

Dealing with Aggressive Behavior

The current economic climate has left many people struggling with an overall sense of insecurity. Some have lost their jobs and those who are still employed may be worried about their own job security. Heightened emotions, money woes and feelings of uncertainty may lead some individuals to argue more quickly or act out aggressively in response to their frustrations.

If you encounter a disruptive person, your first task is to determine the severity of the situation. Most often a situation builds up through various levels of aggression before reaching a danger point. The three basic levels of aggression are:

- Anxiety or frustration
- Verbal aggression
- Physical conflict

Anxiety and Frustration

Individuals who are anxious or frustrated are focused on their own problem and reduce their attention to you. Anxious people may:

- Not make eye contact
- Keep their head down
- Pace, fidget or drum their fingers

When dealing with anxious or frustrated individuals:



- Maintain a calm, respectful and reassuring tone of voice
- Be courteous and remain in control
- Use active listening techniques
- Use professional body language
- Make direct eye contact
- Maintain a respectful distance — about four to six feet — between you and the individual

Verbal Aggression

Individuals who do not respond to your attempts to calm them down may become verbally aggressive. Verbal aggression may be accompanied by such signs as:

- Reddening of the face
- Breathing becomes quicker and deeper
- Pumping hand, pounding fists or pointing fingers
- Invading your personal space
- Staring
- Yelling and swearing

If you believe the person, although verbally aggressive, is not a threat to you or others:

- Maintain your professional behavior
- Do not try to “out shout” the aggressor
- Do not interrupt — sometimes the best response is to let the person “vent” — and when he or she takes a breath, you can use active listening to establish control of the conversation
- Set reasonable and enforceable limits
- Seek assistance

Physical Conflict

If the aggressive person still does not respond to your attempts to defuse the situation, you may want to assume a more defensive stance to protect yourself from a possible physical confrontation:

- Maintain a proper distance of four to six feet from the individual
- Stand at a 45 degree angle to (or directly to the side of) the person, not face to face
- Bring your hands up chest high, and gesture with open palms

Never intervene if weapons are present. If an individual has a weapon, remove yourself and others from harm’s way. If your escape routes are blocked but the aggressor cannot see you:

- Take cover — get behind or under something solid
- Call for help, if you can do so safely
- Keep the aggressor in your sight
- Watch for a possible chance to escape to a safe area

Remember to remain calm and nonhostile. The actions that you take in these situations can either intensify the situation or help to peacefully resolve it.

Personal Protection Tips

Employees who work alone or during odd hours may benefit from following these few safety procedures:

- If you plan to work late or report early, try to arrange your schedule to coincide with another employee’s.
- Be extra cautious when using restrooms or stairwells that are in isolated locations, poorly lighted, or open to the public.
- If you are working late, ask the security officer for an escort to the parking lot.

- Make sure you know your office’s emergency evacuation plan.
- Know where there is a “safe room” where you can go during an in-office emergency.
- Find out if your office can start using a signin/signout book during off hours.
- Keep emergency numbers for security, police, and fire assistance posted near every phone.
- If you notice any suspicious persons or vehicles, call security or the police.

Alertness, common sense precautions, and concern for coworkers are keys to guarding against aggressive encounters in the workplace.

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