De-Escalation

Introduction/Purpose: De-escalation is the calming down or reduction in intensity of a heated conflict. De-escalation can happen quickly, but in most cases, it is a slow progression, which takes effort and time. There are usually several dimensions with a conflict, and as one or more of the dimensions within the conflict become less intense, the conflict can lessen in size. Some elements of the de-escalation process are:

1. Simple Listening – Sometimes all that is needed is to allow an angry person to vent all their anger and frustration to someone who is actually listening to what they are saying.

2. Active Listening – Active listening is the process of really attempting to hear, acknowledge and understand what a person is saying. It is a genuine attempt to put themselves in the other person's shoes; and not only listen to the words the other person is saying but also the underlying emotion.

3. Acknowledgement – Acknowledgement occurs when the person can legitimately understand the person's angry emotion. The person can respond with “wow, I can see how something like that could make you angry”; or “man, if that happened to me, I might be angry, too.” Confirming the legitimacy of the emotion is important, but not the behavior. It is important that the person realize that being angry is not the problem, but the way he/she is choosing to act out those angry feelings.

4. Apologizing – Sincerely apologizing for anything in the situation that is believed to be unjust is the fourth de-escalation topic. The apology is not about an imaginary wrong. It is not about taking responsibility for something that was not someone’s fault, because an apology can be made without taking on the blame. For example, “I’m sorry the situation has you so frustrated,” or “I’m sorry you are having an awful day.”
5. Agreeing – Often when people are angry about something, there is a small amount of truth in what they are saying. Listening for that truth and agreeing with it can often diffuse the situation and the person’s anger will start to subside.

6. Inviting Criticism – Asking the angry person to voice his or her criticism of yourself or the situation more fully can be helpful not just in that situation, but in others as well. The person can be asked to tell you everything that has you upset and do not hold back. This invitation may sometimes temporarily intensify the angry emotions of the person, but if the encouragement to vent is continued eventually, they will run out of complaints.

**Exercise 1:** Divide the large group into smaller groups, and give them controversial topics to discuss. Two individuals within each group will discuss one of the topics given to them. One person in the discussion will be the instigator and attempt to escalate the discussion into a conflict, while the other person will use de-escalation techniques to calm that person using some of the elements of the de-escalation process. Other members of the group will observe and take notes. This exercise will continue until every member of the group has had a chance to role-play. (20-30 minutes)

**Debrief:** Call the group back together and invite individuals to share what worked in the de-escalation process and what did not work. Ask the group what they learned, and what suggestions do they may have to make the process more effective. (15 minutes)

**Exercise 2:** This exercise would be the same as exercise 1 but the only difference would be the role-play would take place in front of the entire group. (15 minutes)

**Debrief:** Call the group back together and invite individuals to share what worked in the de-escalation process and what did not work. Ask the group what they learned, and what suggestions do they may have to make the process more effective. (10 minutes)