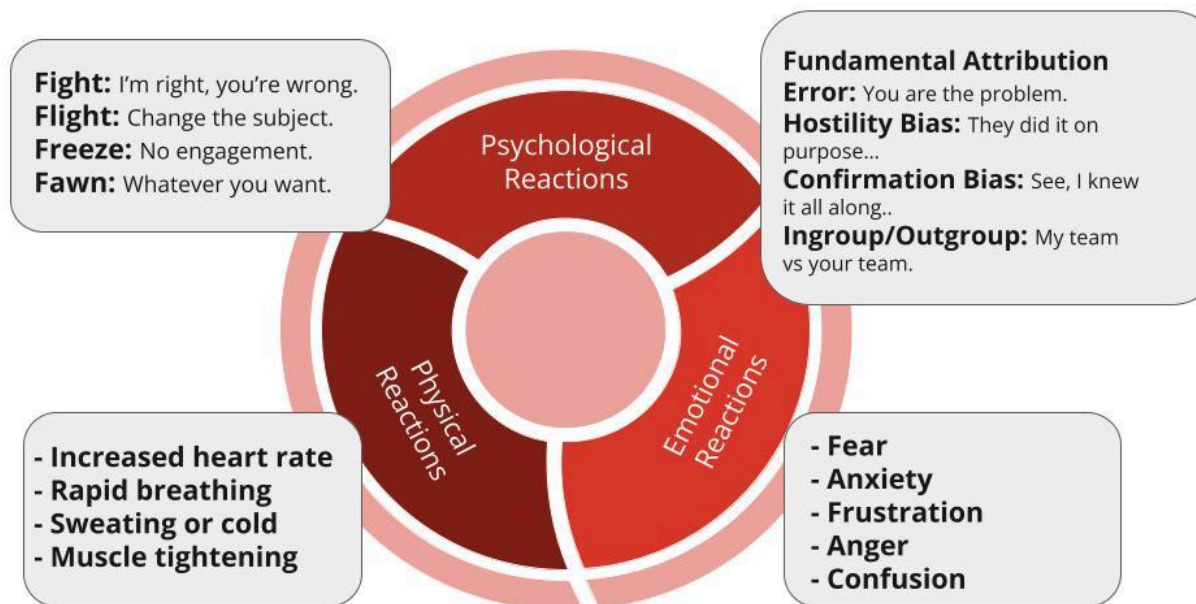
**Fight:** “I’m right. You’re wrong”

**Flight:** Changes the subject.

**Freeze:** Doesn’t engage at all.

**Fawn:** “Whatever you want.”

While controlling these automatic responses will take practice, through self-awareness and self-regulation, we can trigger our parasympathetic nervous system, enhancing our prefrontal cortex (or “thinking brain”) in challenging, stress-provoking times.



## Self-awareness & Self-regulation

Being aware of what sets you and your autonomic nervous system off, is vital to shifting to a constructive response. Reflect on what causes you to REACT rather than RESPOND.

### *Techniques for Self-Regulation:*

- **The Physiological Sigh**
  - *Two short inhales, one long exhale*
- **Peripheral Gaze**
  - *Widen gaze*
- **Cognitive Reframing**
  - *I'm safe. I'm okay. I know what to do.*
- **Self-Acceptance**
  - *It's okay to feel*

### **Consider Your Needs: Respect. Safety. Control.**

Emotional triggers result from internalization, perception and actual threats -- the perception that your needs are being threatened or depleted in some way. In reality, they may not be.

### *Can we move from perception to reality?*

The conflict they are bringing may not REALLY be about you.

What may feel like an attack is likely not a REAL threat.

You have the power to CHOOSE whether to help, fight, or walk away.

## Self-Resilience Domains of Health

We are able to navigate stressful situations more effectively when we are well resourced through healthy habits. These habits build up intra self-resilience which at a biological level helps our body process and manage influxes of cortisol into our systems. We can better resource ourselves to be resilient in times of stress through regular activities that satisfy these 5 domains of health.

<b>Physical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Going on regular walks/exercising</li> <li>- Healthy diet/ Sleep hygiene</li> <li>- Avoid coping with substances</li> </ul>
<b>Mental, Emotional, Spiritual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meditation/gratitude practice</li> <li>- Focus on present/future instead of the past</li> <li>- Enjoy or make art</li> </ul>
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cultivate relationships</li> <li>- Find humor and laughter with others</li> </ul>
<b>Intellectual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seek out new hobbies</li> <li>- Read a book</li> <li>- Learn something new</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schedule time for yourself or your health</li> <li>- Introduce animals into your life</li> <li>- Participate in outdoor activities (sunlight)</li> </ul>

# De-escalation Skills

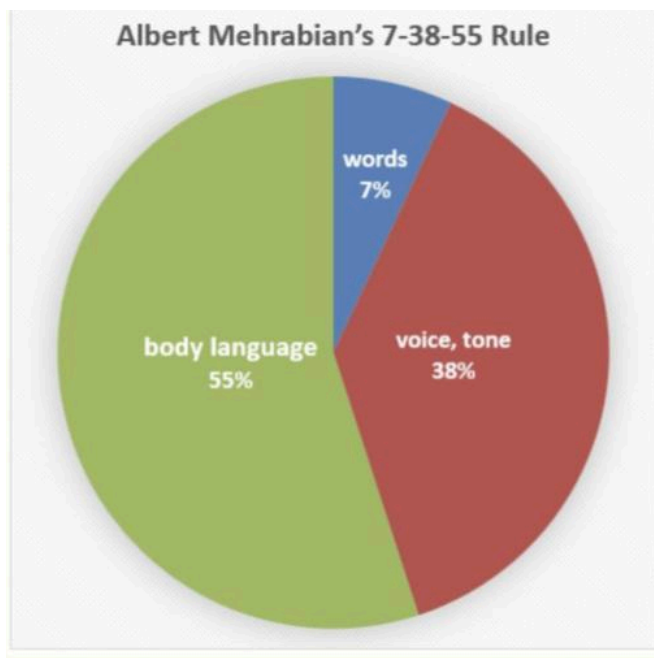
## ***SAFETY FIRST!***

<b>1</b>	<b>Be Aware of Surroundings:</b> Know your exits. Move to a more appropriate location if you need to. Know who is around you.
<b>2</b>	<b>Maintain Safe Distance:</b> Not within arms reach, so you don't seem intimidating and so you are not in danger.
<b>3</b>	<b>Find Your Allies:</b> Who can help you in this situation?

The goal of de-escalation is not to change the policy, not for everyone to get their way. Instead, the goal is to care for the other, and change the perception of threat so the interaction has a better chance of being effective and respectful. Some folks will not be satisfied. We want to know that we did everything we could.

## **Remain Mindful of your Posture, Expression, and Tone of Voice**

- Match their level: sitting or standing
  - Non-threatening stance (slightly off-center with them rather than squared-off chest to chest).
  - Facing similar directions gives the sense you're working together rather than opposing.
- Open, relaxed hands in front of your body; relaxed shoulders; no pointing
- Neutral expression: appear calm and confident, even if you don't feel it



## **The 7%-38%-55% Rule**

Albert Mehrabian's experiments in the late 1960's decoded inconsistent messages in communication, when emotions are involved. For example, if someone is saying "NO, I am not mad" and yet their tone and body language is in opposition, the receiver will trust the predominant communication.

**Communication is 93% body language and tone (55% + 38% respectively) and only 7% content (i.e. what you are actually saying).**

# Responding with CARE

The CARE de-escalation process is a framework for resolving conflicts and reducing tension through communication, active listening, and empathy.

<u>C</u> almly Listen	<u>A</u> cknowledge/ <u>A</u> lign/ <u>A</u> pologize	<u>R</u> eassure	<u>E</u> xplain/ <u>S</u> uggest
<b>Honor the Past</b>	<b>Honor the Past</b>	<b>Bring to the Present</b>	<b>Move Toward Future</b>
Seek understanding	Help them feel seen & heard	Help them feel valued	Make it a dialogue
Create space between escalation and response	Align by expressing common ground	Let them know you care	What are your needs? Is there a policy you need to emphasize?
Let them know you are not the threat	Apologize if you played a part in the escalation	Shift to the “we” perspective	What are next-steps?

## Calmly Listen

Calmly listening is a pressure release valve that releases pressure from you needing to respond and to allow them to vent out their frustration. Use the HEAR active listening tools to be curious about their perspective in a calm and non-judgmental manner. At this stage you should be focused at understanding their experience and perspective, which will increase their likelihood of listening to you when it is time for you to share what you are needing from the situation.

## Acknowledge (AAA)

Acknowledgment is one of the quickest ways to de-escalate a situation. Label and verbalize their feelings, needs, goals, and interests. By doing so, you can show that you understand and respect their perspective. It can also be helpful to align with the other person by expressing a shared desire for resolution and a positive outcome. Additionally, if you played a part in the escalation, consider apologizing and taking responsibility for your actions.

## Reassure

Reassurance helps bring us to the present moment and checks to see if we are ready to move from past to future. This is often a bridge statement to provide a sense of hope and partnership as you shift the conversation toward the future. When appropriate and possible, emphasize the idea of partnership and collaboration in finding a solution. This can help to create a sense of shared responsibility and a more positive, proactive environment for resolving the conflict.

## Explain and Suggest

At some point you’ll likely need to move into the future. As you do this, it is important to make sure you are restoring the RISC needs of the people around you as much as possible, even when you are explaining what you need from the situation. When explaining your needs, share the why, which helps promote their understanding and instill a sense of safety and respect in the situation. You can also restore a sense of control in the situation by offering choice and autonomy where appropriate in the options that you suggest on how to move forward.

## CARE Examples

### Calmly Listen

#### Remember:

- Use your active listening tools
- Prioritize letting them share without responding

#### Internal Mantras:

- Breathe and stay calm (your escalation fuels their escalation)
- This isn't about you, this is about an underlying need that is disrupted
- It's your job to simply listen and try to understand, fixing can come later

### Acknowledge

#### AAA Acknowledgment:

- **A**cknowledge Experience = Emotions + Underlying Interests
  - “It sounds like you’re feeling very restricted (*Emotion*) and want more control over your life(*Interest*). Is that right?”
- **A**lign Interests = Expression of shared interests or needs.
  - *“I also want you to feel like you have some control over your life.”*
- **A**pologize or **A**ffirm = Behavior / Situation + Impact
  - If you had a part to play in their experience use the Behavior + Impact framework to apologize. If you did not play a role, use the Situation + Impact framework to Affirm and reinforce your Acknowledgment.
  - *“I’m sorry that my reminder came across like a demand...”*

### Reassure

#### Possible Statements:

- *“I’m only here to help and be of support to you...”*
- *“Your perspective and opinions matter to us, and we want to do our best to meet your needs here.”*
- *“Let’s step out of the way and discuss options.”*

### Explain and Suggest

#### Expressing Your Needs (While Restoring RISC Needs)

- Give people a sense of CONTROL over what happens next!
- Explain and Suggest:
  - *“And my intentions were only to help you stay on schedule with your meds and all of your progress. What’s a better way I can show my support to you?”*
  - *“To be able to help you, I need \_\_\_\_\_. Would \_\_\_ or \_\_\_ work best for you?”*

## **Exiting A Dangerous Situation: ABCs**

If you start to feel afraid, shift your strategy. Rather than seeking to attend to needs, seek to exit the situation carefully, following these ABCs:

### **A**cknowledge (AAA)

Lean heavily on the AAA De-escalation tools. AVOID your own opinions / judgements.

### **B**ack out

Exit the situation quickly and calmly. AVOID getting in the last word or furthering escalation.

### **C**all for help

Alert your leadership, team, or the authorities, as appropriate to determine next steps.

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## **The Power of Reflection & Lifelong Learning**

*“We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience” - John Dewey, 1993*

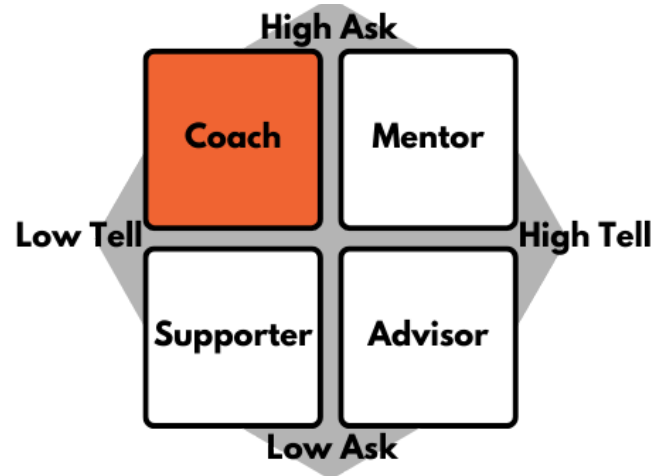
Influenced by John Dewey, David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle shows us how we can constantly learn from reflecting on our experiences. This cycle consists of four stages: *Concrete Experience*, *Reflective Observation*, *Abstract Conceptualization*, and *Active Experimentation*. Another framing he'd use to describe the ideal process of learning is below, with questions for post-incident reflections.

### ***Experiencing – Reflecting – Thinking – Acting***

- *Experiencing (Concrete Experience)*: Learning begins when a learner uses senses and perceptions to engage in what is happening now.
  - *Engaging in the escalated situation*
- *Reflecting (Reflective Observation)*: After the experience, a learner reflects on what happened and connects feelings with ideas about the experience.
  - *What happened? Challenges; Strategies Used*
- *Thinking (Abstract Conceptualization)*: The learner engages in thinking to reach conclusions and form theories, concepts, or general principles that can be tested.
  - *So What? What went well? Why does it matter? Where were opportunities for improvement?*
- *Acting (Active Experimentation)*: The learner tests the theory and applies what was learned to get feedback and create the next experience.
  - *Now What? What will you do differently next time? What support do you need?*

## Coaching Techniques:

There are various ways to pass these skills and techniques down to your staff members. Embodying these techniques is first and foremost. Another effective style of Leadership is using coaching techniques, grounded in a mindset of **curiosity, high-support, and high-challenge**. Two techniques of coaching are:



- **Inquiry:** High-Ask, Low-Tell. Ask reflective questions to help them recognize challenges and opportunities.
- **The Roadmap:** Set the destination and help determine the possible routes. Assess and reroute, while celebrating arrivals! What do they need to get to the destination? What does that support look like?

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### KEEP IN MIND

- *This takes practice and is not easy.*
- *Sometimes you will make mistakes.*
- *Even if you follow the steps perfectly, it will not always work.*
- *Some folks just need to express their anger or frustration. You may*
- *de-escalate the situation just by giving them a space to be heard.*
- *Stay on message with your CARES tools if they try to attack you or change the topic*
- *Sometimes, getting creative and simply being human, is the most effective.*

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## De-escalation is a strategy

Not every situation calls for de-escalation. Sometimes you need to escalate the situation internally to involve the appropriate authorities or systems to support safety and resolution.