

HPN EAP Newsletter for Employees

Violence in the Workplace: Recognizing and Defusing Aggressive Behavior



Frustration Aggression Hypothesis

- People have goals
- When people are blocked from reaching goals, they experience frustration
- When the block is perceived as arbitrary, the person becomes aggressive
- At times, the aggression takes the form of violence
- Sometimes the violence is directed against the source of the block, sometimes a "scapegoat" is chosen, and sometimes the violence is directed against the self

Aggressive Behavior is Reinforcing

- The more frustration builds, the greater the chance of aggressive action
- Aggressive actions often lead to a release of frustration (which can feel good) and can become habit forming

Aggression Continuum

Examples of On-The-Job Aggression – Least Injurious

- Behavior - Plays mean pranks; Unwanted joking, teasing; Occasionally argues with customers, coworkers, or supervisors; Swears at others; Belligerence; Spreads harmful rumors or gossip; Refuses to cooperate with supervisor, coworkers; Breaks rules.

Examples of On-The-Job Aggression – Moderately Injurious

- Behavior - Refuses to comply with work rules; Intentionally damages or wastes company property or merchandise; Engages in sabotage; Vandalizes facilities; Argues frequently with customers; Argues frequently with coworkers and/or supervisors; and Theft.

Examples of On-The-Job Aggression – Highly Injurious

- Behavior - Verbal or physical attacks; Assaults coworkers, supervisors, or customers; Has anger-related accidents; Stalking behavior, rape; Arson; Murder; Carries unauthorized weapon.

BEFORE - Prevention:

Pre-Screening

- Implement Ground Rules: Pro-Safety / Respect & Zero Tolerance
- Train Supervisors & Staff
- Constructive Discipline
- Response Plan
- Drug Testing
- Access Control
- Weapons Policy
- Reporting Avenue

Danger Assessment:

- Warning Signs
- Consultation with EAP
- Anger Management Skills
- Conflict Management Skills
- Mediation
- Support / Validate Staff
- Honor Intuition

DURING - Response:

Authority Alert

Response Team:

- Security
- 911 / Sheriff
- Plant
- Damage Control
- Threat Assessment
- Media Relations

AFTER - Defusing:

Critical Incident Response:

- Education
- Stabilization

Follow-Up:

- Meetings
- Counseling

Survivor Support

Rebuild Safety:

- Physical
- Emotional
- Return to Work

Five Warning Signs of Escalating Behavior

Because reason and emotion move up and down on a sliding scale, our attitudes, circumstances and misperceptions can collide into unexpected behavior. Recognizing the warning signs of escalating behavior will assist you in coping with that reaction and hopefully defusing frustration or anger.

1. Confusion

Confusion is the first sign of escalating behavior, characterized by bewilderment or distraction. A person is uncertain or unsure of the next course of action.

Suggested Response:

- Listen to their concerns
- Ask clarifying questions
- Give factual Answers

2. Frustration

Frustration is characterized by reaction or resistance to information. Impatience. Feeling a sense of defeat in the attempt of accomplishment. Client may try to bait you into a response.

Suggested Response:

- Relocate to quiet location or setting
- Reassure them
- Make a sincere attempt to clarify their concerns

3. Blame

Blame is the beginning of potentially hazardous behavior, and it is characterized by placing responsibility for problems on everyone else. Accusing or holding others responsible and finding fault with the actions of others.

Suggested Response:

- Disengage and bring second party into the discussion
- Use "teamwork" approach
- Draw client back to facts
- Use probing questions
- Create "yes" momentum

4. Anger

Anger is characterized by a visible change in one's body posture and disposition. Actions include pounding fists, pointing fingers, and shouting or screaming. This signals very risky behavior.

Suggested Response:

- Utilize venting techniques
- Don't offer solutions
- Don't argue
- Prepare to evacuate or isolate
- Contact supervisor and/or security

5. Hostility

Behavior may include physical actions or threats that appear imminent, including acts of physical harm or property damage. Out-of-control behavior signals they have crossed the line.

Suggested Response:

- Disengage and evacuate
- Attempt to isolate person if it can be done safely
- Alert supervisor and security
- Dial 911

Call Health Promotion Northwest at 360-788-6565 for more information and services.

