# Guarding the Gates

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## Calming, Control and De-escalation of Mentally Ill, Emotionally Disturbed and Aggressive Individuals

*A Comprehensive Guidebook for*

*Security Officers*

An Edgework Book
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# CHAPTER 5

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## Safety Planning and Risk Reduction:
## Practical Issues

No matter how skilled you may become at verbal de-escalation, you are sometimes dealing with potentially violent individuals who may be unable or more likely, unwilling to stop from acting violently, no matter what you might say or do. Most aggressive subjects are best handled by a team. However, if you and your team do not function in a smooth and coordinated fashion, you will find yourselves trying to improvise the things you should have prepared beforehand. When you are focused as an individual and coordinated as a team, you are far more effective in managing the aggressive person. Agencies that have a well-coordinated and well-practiced safety plan feel different as well and as a result potential aggressors:

- See fewer opportunities to attack.
- Find fewer pretexts to justify an attack in their mind.

### How to Assess Your Personal Workspace: A Training Exercise

1. Enter a room with a predator's mind and a predator's movements: slowly, gracefully, with calculation. Imagine that you will hurt the next person who comes in that room. How would you cut off their escape routes? What could you use as a weapon? Where would you position yourself to attack? Where could your victim best escape?
2. The point of this exercise is that when you move like someone, you get true insight into his or her way of thinking, from the inside out. If you are in the habit of noting potential danger (items that can be thrown, sharp objects, etc.), you will have a far greater likelihood of avoiding harm when it is offered.
3. Any object can become a weapon.
   a. Pens, pencils, staplers, paper punches, and other office equipment can be used as weapons if a situation is escalating. Keep desks free of such items, particularly in an interview room.
   b. Are picture frames or corkboards secured to the walls? Any item that can be removed from the walls or picked up easily is a potential weapon.
   c. Loose chair parts and light furniture can be used as weapons as well. Keep office furniture and equipment is in good condition and in proper working order.
   d. If your department authorizes the use of weapons of any kind, make sure that they are in a locked cabinet or drawer when not in use.

## Communication for Emergencies

You cannot create a strategy for communication in emergency situations while enmeshed in an emergency. This not only must be developed beforehand, it must be practiced enough times that your team initiates this strategy automatically.

- Emergency numbers, including 9-1-1 (or your country's equivalent emergency dispatch number), poison control, child protective services, and the mental health professionals who, in your state or province, are responsible to place severely mentally ill people in a hospital should be programmed into the office phone system or posted nearby each telephone extension in the security office.

- Use a land line, whenever possible, to call for emergency assistance. In North America, and in many other countries, your address will automatically be available to 9-1-1 call takers, letting them know your location even when you cannot speak freely. Security Guards should also enter all emergency contact information into their cell phones, including numbers for local police departments, treatment centers, and their home office.

- Some agencies install emergency call buttons that trigger an audible or silent alarm, even including a light over the doorway of the room where the crisis is occurring. However, installing the buttons is not enough. Your agency should have regular drills to be sure that they actually work, and that the designated people actually respond when an emergency button is pressed. In addition, those possessing these buttons must be trained in when and how to use them, including what response they can expect were they to use the button.

- Develop and implement emergency code words or phrases that will activate emergency procedures, including a show-of-force within the office, and a call to law enforcement, if necessary. This code phrase can be used over the public address system to summon aid as required. Consideration in training must be given to consistent application of training if using code words or phrases. Attrition of Security Guards requires both updating current Security Guards and training new hires.

- Develop and implement the use of critical incident reports, which are to be completed following the resolution of the emergency or critical incident. The authors recommend that Security Guards fill out a critical incident report any time they feel that their safety has been threatened or jeopardized, no matter how hard it might be to define what was of concern. For example, "grooming behavior" to set you up for a possible assault or blackmail can be an investment of considerable time. It is sometimes only revealed when a Security Guard has noted subtle behaviors that, taken as a whole, reveal a pattern.

- Supervisors should compile a list of emergency contact numbers for each of their Security Guards in the event of an emergency. Supervisors should keep a copy of the emergency contact list at home as well as in the office.

- Employees, among them Security Guards, may find themselves in a situation where they need to summon help without alerting the individual that they are doing so. The use of code words or phrases over your office phone, in conversation with another employee or guard, or over the public address system, will trigger a response. This should be placed in context to the situation

being discussed, such as "Virginia, should you bring down the codes regarding visitors to the facility?" In this case, Virginia, a non-existent employee, is the code word for requesting help.

- Some agencies use a second code to simply call one person down to check out the situation or offer support. Here, we recommend a *code word* to alert the person that the situation is heated and it may be necessary that they stand by, ready to assist in de-escalation or in initiating a show-of-force. In *this* circumstance, you do not have an emergency--yet. There is, therefore, no need to obscure your intentions from the person. Instead, you could call the front desk or a supervisor and say, "Mr. DeVore is troubled by our recent phone call to his insurance company. Would you send Ms. Bargetta to this office to *lend a hand* in explaining things to him?" In this case, the somewhat stilted "lend a hand" is used, rather than the more common word, "help"--and this word is designated, agency-wide, as the code that the situation demands immediate attention.

**Figure 5.1  Code Words**

Whenever the agreed-upon code word or phrase is voiced, no matter what the *apparent* context of the call, the recipient knows that the designated safety response plan must be initiated.

For example:
- "I'm in the 2nd conference room. Would **Mr. HOLMES** get me our information on our hiring practices concerning convicted felons." In this case, the use of the name **HOLMES,** by prearrangement means, "I need help right now."
- "I need an immediate consult with **Mr. HOLMES** concerning whether we are required to call the union as soon as a report of possible theft is filed."
- "Could **Mr. HOLMES** please come here with the records I was talking about? I'm in conference room B."

With proper planning and attention to detail, many potential emergencies can be curtailed before they develop into a harmful situation. Of course, even the best laid plans will not prevent an emergency from arising, which is why regular practice of the safety plan is a requirement for the safety of all concerned. Regular practice will also highlight areas of the response plan that need to be modified and improved upon, *before* a true emergency occurs.

**Figure 5.2  Explicit Announcements in Emergencies**

There are other situations in which you must inform everyone in your facility, without ambiguity, that they are in an emergency situation. In these cases, speak explicitly. For example: "A man with a gun, wearing a red jacket and brown pants is in the building. He was last seen on the second floor. Staff must initiate emergency procedures now!"

## Be Aware Who Is in Your Agency

Outsiders such as visitors must not have the freedom to enter your agency and move around at will without anyone being aware of where they are and who they are. Given that you may have many people entering and leaving your company on a daily basis, many of who are unfamiliar, it is imperative that no one "disappears" while on agency property. Access control systems are an integral part of many organizations, and as such managing access is critical. It is typically the responsibility of security to control access or respond to a person who has not complied. Access control is the literal front line of the organization's defense. The following list will be helpful maintaining control:

- **Just visiting.** Companies in many countries are required to keep visitor logs.
- **Control ingress and egress to the office proper.** A secure reception area should be established to control the flow of individuals into the office. Depending on the security requirements of your facility, the door leading from the reception area into the office itself should remain locked at all times, and Security Guards must escort each individual into and out of the office. Whatever your entry procedures, do not allow an individual to wander unescorted through the office.
- **Badge system.** One of the most effective security measures is a requirement that all people who enter the facility sign in and prominently wear a visitor's badge. Most companies require that visitors be escorted by an employee while present in any location.
- **Security doors must remain locked if they are to be effective.** Propping a security door open, or leaving the door unlocked negates its intended purpose.
- **Leave no space unguarded.** Outside your personal office space, give consideration to all hallways, stairwells, staff and public elevators, parking and storage areas, and the reception area. Are there adequate sight lines to see who is entering the reception area? Is the lighting adequate in hallways, stairwells, and parking areas?

## Planning for Potentially Volatile Meetings

Even the most secure office site cannot prevent an individual from becoming agitated or even aggressive. There are many situations where the individual must be informed of something that is potentially upsetting, such as being told to leave a location, a termination or reduction in pay or status, or being investigated for theft, to name only a few. Any of these problems may escalate into a potentially dangerous situation.

Each member of the team must be fully aware of their designated role in any plan regarding a potentially aggressive subject, and possess the skills and training necessary to carry out his/her assigned duties. Inadequate staffing or poor planning for a situation is a guaranteed formula to kindle people who are already on the edge. Individual Security Guard limitations or liabilities must be taken into account when preparing a safety plan, and duties and responsibilities should be assigned accordingly. Regardless of individual assignments, ongoing communication among Security Guards and staff must be considered one of the most vital aspects of office safety.

A Security Guard or Human Resources (HR) person, anticipating an aggressive encounter should never "surprise" the Security Guard team with a last minute request for assistance *after* the individual has

already been admitted into the office proper. Notifying others as to the potential for an emergency situation takes but a moment, and can be accomplished while the individual remains in the reception area or even after they arrive. Failure to do so is a guaranteed formula for escalating an otherwise manageable encounter into a critical event. Of course, some situations simply explode unexpectedly, but risk should not be increased by not preparing when it is already known that the person is volatile.

If the employee (or outsider) will be escorted to their desk to collect their belongings and then off the property, or directly off grounds, then the team should be assembled and advised of the reasons for the action, the individual's propensity for resistance, and who will be doing what in the room.

Depending on the location of your agency, that is, rural versus urban, local police departments may not be able to quickly respond to requests for non-emergency assistance, In the event of a true emergency, staff must not hesitate to call 9-1-1.

## How to Extricate Employees From a Room in a Volatile Situation

Let us imagine that you hear loud or threatening voices coming from an office, cubicle, or conference room. If such behaviors are occurring, encourage the victim to exit the room. Security should then make themselves visible in an effort to mitigate the problem. Security should not attempt to physically prevent the aggressive employee from leaving; the person should be escorted from the premises. If the person threatens violence, police should be called.

## The Five Ws: What information is needed in an emergency?

There is some information that is absolutely required when trying to assess threat level in any emergency.
- **Where?** Get the location of where the incident is happening, and get the informant to tell you again! Absolutely nothing can be accomplished if emergency responders cannot reach the correct scene.
- **What?** Always ensure that you know what is going on. And do not assume that the first thing the person tells you is the real story! History teaches us difficult lessons in some cases. Descriptions of people, activities, weapons, and the type of violence may be inconsistent, leading responders to a conclusion not necessarily accurate. It is important to listen to information being presented, at the same time understanding the circumstances under which it is being presented. *For example, one of the authors, in responding to a threat case by an employee, encountered multiple employees running towards him, screaming that the person was armed with a knife. The person had an unopened pocketknife and was holding it in his hand.* To be sure, Security Guards need to be aware that circumstances may be under reported as well. It is a function of awareness and maintaining composure.
- **Who?** Be sure to find out everyone who is involved: those presenting threat, those who are injured or victims, and others on the scene.
- **When?** When did the crisis happen: recently, currently, or is it about to happen? The level of urgency that is present drives decisions and actions.
- **Weapons.** Concerning emergency responders' safety we must do everything necessary and possible to keep our police officers, firefighters, and EMTs safe. Questions about weapons and their

locations, a history of violence, past or current threats to responders, drug or alcohol use, and any other potential dangers must be answered as fully as humanly possible.

## Staying Calm by Being Prepared for the Worst

Do not shut your eyes to signs of danger. The calm of the professional is very different from the calm of the clueless person. You must be conscious of what the aggressor is doing and the likely meaning and implications that follow. While you are trying to calm or soothe them or while you are controlling the crisis remain conscious of the following:

- Where are your escape routes? Is something blocking your way out?
- Are there any obstacles, sharp corners, or other hazards that you need to avoid?
- Are there any weapons around that can be used against you, or in the worst case, that you can pick up in your own defense?
- Is the person's aggressiveness escalating? If so, what is the proximate cause of their escalation, and what mode of aggression are they moving into?
- Do they have allies, confederates who are waiting for you to get off-guard at which point they will join in the attack.
- What are your non-verbal behaviors? Are you getting mad too? If so, it is best to disengage or you will merely get very angry together and the situation could become explosive.
- Where is your "team?" Is other staff organizing to help you?

## Calling the Police

Police should be called when anyone is at physical risk, or when the aggressive individual is so disruptive that their behavior cannot be modulated and they are disrupting the activities of your facility. It is the Security Guard's responsibility to give as complete information as possible, including a description of the aggressor, their current location, whether he/she has weapons, and current behavior and potential risk. Whenever possible, inform emergency responders of exactly what help you are requesting. You must understand that the police, as emergency responders in cases of potential danger, <u>will</u> take over to establish safety based on *their* assessment of risk at that moment.

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**Figure 5.3  Crisis Intervention Team/Training**

One of the most exciting innovations in law enforcement in both America and Great Britain is the Crisis Intervention Team model (CIT), in which law enforcement officers get 40 or more hours of training on dealing with mentally ill individuals. In many law enforcement agencies, somewhere between 20-40% of the officers are CIT trained.

- If your local law enforcement agency has a CIT team, ensure that all members of your security team are familiar with its existence.
- If there is a CIT team, always ask for a CIT-officer when calling emergency dispatch in situations with apparently mentally ill subjects. You are not guaranteed a response from a CIT officer: this depends on their availability at the time of the call. Nonetheless, always ask.

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