

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace - Dealing with Negative Interactions

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Why learn how to deal with negative interactions?

We all like to think of ourselves as being safe and secure while at work, protected from all forms of violence and aggression. However, wherever people interact, there is potential for violence. The advice in this document will help keep communications between individuals – whether they are managers, supervisors, workers, customers, clients, patients, or students – on a positive note.

Knowing some basic communication skills (verbal and non-verbal) and some "problem solving" strategies can help prevent issues from occurring or can stop a small issue from getting bigger or out of control. Workplace harassment and violence can start as small incidents involving negative remarks and inappropriate behaviours. These small incidents can sometimes escalate to physical or psychological violence.

NOTE: In this document, we use the term violence also to include bullying and harassment

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for more information:

- [Bullying in the Workplace](#)
- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)

- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Family_\(Domestic\)_Violence](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Parking Lot Safety](#)
 - [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs](#)
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What is meant by "verbal" communication skills?

Verbal communication skills are the way that you talk to another person or other people. Verbal communication includes the words you choose to use and the way in which you use them (for example, the tone (angry or calm) or volume (loud or soft)).

When you are interacting with other people, especially during a negative interaction, you should:

- Focus your attention on the other person and let them know that you are interested in what they have to say.
 - Look at the person when they are talking. DO NOT look away as if disinterested.
 - If appropriate, ask if you can take a few "brief notes" to help you retain the information. This action conveys that you are interested.
 - Remain calm.
 - Be conscious of how you are delivering your words.
 - Speak slowly and confidently at a volume appropriate for your surroundings.
 - Speak simply. DO NOT use official language or complex terminology.
 - Listen carefully. DO NOT interrupt or offer unsolicited advice or criticism.
 - Remain open-minded and objective.
 - Use silence as a calming tool.
 - Encourage the person to talk. Ask questions that require a lengthy explanation, as this can defuse the intensity of the interaction. DO NOT tell the person to relax or calm down.
 - Try to understand. Ask questions. Make statements like "Help me understand why you are upset."
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What is meant by "non-verbal" communication skills?

Non-verbal communication skills include your body language and position. People communicate through both their words and their bodies. The way you position or use your body can be calming or could aggravate a situation.

You should:

- Use calm body language – a relaxed posture with your hands unclenched and an attentive expression.
- Match the other person's physical level. If they are seated, sit, or try kneeling, squatting, or bending over rather than standing over them.
- Give the other person enough physical (personal) space, usually about one metre (about 3 feet).
- Position yourself at a right angle rather than directly in front of the other person.

More importantly, you should not:

- Use gestures that could be interpreted as challenging the other person, such as putting your hands on your hips, pointing your finger, waving your arms, or crossing your arms.
- Glare or stare, which may be interpreted as challenging.

How can you better understand the other person's concerns?

Some tips for understanding the other's concerns include:

- Try to put yourself in the person's position so that you can better understand their concerns.
- Ask for their recommendations.
- Repeat back to the person what you think they are saying to clarify your understanding.
- Accept criticism in a positive way. When a complaint might be true, use statements like "you are probably right" or "it was my fault". If the criticism seems unwarranted, ask for clarification.
- Be honest. DO NOT make false statements or promises you can not keep.
- Be familiar with your organization's complaint procedures and apply them fairly.
- Remain professional and take the person seriously. Be respectful.
- Ask for small, specific favours – such as asking the person to move with you to a quieter area.
- Break a problem or an issue into smaller pieces and offer step-by-step solutions so that the person is not overwhelmed by the issue.

- Be reassuring and point out choices and options.

It is important that you try to avoid escalating the situation. Establish ground rules if the unreasonable behaviour continues. Calmly describe the consequences of violent or aggressive behaviour (e.g., ending of interaction or refusal of service). Suggest alternatives, and avoid giving commands or making conditional statements.

If your situation involves punishment or sanctions (for example, you are an enforcement officer), and you feel that the situation is becoming very negative or escalating, delay any necessary punishment or penalty until you have backup or until the situation is safer.

DO NOT:

- Do not take sides or agree with statements that misrepresent reality.
- Do not immediately reject the person's demands or perspective
- Do not attempt to bargain with a threatening individual. If necessary, end the interaction.
- Do not make promises you can't keep.

How can you end a "negative interaction"?

It is important to know how to safely and effectively end a conversation or interaction before the situation escalates. Here are some tips:

- Interrupt the conversation firmly but politely.
- Tell the person that you:
 - Will not accept abusive treatment or language.
 - Will end the conversation if necessary.
- Tell the person that you will ask them to leave (the building, your office, etc.) or that you will leave.
- If the behaviour continues, end the conversation. Ask the person to leave, or leave yourself.
- If the person does not agree to leave, remove yourself from the scene and inform your manager or supervisor immediately.
- Do not return if you believe the person may be a physical threat.
- Tell other staff and have them leave the immediate area as well.
- Call security or your local police, as necessary.
- File an incident or occurrence report with your employer or designated person following your workplace harassment and violence prevention policy and procedures.

What if the interaction is a physical fight?

Whether you are a bystander, co-worker, supervisor, or manager, the first priority is to avoid getting hurt yourself or having harm happen to bystanders.

- Do not intervene in a physical fight involving others if you fear you will be injured or do not have the appropriate training.
- If there are weapons involved (including improvised weapons), call the police immediately.
- Get help or designate a specific bystander to get help. Help may include a company security officer or individuals who are trained in how to de-escalate physical situations. If your organization has a “code” system to call for help, use that code. If necessary, call the police for assistance.
- Ask any bystanders to stand back. Use their names if you know them. If having an audience is encouraging the individuals to continue fighting, ask the bystanders to leave the area immediately. Tell them specifically where to go, if applicable.
- Verbally give the individuals specific instructions:
 - Use a calm but authoritative voice. Do not use official language or complex terminology. Try not to yell.
 - Use their names. If you do not know their names, identify the individuals by unique characteristics, for example, “You in the red shirt...”
 - Tell them what you expect them to do, such as: “Please stop fighting. Fighting is against our violence prevention policy. John, please go to the conference room, and Susan, please go to the other meeting room. We will talk to each of you separately.”
 - Use the verbal and non-verbal communication tips listed above.
 - Keep your distance where possible.
- Defer to the organization’s policy and procedures instead of personal authority. For example, try “Fighting is against the rules. We need you to separate and move to different rooms.”
- Explain what will happen next, such as the event will be investigated and that each person will get a chance to explain their view.
- If the individuals do not stop fighting, try splashing them with water or find another way to distract them so you can get their attention to provide verbal instructions.
- Do not criticize or demean the fighters. These actions may be seen as a challenge.

- Do not take sides or favour one individual over another.
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What can you do if you feel threatened?

Politely and calmly end the interaction in a non-threatening way, if possible.

Know what support and advice (e.g., from a manager, supervisor, co-worker, security, or police) are available to help you when handling a difficult individual.

Get help

- Contact security or someone trained in de-escalation techniques.
- Use a silent alarm.
- Use a pre-arranged code word.

If you have threatened to call the police or security, be sure that you do.

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