

De-escalation strategies

Difficult situations can escalate quickly, whether in person or over the phone. It can escalate our emotions in the moment and make it difficult for us to remain composed and in control. To help diffuse a potentially difficult moment, a humanistic therapeutic approach; being realistic about options, empathetic about the situation, and offering a positive, and solution-focused narrative, will help defuse tension while preserving dignity and respect.

Use these strategies to de-escalate conflict in any setting.

1. Stay grounded & regulate your reactions

- Take a deep breath before responding, your calmness influences theirs
- Use a steady voice and open body language (uncrossed arms, neutral posture). Over the phone, sit upright and slow your speech.
- Pause if needed: "Let's take a breath and figure this out together."

2. Give space without distraction and really listen

- In person, allow them space to feel supported and safe. If on the phone, let them talk first without interrupting.
- Show you're listening, nod, use natural verbal acknowledgments ("I hear you", "go on") to let people know you are there still and present in the moment.
- Avoid dismissive phrases like "Calm down". Instead, say "I can understand why this is upsetting."

3. Slow the pace & acknowledge feelings

- Speak slowly and clearly, using short sentences.
- If they're shouting, lower your voice instead of matching their intensity.
- Reflect their emotions back: "This sounds really frustrating for you."
- If they keep escalating, introduce a break: "Let me check something you just mentioned that sounded important, and I'll come back in 10 minutes."

4. Offer solutions & choices

- People feel more in control when given choices: "Would you prefer to continue here or move somewhere quieter?" "Would you like me to explain options now, or do you need a moment?"
- People need to feel heard before shifting to solutions.
- Redirect the conversation: "Let's focus on what we can do next."

5. Set boundaries & know when to step away

- If they're being verbally abusive, calmly set a boundary: "I want to help, but I can't do that while being shouted at."
- If aggression continues, step away or end the conversation professionally: "We're not making progress right now, let's try again later."



- Stay professional - de-escalation is about reducing tension, not "winning." ✓
- Give space - mentally on the phone, physically in person. ✓
- Use time as a tool - pausing allows emotions to cool down. ✓
- Trust your instincts - if you feel unsafe, remove yourself. ✓

After the conversation - Look after yourself!

Even after a difficult conversation has ended, your emotions may still be heightened. Thoughts may swirl as you replay the situation, questioning what was said and how it was handled. This is completely normal. The key is to have a process in place to protect your own wellbeing and prevent stress from building up.

Self-care steps after a difficult conversation

- Debrief with a trusted colleague: Talking things through informally can help you process emotions and gain perspective.
- Record key details: If the conversation was high-pressure, make a factual note of what happened. Keep it objective and brief to avoid overthinking later.
- Change your environment: If possible, step away from your workspace, get a coffee, or take a short walk. A shift in surroundings can help break the cycle of overthinking.
- Breathe & reset: Use grounding techniques like controlled breathing, Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), or mindfulness to calm the nervous system.
- Physical movement: If stress lingers, engage in exercise, whether it's a walk, stretching, or a full workout. Physical activity helps regulate emotions and clear the mind.
- Engage in social connection: Meet up with a friend, call someone you trust, or simply be around others. Social interaction can help shift your focus.
- Prioritise restful moments: If stress is still present later, try relaxing activities like listening to music, reading, cooking, or taking a warm bath.
- Don't take it home with you: If thoughts are still swirling, step outside, take a short walk, or engage in something enjoyable before settling in for the evening.

