

Guidelines for Dealing with Agitated Clients

If a client becomes agitated or confrontational:

1. Maintain an appropriate distance. Sometimes we tend to move closer to an individual and this can escalate a situation or put you in danger of being assaulted. You may need to give them space to walk out of the area or to remove yourself from the area. If needed, ask a supervisor or another staff in authority to assist you. (allowing you to disengage with the person, get out of danger, and make someone aware of the volatile situation).
2. Encourage the person to have a seat if they are standing. Pacing can increase the agitation. You may wish to stand until assistance arrives or you may choose to sit after the client sits.
3. Do not touch the person, even if attempting to simply pat them on the shoulder to reassure them.
4. Watch carefully and remain alert. Clenched fists, hands that are opening and closing in a frenzied manner, darting eyes or wide-eyed panic stricken look and tensed jaw muscles can provide indicators that the person is very agitated. If aggressive behaviors continue to escalate despite your efforts to assist client in calming down, identify an opportunity to leave this volatile situation to get help.
5. When faced with verbal confrontations, keep your voice calm. Do not engage in an argument. Speaking softly will sometimes allow the person to lower their tone in order to hear what you are saying.
6. Provide an honorable avenue of escape. Know when to terminate a session. Do not become so focused on the task that you ignore warning signs of a potentially dangerous situation. Offer to reschedule the appointment. You may ask the client to wait in the waiting room while you contact your supervisor for direction as to how to proceed in assisting them.
7. Realize that an individual who is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs has an increased risk of unstable or volatile behavior and impaired judgement. Learn to identify signs of being under the influence:
 glassy eyes, dilated pupils, staggering, odor of alcohol or marijuana, irrational or illogical behavior, acting uncharacteristically different, extremely depressed or elevated mood.
It is not useful to attempt to resolve issues with a client in this condition. It is recommended that you terminate the session and reschedule.
8. If you are threatened with violence, disengage immediately until you can get assistance from your supervisor or local police if necessary.