



TDCJ Risk Management's Training Circular

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Risk Management Issues

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Aggression



Issues Affecting Offender Behavior

It is the policy of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to promote prevention and reduction of staff injuries during confrontational situations with offenders.

Each employee must make every effort to ensure the safety and well being of the offender population; however, not at the risk of staff safety. An employee's primary responsibility is to remain unharmed. When working with aggressive offenders, a professional, calm, and mature approach to handling aggressive offender behavior will eliminate many staff and offender injuries.

The protection of staff, offenders, and the institution may all depend on how well an employee manages aggression. What requires skill – and what everyone should be proud of – is using your skills and understanding of human nature to avoid a use of force. Granted this is not always possible, but it should always be your goal when interacting with an aggressive individual.

Issues that may not be obvious:

- Changes in environment
- Personal/family problems
- Learning new behaviors or skills
- Changes in treatment
- Changes in medication

Obvious issues:

- Age
- Race
- Gender
- Rules
- Appearance
- Staff conflicts

The most significant risk factor, and often the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Particularly when it comes to predatory psychopaths who demonstrate a propensity toward violent or aggressive acts against other offenders and staff.

Signs of Potential Aggressive Behavior

Overt signs

- Yelling
- Shaking fists
- Threatening staff or offenders

Subtle signs

- Hand tremors
- Change in mood
- Change in tone of voice

Characteristics for Predicting Violent Behavior

- History of violence
- Evidence of psychosis

- Evidence of Erotomania - a pre-occupation with sexual activities , thoughts and fantasies
- Chemical or alcohol dependence
- Depression
- Delegation of blame and responsibility
- Elevated frustration level, particularly when low frustration tolerance exists.
- Interest in weapons
- Evidence of personality disorders
- Vocalization of violent intentions prior to a violent act
- Evidence of strange or bizarre behavior over a period of time

Historical Information Used in Clinical Prediction of Violence

- Physical or sexual abuse as a child
- Violent parental or sibling influence
- Pyromania
- Cruelty to animals





- Emotion or physical abandonment as a child
- Hostile or assaultive feelings towards parents, siblings and/or significant others
- Self-reinforcement or self-praise for aggression
- Juvenile record
- Preference for violent films
- School problems (temper tantrums, truancy, threats, fights, etc.)

Range of Aggressive Behavior

Verbal Aggression

- Makes loud noises, shouts angrily
- Yells personal insults
- Curses viciously
- Makes clear threats of violence toward others

Physical Aggression Against Objects

- Slams doors and scatters personal possessions
- Throws objects down and marks on the walls
- Destruction of property
- Sets fires or throws objects dangerously

Physical Aggression Against Self

- Picks or scratches skin, hits self on arms or body, or pulls hair
- Bangs head, hits fists into objects, throws self on the floor or into objects
- Small cuts or bruises, minor burns
- Serious self-mutilation, bites that bleed, internal injury, fracture, loss of consciousness, loss of teeth

Physical Aggression Against Others

- Makes threatening gestures, swings at people, grabs clothes
- Strikes, kicks, pushes, pulls hair
- Attacks others causing mild to moderate physical injury (bruises, sprains, welts)
- Attacks others causing severe physical injury (broken bones, deep lacerations, internal injuries)

Causes of Aggression

Stress—Stress plays an important part in many cases of aggression. Everyone experiences stress from pressures at work, pressure at home, money worries, etc. These things can build up and make a person over-stressed.

Social Reinforcement—When social reinforcement follows acts of aggression, it may serve to reinforce the aggressive acts and increase their future occurrence. In this way, the social reinforcement can be both a consequence and at least a partial future “cause” of further aggressive acts.

Frustration — It is often a strong emotional response to opposition, anger, and disappointment. People become frustrated when they are unable to change something or achieve something.

Redirection and Stimulus Change

Often when an individual is displaying pre-aggressive behaviors, it may not be possible to calm them by talking with them about the stressor. The more you talk about the stressor, the more they may continue to think about it which just prolongs the distress.

Some individuals cannot pinpoint what is upsetting them. There may be nothing you can say or do that will change a particular disturbing situation.

In such situations, there are several things that can be done. If you are able to determine what is upsetting an offender, you may help to calm them by simply removing what is upsetting them from their area. You might also be able to remove the offender from the area. For example, an offender may get quite upset because he is trying to watch TV and another offender is yelling and screaming. Perhaps the easiest way to calm the offender would be to separate the two offenders. This type of change is called a stimulus change.



Another way to calm an offender, is to redirect their attention from what is upsetting them to something else. If you can get them to talk about something else, which is pleasant to them, they may stop thinking about what is upsetting them and calm down.

If they are non-verbal or will not talk, you may simply lead them to a chair and ask them to sit down and relax and just talk to them about a subject you know they enjoy. It is usually difficult to think about stressful things if one continues to think or talk about pleasant things.

Another way to redirect an offender's attention is to get them involved in some type of activity. Lead the offender to a table and prompt them to draw a picture, play dominoes or checkers, or engage in some other task.

Always remain with the offender until they have calmed down for a while. Do not assume that they will remain calm just because they appear calm at the moment. When redirecting an offender who is becoming aggressive, never attempt to bribe them. Never threaten them. By using these techniques you can prevent the majority of actual aggressive incidents. The faster you intervene when someone begins to become upset, the greater the likelihood that you will be able to prevent aggression and injuries to yourself and others.



Tips to Tame Your Temper

Think before you speak: In the heat of the moment, it is easy to say something you will later regret. Take a few moments to collect your thoughts before saying anything and allow others involved in the situation to do the same.

Once you are calm, express your

anger: As soon as you are thinking clearly, express your frustration in a non confrontational way. State your concerns and needs clearly and directly, without hurting others or trying to control them.

Get some exercise: Physical activity can help reduce stress that can cause you to become angry. If you feel your anger escalating, go for a brisk walk or run, or spend some time doing other enjoyable physical activities.

Take a timeout: Timeouts are not just for kids. Give yourself short breaks during times of the day that tend to be stressful. A few moments of quiet time might help you feel better prepared to handle what is ahead without getting irritated or angry.

Identify possible solutions: Instead of focusing on what made you mad, work on resolving the issue at hand. Does your child's messy room drive you crazy? Close the door. Is your partner late for dinner every night? Schedule meals later in the evening — or agree to eat on your own a few times a week. Remind yourself that anger will not fix anything and might only make it worse.

Don't hold a grudge: Forgiveness is a powerful tool. If you allow anger and other negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice. But if you can forgive someone who angered you, you might both learn from the situation. It's unrealistic to expect everyone to behave exactly as you want at all times.

Use humor to release tension: Lightening up can help diffuse tension. Use humor to help you face what is making you angry and, any unrealistic expectations you have for how things

should go. Avoid sarcasm, as it can hurt feelings and make things worse.

Practice relaxation skills: When your temper flares, put relaxation skills to work. Practice deep-breathing exercises, imagine a relaxing scene, or repeat a calming word or phrase, such as, "Take it easy." You might also listen to music, write in a journal or do a few yoga poses — whatever it takes to encourage relaxation.

Know when to seek help:

Learning to control anger is a challenge for everyone at times. Consider seeking help for anger issues if your anger seems out of control, causes you to do things you regret, or hurts those around you.

Professional Conduct:

Remember that it is very important to remain professional in your actions as officers, staff, managers, and leaders. Everyone should strive to be courteous, polite, respectful, considerate, and positive when communicating and working with others. We should address all issues beginning at the lowest level and remind others that inappropriate or unprofessional behavior will not be tolerated. Everyone will be held accountable for their actions and decisions. According to our agency's ethics policy ED-02.01, actions and decisions of employees should be based on the core values of the agency.

Core Values:

- Integrity
- Courage
- Commitment
- Perseverance

General Awareness:

Be aware of and alert to the surroundings.

Visually search offenders and the surrounding area for possible weapons.

Be aware of where fellow employees are who could assist if needed, and when possible, avoid entering an area alone.

Maintain a safety zone between yourself and offenders, avoiding easy striking distance.

Be prepared to take evasive or defensive action, and move quickly and expediently.

Remain calm while assessing the situation and maintain control.

Prevent personal feelings or emotions from dictating actions.

Do not respond to verbal taunts.

Be firm, fair, and consistent while interacting with others.

Do not panic. Give calm, controlled orders instead of loud, agitated commands to achieve compliance.

Offenders Involved in a Fight

- Quickly and loudly yell "Fight"
- Intervene only when sufficient staff is present to control all participants.

**Offenders Being Escorted in Restraints**

- A restrained offender is not harmless (the offender is capable of kicking, biting, head butting, tripping someone, or jerking away).
- Every attempt shall be made to prevent harm to the offender, while keeping the offender from harming anyone else and ensuring control is maintained.
- Remain alert to other offenders attempting to harm the escorted offender.

References :

- Texas Department of Criminal Justice Prevention of Employee Injuries Due to Offender Aggression
⇒ AD- 03.48
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice Ethics Policy
⇒ ED 02.01
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice CID—Management Operations/Correctional Training and Staff Development
⇒ Mental Health Training for Correctional Officers
- Mayo Clinic
⇒ <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/anger-management/art-20045434>

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