
PUBLIC LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO DE-ESCALATION

Working in a public library means welcoming a wide range of patrons every day. Sometimes interactions can become tense, frustrating, or even confrontational. De-escalation skills help staff maintain safety, uphold a welcoming environment, and respond professionally to challenging situations. By combining calm communication, attentive listening, and thoughtful strategies, library staff can prevent conflicts from escalating while preserving respect and dignity for everyone involved.

Core Principles

- **Stay Calm & Regulated:** Manage your emotions, speak slowly, and breathe steadily.
- **Respect & Dignity:** Treat all patrons with fairness and courtesy, even if their behavior is challenging.
- **Non-Threatening Body Language:** Keep hands visible, posture relaxed, and expressions neutral.
- **Safety First:** Protect yourself and others. Well-being takes priority over compliance.

Preventative Strategies

- **Early Recognition:** Watch for signs of agitation: raised voice, pacing, clenched fists.
- **Calm Approach:** Maintain a quiet tone, provide personal space, and avoid sudden movements.
- **Environmental Adjustments:** Minimize noise, reduce crowding, and direct patrons to calmer areas when possible.
- **Offer Choices:** Small, manageable options can defuse tension. Example: "Would you like to continue this conversation at the front desk or over there by the window?"

Verbal De-Escalation Tools

- **L.E.A.P.S. Method:** Listen, Empathize, Ask, Paraphrase, Summarize.
- **Acknowledge Feelings:** “I can see this is frustrating for you.”
- **Avoid Trigger Phrases:** Replace “Calm down” with “Take your time. How can I help?”
- **Offer Choices, Not Ultimatums:** Empower patrons to make safe decisions.

Non-Verbal Techniques

- Keep safe physical distance.
- Sit or stand at eye level with patrons.
- Use slow, deliberate movements; hands relaxed and visible.

Scenario Tips

- **Computer Time Frustration:** Listen, validate feelings, and offer alternatives.
- **Refusing Behavior Rules:** Restate rules calmly, provide choices, and maintain safety.
- **Mental-Health Distress:** Stay calm, maintain distance, involve trained staff if needed.
- **Disruptive Patron Interaction:** Keep voice neutral, avoid arguing, and alert security if necessary.

When De-Escalation Fails

- Know your library’s safety protocols.
- Call security or law enforcement if a situation becomes unsafe.
- Document incidents clearly for future reference.

Staff Self-Care

- Take a moment to breathe and regroup after challenging encounters.
- Debrief with colleagues or supervisors to process emotions.
- Reflect on the interaction to improve future responses.

Quick Reference Box

Top Phrases to Use: “I understand.” “Let’s figure this out together.” “Take your time.”

Phrases to Avoid: “Calm down.” “You can’t do that.” “That’s not allowed.”

Emergency Steps:

- Maintain distance.
- Call security or law enforcement if needed.
- Document the incident.