The Men's Toolbox

Tool for intervention

How to React to Aggressiveness

Goal*

Help professionals identify and apply ways to control their reactions to a man who is exhibiting aggressiveness or anger to avoid verbal escalation while adopting safe behaviour.

* *This tool does not replace safety training such as the Omega program.*

1 Coping with aggressiveness: a necessary skill

Let's look at some concepts to understand the behaviour of a man who may lose his temper during one of your sessions with him. These concepts will help you react appropriately to the situation.

Anger

Anger is a healthy emotion that needs to be expressed like any other emotion, as this venting releases built-up tension and frustration. Although anger is not always expressed appropriately, we still need to acknowledge the emotion and understand what the person is trying to say.

Aggressiveness

Aggressiveness is a pulsion, a strenght that allows one to ensure it's vital needs and protection. We assert ourselves to satisfy our needs. When used positively, aggressiveness lets us defend and stand up for ourselves, solve problems, create, evolve, and even get what we want. Aggressiveness becomes negative when the goal is to impose our will or to insult, threaten, or overpower.

Aggression

Aggression is the use of physical force or its symbolic equivalent (i.e., psychological, verbal aggression) to abuse others.

2 Recognize your prejudices

In situations that trigger societal disapproval (e.g., domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse), you need to pay particular attention to your own perceptions, preferences and values so that you can engage in supportive processes without emotional bias, clearheadedly and efficiently.

As we know, every experience we have influences how we work with others. A history of traumatic experiences or prejudices can make us form a bad impression of some men. Here are some examples of prejudices:

- Anger is not a good thing.
- Men never change.
- They're all the same.
- All they do is manipulate.
- I don't believe in violence; therefore, I should refuse to help a violent man.

We are more likely to invest in someone if this person corresponds to our preferred models or to the patterns we perceive positively.

The verbal expression of aggressiveness is often confused with verbal aggression

When someone is verbally expressing his aggressiveness (which is healthy and prevents them from acting out), he talks about himself, his anger, and his feelings.

When someone is verbally abusive, he is talking about the other person, he criticizes his behavior, he accuses, he blames, he judges.

Adapted from the training manual *Intervenir efficacement auprès des clients difficiles, vulnérables ou agressifs*. Formation continue du Cégep de Saint-Jérôme.

3 Prevent verbal escalation

Adopt basic principles to get the man to express his emotions in a healthy way but without exacerbating his anger or feeling attacked by his words.

- Determine what may be causing the man's anger, e.g. unmet needs, certain attitudes that one adopts.
- Let him express himself so that he feels heard, and then focus on what is being said to detect if there is aggression or not.
- Acknowledge that his anger is legitimate in light of his experience and that it is important to deal with the situation.
- Encourage the man to talk and get things "off his chest."
- Acknowledge your own emotional state to distance yourself from the situation.
- Use a calm and composed tone, avoid raising your voice, and control how quickly you speak.
- Ask short, simple questions.
- Identify his main emotions, decode them, and name them if he is unable to express them.
- Model your responses on what the man says: respond rationally or emotionally in accordance with the content of his words. Avoid giving orders or advice or lecturing.
- Point out what he could have done worse in the situation and what he did well to avoid more problems, e.g., "How did you manage to... (leave the room quietly, not shout or hit, etc.)?"
- Show openness in your way of saying things.
- Try to reduce the tension and agree on a more appropriate way for him to express himself. If appropriate, you can also negotiate ground rules for your sessions.

4 Recognize the danger and ensure your and the man's safety

You need to recognize any imminent threat and spot the warning signs early.

- Pay attention to behaviours that you think are disturbing: observe and gauge the situation.
- Determine against whom or what the man is directing his anger, for example, you personally, the organization, others, himself, etc.
- Get him to cooperate to find a solution to his uneasiness.
- Keep a safe distance.
- Give simple instructions.
- Evaluate the risk of suicide, homicide and substance abuse problems.
- End the session and get help if the man acts out in aggression, if there is a significant risk that he will do so, or if he refuses to cooperate.
- Apply the organization's safety protocols and implement the concepts from your trainings.

5 Good practices to maintain

Many practices regarding aggressiveness management are already well established. Below is a brief reminder:

- Acknowledge any prejudices you may have about aggressiveness.
- Take the time to listen; let the man express himself.
- Tolerate the externalization of anger.
- Be open to the expression of different emotions.
- Emphasize the man's skills and give positive feedback.
- Adapt your language to the language he uses.
- Suggest constructive actions that he can take and alternatives to expressing his anger.
- Adopt safe behaviours.

Phrases that promote connection

- Are things not going well?
- Are you having a hard time?
- Are you worried about something?
- Are your thoughts racing?
- That's sad.
- You didn't feel heard.

Instead of

- Keep your voice down.
- Are you angry?
- Calm down!
- Stop behaving like that...

6 Re-evaluate your approach or role

If you find that an expression of aggressiveness is too triggering for you, don't hesitate to discuss this with a supervisor to determine the best approach.

Before referring the man to another colleague (which may be appropriate), it's important to talk to the client and choose the right approach. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What is it about certain men that triggers me? Why?
- Am I overly sympathetic? Unsympathetic?
- Am I aware of my impressions and judgments? How am I managing them?

References

Association paritaire pour la santé et la sécurité du travail du secteur affaires sociales. (2014). *Programme de formation Réactions sécuritaires Alpha*. http://asstsas.qc.ca/formations-nos-formations/reactions-securitaires-alpha

Cégep de Saint-Jérôme. (2018). *Intervenir efficacement auprès des clients difficiles, vulnérables ou agressifs. Manuel de formation.* https://fcsei.cstj.qc.ca/programmes/intervenir-aupres-des-clients-difficiles-vulnerables-ou-agressifs/

Cégep de Saint-Jérôme. (2014). *La gestion des situations à risque d'agression. Manuel de formation.*

Learn more

The following video offers some interesting insights:

- *Bertrand – Créer un lien avec une personne en situation de crise qui résiste à accepter de l'aide* (in French)

  https://crisesuicidaire.ccdmd.qc.ca/videos.php?vid=7

Produced by the Centre collégial de développement de matériel didactique, in collaboration with the Cégep de l'Outaouais (2017).

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Consult all the toolbox tools

www.polesbeh.ca/en/documentation/mens-toolbox

To cite this tool

De Serres, J., L'Heureux, P., Arévian, A., Bacon, J., Brodeur, N., Gagné, D., Gariépy, Y., Hammond-Rivard, M., Lavoie, B., Martel, B., Martin, R., Tremblay, G. & Houle, J. (2021). *The Men's Toolbox. How to React to Aggressiveness*. Vitalité – Laboratoire de recherche sur la santé (UQAM). https://www.polesbeh.ca/en/documentation/mens-toolbox

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Graphic design and editing: Pascale Ouimet, Cert. Ed.

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Québec