

# De-escalation

## In Police Encounters with Emotionally Disturbed Persons

As a result of the Mental Health Legislation requiring more police intervention, combined with too few community mental health services, more police officers are finding themselves called to intervene in crisis situations involving persons mentally or emotionally disturbed.

In responding to these calls, officers have many pressures on their performance: safety, time, care of the individual, the law and public scrutiny. Taking time to communicate and understand what someone may be going through during a crisis can lead to successful verbal de-escalation of emergency situations. This not only helps the immediate situation, but can lead to easier interactions in the future, if police are called to the individual again.

### **Tips when called to a crisis:**

- *Remain calm.* Set the tone you want i.e. courteous, respectful, calm
- *Communicate,* ask questions, listen, avoid interrupting, speak one at a time. Don't argue about what's real, just respond to what you can relate to e.g. You're being watched? How are you coping with that? What helps?
- *Decrease other distractions:* ask if you can turn off the TV, radio, reduce bright lights, loud noises
- Make a statement about the behavior you are observing: (i.e. You seem to be afraid, angry, confused) Ask – Is that right? Or – Please tell me what's making you afraid.
- Repeat questions or statements when necessary, preferably short, clear sentences
- Don't assume what the problem is e.g. not taking medication. For some people psychiatric medications do more harm than good. Some things you see may be side effects of psych. med.s: inability to stop moving, violence, suicidality, tics, twitches, trembling, indifference, etc.
- Be an ally to the person in distress, with statements like: I'm here to help. How can I help?
- Avoid judgmental, authoritative statements such as: You are acting like a child
- *Allow the person as much space as you can.* Standing over them, getting too close, blocking the doorway can add to the person's fear and tension. (Most people with psychiatric histories are abuse survivors.)
- Don't shout. If the individual appears not to listen it may be because other voices are louder
- Don't criticize or ridicule (it affects people, even if it is not apparent).
- *Offer choices.* Even small choices can help a person retain dignity and reduce fear.
- *Explain clearly* what you are doing and why you are doing it, and if necessary, what you want the person to do and why.
- If there is real physical danger, try to contain the person while you retreat to a safer place.

*Because most mentally/emotionally disturbed people have been abused, most of what you see in people in crisis is fear. An aggressive appearance is usually an attempt to keep people away so the person can feel safe. In most cases anything you can do to reduce the person's fear will help to deescalate the situation.*

### **Alternative to the Hospital**

Gerstein Centre: 24 hour crisis hotline and mobile response in home or community,  
short term residence at 100 Charles Street E.  
Telephone: (416) 929-9897 (referral line, police can call) (416) 929-5200 (crisis line)

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