

A Practical Guide

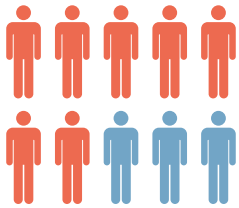
TO

De-escalating Potentially Violent Situations for Health Care Workers



Practical, trauma-informed strategies to help you feel safer and more confident at work.

Every day, you show up for people in their most vulnerable moments.
But your safety matters too.



70% of nurses have experienced or witnessed violence at work.



Health care workers are **five times** more likely to face workplace violence than the average worker.



53% report lasting psychological or emotional trauma after an incident.

In stressful, grief-filled, or emotionally-charged environments, even small interactions can escalate quickly.

How you respond in these moments makes all the difference.

This guide gives you practical, trauma-informed strategies you can start using right away.

People are not at their best when they come into a health care setting. They are already not at their baseline, which is why it's important to approach any situation with compassion.



In this workshop, you'll explore the factors that influence risk in your health care setting, so you can recognize them before they escalate.

Core Principles of Trauma-Informed De-escalation

Trauma changes how people react under stress. In health care settings, behaviours that look “irrational” often come from survival responses.

A trauma-informed approach asks *What happened to this person?* rather than *What’s wrong with them?*

- **Promote awareness:** Learn how trauma shapes reactions.
- **Shift attitudes:** Lead with curiosity, not judgement.
- **Foster safety:** Prioritize both physical and psychological safety.
- **Provide choice:** Offer meaningful options whenever possible.
- **Highlight strengths:** Focus on resilience, not deficits.

Why Health Care Settings Are at Risk

Violence in health care often comes from a mix of stress and systemic challenges:

- Patients and families under stress can mean trauma responses kick in.
- Complex systems create feelings of frustration and helplessness.
- Long hours, shift work, and understaffing means more burnout.
- High emotional stakes build on feelings of grief, fear, and uncertainty.

These factors make health care settings particularly vulnerable to escalation. That’s why targeted strategies and specialized tools are essential.

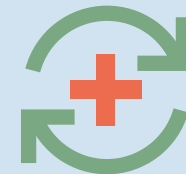
Trauma-informed care in health care settings can:



Reduce the use of restraints by up to **50%**



Boost patient engagement by **nearly 40%**



Improve recovery rates by about **33%**

worldmetrics.org

Top 5 Reasons for Escalation in Health Care Settings



1. Unmet needs and frustration

- Patients or families may feel unheard or helpless.
- Long waits or lack of information heighten tension.

What to do about it: Provide patient-and-family-centred care. Take time to listen first, even when you're busy.



2. Pain, fear, or distress

- Physical pain and fear of diagnosis can tip into aggression.
- Trauma and mental health amplify the risk of escalation.

What to do about it: Validate people's feelings, make them feel heard, and seek to address their basic needs.



3. Environmental stressors

- Crowded, noisy, or chaotic spaces increase agitation.
- Staff burnout intensifies these stressors.

What to do about it: Examine ways you can reduce the amount of stressors in the environment, and bring awareness to how and what you are feeling. Use regulating strategies such as breathwork to calm your nervous system.



4. Power imbalances

- Patients and families often feel a loss of control.
- Dismissive communication can fuel escalation.

What to do about it: Offer small choices to restore control and make client care feel collaborative.



5. Substance use or cognitive impairment

- Alcohol, drugs, or conditions like dementia affect judgement.
- Agitation due to delirium is a medical emergency.

What to do about it: Keep language simple, calm, and consistent. Call the physician if delirium is suspected.

The De-escalation Process

The following elements constitute a process for defusing potentially violent situations. While no two situations are ever the same, this process serves as a blueprint and offers specific techniques that may be utilized when encountering a potentially violent situation.



1. Awareness

- Scan the environment and your own state. You can't de-escalate if you are not regulated!
- When care requires close contact (like taking vitals), pause to assess safety. Ask yourself, *Does this need to happen now, or can it wait?*
- Observe the individual and consider whether their behaviour is due to a disease process or delirium.
- Remove potential weapons and obstacles, and move bystanders to a safe location.
- Choose your approach.

In training, we practice self-regulation and identifying immediate actions.



2. Connection

- Show respect, interest, and compassion.
- Ask how they would like to be addressed and use inclusive language. Use their name and let them know yours.
- Be conscious of eye contact and connect nonverbally.
- Using the right words and tone can increase safety and de-escalation. Avoid confrontational language like "I can't..." or "We don't..." Instead, try using cooperative statements like, "What I can do is..." or "What we do is..."
- Use active listening, paraphrase what you are hearing, and validate their experience. Ask open-ended questions to encourage longer responses.



People who act always have an advantage over people who react.



In our workshop, we take a deeper dive to strengthen communication strategies, tone, posture, and word choice, so you feel fully prepared when a situation arises.



3. Finding a Resolution

Escalation often occurs because of an unmet need or underlying fear. This step is where you can clarify and address the problem and core reason for the escalation.

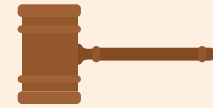
- Identify unmet needs (hunger, thirst, fear, confusion).
- Offer small choices to restore control.
- Validate the person's experience.



4. Closing and Debriefing

Wherever possible, review the incident with those involved once everyone is calm – patients, families, and others who were present. Always debrief with your colleagues.

- Do a perspective check to explore what was happening for them.
- Thank the individual, reassure them, and clarify next steps.
- Debrief with your team. Do an immediate safety check, an in-depth review of how things went, and an emotional debriefing.



Legal and Ethical Considerations

- Follow your organization's policy for documentation and incident reporting.
- Adhere to no-restraint policies.
- Physical intervention is a last resort and should only be done by specially trained staff.

Range of Disengagement

Due to safety or extreme escalation, you may have to disengage from the interaction at various stages. In health care settings, it's not always possible to fully disengage or leave, but safety must be a priority.

Remember: A successful de-escalation at its most basic level is one in which no one is physically harmed and may end at step two.

- Politely end the conversation.
- Be prepared to call for help if the need arises.
- Remove yourself to a safe distance or, if possible, leave the situation – don't turn your back and keep an open, nonthreatening posture.
- Notify the appropriate people immediately.

Taking the Next Step

You don't have to navigate this alone.

Our workshop, [De-escalating Potentially Violent Situations for Health Care Workers](#), is designed specifically for your world of:

- Understaffing and long shifts
- High-pressure environments
- Patients and families in crisis

You'll leave with:

- A deep understanding of the stages of escalation and trauma responses
- Tools to stay calm and confident during escalation
- Strategies to protect yourself, your team, and those you serve
- Practical skills for a safer, healthier workplace
- Legal and ethical considerations

Learn more at ctrinstitute.com/topic/de-escalatingpotentially-violent-situations-for-health-care-workers

More Resources

[7 Tips for Defusing Potentially Violent Situations](#)

[Podcast: De-escalating Potentially Violent Situations With a Trauma-Informed Lens](#)

[Cycle of Escalating Cooperative Behaviour](#)

[3 Go-To Elements for Trauma-Informed Workplaces](#)

[Trauma-Informed Care E-Manual](#)

[Blog: 3 Ways Helpers can Prevent Burnout](#)