

Article: Tips for the Front-Line

What can I do to stay safe?

We all react differently to violent or aggressive behaviour. Aggression perceived by one person, may not be so by another. However, no one should risk their personal safety.

We can sometimes compromise our safety for many reasons, including accepting aggression as part of the job, seeing no alternative (e.g. evening visits), convenience (e.g. a visit on the way home), feeling we should cope, or being too trusting.

Theory: Confrontation usually happens when people want something that cannot be provided. All of us also have a need to be taken seriously, 'respected', especially if we are not given what we want.

General suggestions

- Gather relevant information or case history.
- Be sensitive to behaviour, people and situations.
- Put safety first!
- Trust your intuition and feelings.
- Challenge bad language ('I cannot help unless you stop swearing'), but **not** if you are unsupported or if this would escalate aggression.
- Position yourself at a slight angle.
- Use normal eye contact. Avoid touching.
- Be prepared to call for help or leave.
- Have an exit plan at the ready.
- Report incidents or near misses. Always!

Dealing with complaints

- Stay calm, listen with empathy and paraphrase the complaint. Make notes.
- Request details, keep to the point.
- Let the person 'be heard', avoid offering solutions too quickly.
- Be assertive.
- Avoid excuses. Apologise if appropriate.
- Investigate. If you can't solve the problem immediately, say what will happen and when.
- In an emergency or distressing situation, call/ask for assistance.
- On the telephone:
 - People can be more aggressive and less coherent.
 - Never talk with your hand over the mouth-piece.
 - If you need to interrupt the caller, ask to phone them back.

Theory:

Clues to spotting potential violent behaviour:

- Louder voice and higher pitch, or a quiet, cold, very controlled threat.
- A threat, which is 'any manner or action or behaviour or remark that suggests that someone is at risk of harming himself or others' (McElhaney, 2004).
- Repetition over and over again, which 'winds the person up' further.
- Depersonalising language, including swearing and demeaning language.
- Agitated, restless behaviour, and muscle tension and fist clenching.
- Threatening, provocative behaviour and gestures.
- Confrontational, staring eye contact.
- Coming too close and towering posture.
- Banging furniture.
- Finger pointing or pushing.

Source: 'The New ABC of Handling Aggression - A Personal Guide', Willie More, 2005.

Visiting homes or premises:

- Exit lifts if you feel uncomfortable. Avoid basements.
- Park by lighting.
- Avoid involvement in family arguments.
- Take a colleague with you.
- Be traceable, let others know your route.
- At the door, if uncomfortable, leave or make it a different visit, e.g. leaving information.
- Invite them to lead the way, close the door yourself, remaining close to the exit.
- Request dogs are moved the another room.
- Be aware of other people and potential weapons.

At the office

- Establish a system of alerting colleagues.
- Arrange seats at an angle, unless you need a desk as a barrier.
- Ensure a quick exit route.
- Remove potential weapons, e.g. mugs.

At reception

- Use a calm, helpful approach.
- Ensure reception is well signposted with clear instructions for getting attention.
- Keep people informed.
- Avoid confrontation. Consider voice, language, body-language, proximity and eye contact.
- Apologise for any mistakes.

What else?

- Dress: Avoid valuables, clothes or uniforms that attract attention. Clothes should allow a quick getaway. Keep hands free.
- Beware of potentially dangerous locations.
- Darkness: Consider alternatives (e.g. an office appointment). Walk on the outside of the pavement. Keep keys and a panic alarm handy.
- Driving:
 - Lock your door in built-up areas, junctions or garages.
 - If approached, use the horn or lights.
 - Don't assist anyone - phone the police.
 - Check your car is empty before unlocking. Have keys ready.
 - Don't approach people around your car - phone the police.
 - Maintain the car. Don't let it run low on petrol!