

## 2.15. Ten steps for responding to threats, hostility and aggression

### 2.15.1. Recognising danger signals and reviewing risk

- Recognise the signs of anger – whether or not the anger is directed at you.
- Ask yourself: ‘Am I in danger?’
- If ‘yes’ – remove yourself from harm’s way as quickly as possible. Walk through the nearest door into a more secure area, and then inform the person that the interview has/ will be terminated – for example, ‘I cannot continue this interview while you are behaving in an angry way or making threats.’
- If the threat abates – that is, the person’s behaviour improves – then you can restart the interview based on clear behavioural ground rules.

#### Repeating

- Make sure threats are clarified (made overt) and the person takes ownership of the threat by repeating the statement as close to verbatim as possible – for example, ‘You have just said to me that ....’
- Ask if this is what the person meant to say and whether it is in fact a threat to cause harm – for example, ‘Is that what you meant? Are you threatening me?’

#### Reacting

- React to all threats by explicitly acknowledging them – whether they are overt or covert threats to you, to themselves or to others.
- Always show some reaction to a threat, even if minimal – for example, take a five-minute break.
- Do not overreact or mirror the threatening language or the threatening behaviour.
- Continue to show respect even when the person is being rude or threatening.

#### Responding

- Ask the person to stop the behaviour – ‘Mr ... stop shouting at me’ – while informing the person of the organisation’s protocols for responding to threats.
- Communicate clearly and consistently what the consequences will be if the behaviour continues.

#### Redirecting

- Redirect or distract the attention of the person with actions or comments that do not reward the behaviour.
- Ask questions about the substantive issue to try to move the person from the ‘emotional’ state back into a ‘cognitive’ or thinking state.
- Take a five-minute break or offer a cold drink, if needed.

## Refocusing

- If you are able to help the person bring their emotions under control, refocus attention on their issue.  
A question about the facts can change a person's focus from feelings to thinking about the substance of their issue.

## Raising concerns

- If you feel threatened, activate a silent alarm (if available) or leave the room and call for assistance from other staff.

## Running

- If all else fails and you feel an imminent risk of harm – run (or at least move quickly) to a safe location.

## Recording

- Always make a 'verbatim' record of all threats and put a copy on the relevant file.

## Reporting and reviewing responses

- Report the matter to a supervisor/manager so that both of you can review your responses to the threatening behaviour and identify strategies to manage or control any future interactions with the person.
- You may want a formal or informal debrief after the incident.