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Workplace Safety for Human Service Workers



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Learning objectives

By the end of this training, you will be able to:

- Develop your own strategies for maintaining safety in the workplace
- Be aware of various workplace safety concerns
- Understand risks factors for workplace violence
- Adapt de-escalation techniques for use when working with aggressive or agitated people



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Workplace Safety Awareness



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Employee health and safety

- The Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) seeks to be a violence free workplace for all human service workers.
- EOHHS recognizes that workplace violence threatens the health and safety of all employees in the human service field.
- The “Human Service Worker Workplace Violence Prevention Policy” requires that every organization partners with the Office of Health and Human Services to establish a crisis response plan which must be readily available to all employees.



Who is a human service worker?

- A human service worker is any person that works in an Office of Health and Human Services funded program.
 - Includes: full and part time employees, contracted employees, fee for service staff, relief staff, interns, and volunteers

- Everyone at MCS is a human service worker regardless of division, position or work location.





Categories of workplace violence

- **Violence by Strangers:** Random acts of violence committed by an assailant unknown to the victim
 - Examples include armed robbery, assault, or other act committed by a stranger
- **Violence by People Receiving Services:** Violent acts committed by someone under the care of the agency
 - Examples can include verbal assaults and physical assaults such as pushing, biting, punching, or scratching
- **Violence by Employees:** Violent acts committed by a co-worker, supervisor, or former employee
 - Examples include verbal harassment, threats of violence whether direct or indirect, and physical assaults
- **Violence by Personal Relations (Domestic Violence):** Violent acts committed by someone known to the victim through their personal life – also known as Domestic Violence
 - Examples include when an abuser harasses an employee on the job or a victim is absent from work because of injury or is less productive at work due to stress related to an abusive relationship



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What is workplace violence?

- Violent behavior can include actions or communications
 - In person
 - By letter or note
 - Via telephone including text messages or voicemail
 - By fax
 - By email
 - Through social media



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Assessing Risk



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The key to assessing risk

➤ Awareness

- Be mindful of someone who seems upset
- Notice behavioral changes in someone
- Some people may become withdrawn and sullen when upset
- Look for signs of tension or agitation such as
 - Pacing
 - Cursing
 - Using a loud voice or shouting
 - Tense body language

However, some people may show no warning signs of aggression.



Assessing risk

- Verbal indicators that a person is becoming agitated or aggressive:
 - Raised voice
 - Swearing
 - Repetitious questioning
 - Threatening statements

- Physical indicators:
 - Pacing
 - Rocking back and forth
 - Exaggerated movements or stopping all movement
 - Clenched fists
 - Eyes darting around





Assessing environmental risk

- Environmental risks are factors that surround a person, but are not inherit within that individual:

- Check your environment for risks:
 - Where are you seated? Can you get to an exit easily?
 - Who is around you?
 - Where do you need to go in an emergency to guarantee safety?
 - Are you dressed for safety?
 - Do you feel well informed about risks?



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De-escalation

For use when interacting with an
aggressive or agitated person



De-escalation

- When a hostile situation does present itself, de-escalating the situation is important.

- However, remember that if at any time you feel threatened or unsafe, do not hesitate to call for assistance.
 - If you are asking yourself “do I need to call for help,” follow your gut instinct and call.





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Goal of de-escalation

- The goal of de-escalation is to reduce the level of agitation so that a discussion becomes possible.
- In some situations, adjusting our behavior can de-escalate an agitated person.

The only person you can control is yourself.



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Strategies for de-escalation

- Begin defusing hostile situations early
- Strive to control the interaction
- Be assertive, not aggressive or passive
- Recognize that each situation is unique
- Do not become defensive even if comments or insults are directed at you

Remember that if you lose control, the situation will escalate.



Verbal de-escalation techniques

- Keep a soft and neutral tone of voice
- Don't talk over or yell at an agitated person
- Be a "neutral observer"; respond don't react
- Be respectful when setting limits or calling for help
- Be honest but avoid information that may escalate the situation
- Empathize with feelings not behavior
- Do not tell a person how they are feeling
- Do not ask accusatory or confusing questions
- Listen actively



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More verbal de-escalation

Use the LADDER technique of:

- **L**ook at the person
- **A**sk questions
- **D**o not interrupt; really listen
- **D**o not change the subject
- **E**motions - be aware of your own
- **R**espond with verbal and non-verbal cues



Physical de-escalation techniques

- Present a calm center and be self assured.
- Use a neutral facial expression
- Have relaxed and alert posture
- Minimize your body movements
- Stand at an angle from the person rather than head-on
 - That way you can sidestep away if needed
- Know where all exits are located
- Be at the same eye level as the person
 - Encourage the person to sit if you are sitting
 - If they are standing, stand up as well
- Do not point or shake a finger
- Avoid touching the person
- Never turn your back on an agitated person



Be aware of your reactions

- Know what your triggers are
- Do not respond to complaints with more complaints
- Try to understand, even if you do not agree with the person
- Speak slowly and softly even if the other person is yelling
- Do not argue or try to convince someone
- Offer choices
- Use “I” sentences
 - “I am feeling uncomfortable right now” instead of “you are making me uncomfortable”



Explore alternatives

- Discuss available choices with the person
- Get the person's input on how to solve the problem
- Try to make a working agreement
- If possible, seek out your supervisor or another co-worker. Sometimes the presence of a third-person helps.





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If you feel unsafe

When de-escalation techniques do not work and you feel threatened:

- Call for assistance
- Stay calm but firm
- End the interaction if possible
- Do not threaten in return

Your primary responsibility is to keep yourself safe.



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Workplace Safety Resources



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911

- Do not hesitate to call 911 if:
 - There has been a physical assault or battery
 - There has been threats of physical assault or battery
 - The situation makes your fear for your personal safety or that of co-workers
 - You are alone and unable to de-escalate an aggressive person





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Pertinent laws

- A copy of the regulations can be found at <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/>
- This outlines what is required of agencies like MCS which are funded by an entity within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services in regards to Human Service Worker Workplace Violence Prevention





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Scenarios



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Mark

Mark, a man supported by MCS, is at the front desk yelling loudly at the receptionists and threatening to hit them if they do not give him his check.

What should the receptionists do in this situation?

- a. Maintain self control and try to stay calm
- b. Ask questions to get more information from Mark
- c. Seek help if they feel physically threatened
- d. All of the above



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Mark - answer

Mark, a man supported by MCS, is at the front desk yelling loudly at the receptionists and threatening to hit them if they do not give him his check.

What should the receptionists do in this situation?

D. All of the above

In this situation, any of the actions are appropriate: maintain self control and trying to stay calm, asking questions to get more information, and getting help if they feel threatened.



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Kathy

Kathy comes to Human Resources very upset about a co-worker. She starts to get very loud and begins using inappropriate language. Jill, who works in HR, loudly tells Kathy to “calm down or I am calling the police to have you arrested.” With that, Kathy gets more escalated and picks up a chair to throw at Jill.

What did Jill do wrong in this situation?

- a. Lets Kathy into HR
- b. Tells Kathy loudly to calm down and threatens to have her arrested
- c. Does not get out of the way of the chair quick enough
- d. Remains calm and uses de-escalation strategies



Kathy - answer

Kathy comes to Human Resources very upset about a co-worker. She starts to get very loud and begins using inappropriate language. Jill, who works in HR, loudly tells Kathy to “calm down or I am calling the police to have you arrested.” With that, Kathy gets more escalated and picks up a chair to throw at Jill.

What did Jill do wrong in this situation?

B. Tells Kathy loudly to calm down and threatens to have her arrested

This response only seems to make the situation worse with Kathy and raises the level of aggression and escalation.



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Mike

A client of MCS, Mike, comes into the office. A few minutes later Mike's spouse enters the office and there is an altercation between the two of them. No MCS employees are involved.

Does this fall under the jurisdiction of the Human Service Worker Workplace Violence Prevention Policy?

- a. Yes
- b. No



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Mike - answer

A client of MCS, Mike, comes into the office. A few minutes later Mike's spouse enters the office and there is an altercation between the two of them. No MCS employees are involved.

Does this fall under the jurisdiction of the Human Service Worker Workplace Violence Prevention Policy?

B. No

While this does take place in a work area, no employees were involved, so it does not fall under the policy jurisdiction.



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Wrap up



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Remember

- Your primary responsibility is to keep yourself safe.
- Trust your gut. If you feel like you need help, seek assistance immediately.
- The only person's behavior you can control is your own.
- Do not hesitate to call 911



