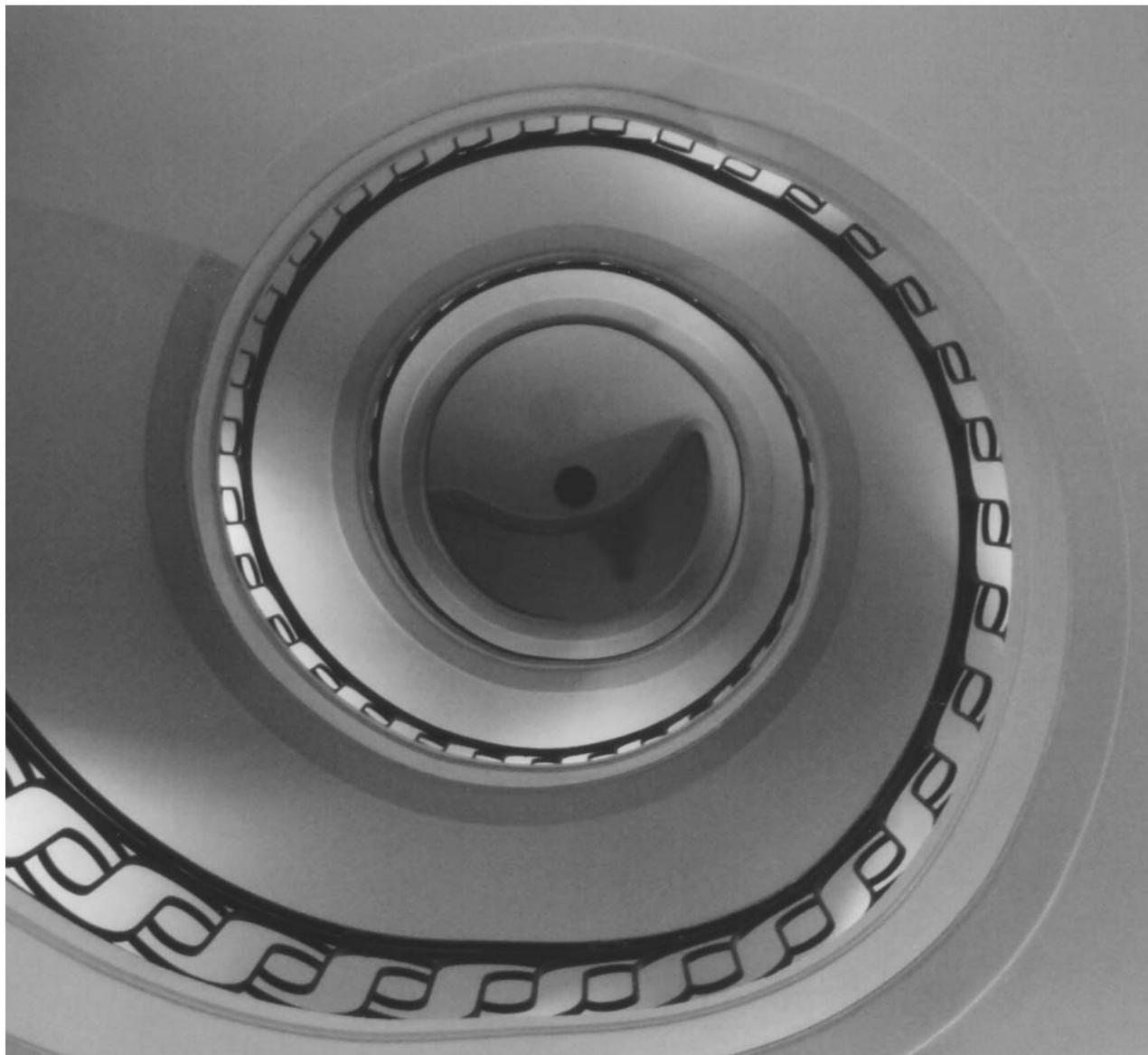


FOR
FAMILIES

In the Eye of the Hurricane

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Skills to Calm and De-escalate Aggressive and
Mentally Ill Family Members: 2nd Edition

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CHAPTER 54

Terrified Rage

Be aware that the line between terrified and chaotic rage can be very fine. The terrified person, overwhelmed, can shift into chaotic rage. When facing an individual in a state of either pure terror or terrified rage, be prepared, therefore, to shift to protocols suitable to assisting individuals in chaotic states (Chapter 53).

What Does Terrified Rage Look Like?

Terrified individuals believe that they will be violated or abused. They appear apprehensive and furtive, looking halfway ready to run, halfway ready to strike. Their voice can be pleading, whiny or fearful, and their eyes are often wide-open or darting from place to place. Wide-open eyes do not always indicate fear, however. When fearful, the muscles under the eyes are slack, giving their face a pleading look. Even though the terrified person is looking in your direction, they do not, usually, look *into* your eyes, nor do they want you to look into theirs. The enraged, aggressive individual with wide-open eyes, on the other hand, displays tension around the eyes. Furthermore, they often look penetratingly into your eyes, or *through* you.

The mouth of some terrified people gapes slightly as they breathe in panicky short gasps, high in the chest, while others press their lips together in a quivering pucker. Their skin tone is often ashen or pale. Some make threatening gestures with a flailing overhand blow, while others primarily use a fending off gesture, as if trying to ward off attack. Their body posture can be described as concave, as they pull away from you, or hold themselves tightly in fear. Their body is usually tense, preparing to either defend themselves or flee. They also exhibit heightened levels of physical arousal, accompanied by panting, sweating, and trembling. They may back into a wall or corner. They may also yell, threatening and pleading at the same time, using such phrases as “Stay back! You get away from me! I will hit you! I will! You stay back!” There is a hollow quality to their voice, as if it has no “foundation.” This is due to the tightening of their abdomen and diaphragm, so that not only their breathing, but also their speech is high in their chest.



What Causes Terrified Rage?

Severely frightened people often suffer from paranoid delusions, a fear of the unknown, or frightening hallucinations. At other times, they are afraid of a loss of control, of being laughed at or humiliated. Some people are afraid that they are in terrible trouble with some agency, be it police, mental health professionals, or even the family. Finally, for any number of reasons, they are simply terrified of you. Imagine a snarling wolf cornered, backed up against a cliff face.

De-Escalation of Terrified Rage

Try to reduce the terrified person's sense of danger. Maintain a safe distance and relax your posture. Make sure your movements are unhurried, and your voice is firm, confident, and reassuring.

Notice if their body relaxes or tenses in response to your eye contact or its lack. If direct eye contact is reassuring for the person, do so; if intimidating, do not. Of course, you should never take your eyes *off* the person: the point is that you should not look penetratingly into their eyes if such contact terrifies them.

Initiate a litany of reassuring phrases, speaking slowly, with frequent pauses: "I know you are scared – that's OK. - - - - Put down the chair. - - - - You don't need that. - - - - - I keep it safe here. You can put it down now. - - - - - I'm way over here. - - - - - Go ahead. Sit down. - - - - - I keep it safe."

Do not say "I'll protect you" or "I won't hurt you." Many people who shift into terrified rage have been hurt by people who said those kinds of phrases. However, when you say, "I keep it safe here," you are implicitly telling them, "This is my territory and no one, including you, will be hurt on my territory. I am taking responsibility now, and because of me, you will be safe."

Furthermore, by saying something similar to what they expect to hear, yet somehow different, you cause a "glitch" in their thought process. "What did he say? He didn't say, 'I'll keep you safe.' What's different in what he said?" By getting the terrified person to question what you said, you cause them to re-engage the parts of the brain that actually think things through as opposed to just reacting.

Their body language will also indicate that they are calming down. Their breathing will get a little shuddery or be expressed in short, high-pitched gasps. They may slump into a chair or onto the floor, as if physically exhausted, or they may even begin to weep. Maintain your reassuring litany and slowly approach them. If they show signs of becoming frightened again, pause, move slightly back, and continue to speak reassuringly.

As you approach the person, move in "half steps." For example, move the right foot a full step, then bring the left foot *up* to the right foot. Pause. Move either right or left foot forward, and then bring the other foot forward *up* to the lead foot. Pause. The advantage of moving this way is that you stay balanced, in case the individual suddenly attacks. Furthermore, you can ease backward, creating more space between you if the person becomes startled or reactive.

Attempting to hold or hug the person to comfort their fears should *not* be your first choice. Particularly with adults, this will be a very rare option. There are some times, however, when that is the right thing to do.

With adults, touch usually occurs at the end, when they are calm, close to baseline, or even further into post-crisis depression. If touch is in order, it should be firm. Be very careful: many adults will still be frightened and confused, and can misunderstand your intentions. Therefore, do not try to touch them unless you have a strong sense that you will be experienced as comforting and welcome. Do not curve your hand so that the fingertips “dig” inward: your hands, particularly to the hypersensitive person, will feel like claws. You must not stroke or pat them: these are gestures that are meant to *evoke* feelings. A firm touch will help the person dampen down their emotions. If you feel any tension in their body in response to your touch, calmly remove your hand. To reiterate, in such situations, touch is the rarest of options, but this is how to do it in cases where it is warranted. In such cases, the best touch to an adult is a firm palm of the hand on the shoulder – in particular, the deltoid muscle. If you place your hand on their trapezius muscle, you are too close to their neck. This may very likely be experienced as threatening or intrusive.

With small children, it is often effective to wrap them firmly in your arms, containing their rage within your kind strength. At the same time, reassure the child that you are holding them to keep them safe.

If you do wrap a child in your arms, it is often very effective to “shove” a beloved toy – a teddy bear or doll, for example -- into their arms, and wrap their arms around the toy. They will thus be holding the toy in the same way you are holding them. At this time, you can repeat such phrases as, “You hold onto that dolly. Hold onto her so she won’t get hurt. Hold her tight.” You are subliminally suggesting that you are holding the child in the same way.

This can also be done with terrified developmentally disabled people.

When Should You Allow the Terrified Person to Leave?

Fearful people feel trapped: this is one of the primary reasons why they are frightened. Remember the image of a “cornered wolf.” The last thing you should do with a wolf is to block it from escape. There are many situations where you tell your family member, “You can stay or go if you want. I am concerned for you and want to help you. But you do not have to stay if you don’t want to.” On the other hand, you may have a responsibility to protect both the terrified person and other people. If you are concerned that the person may run out and harm either themselves or other people, you have a moral responsibility to keep them safe by keeping them close.