



MODULE 18. VERBAL DE-ESCALATION SCENARIOS

Role Play Scenarios

Fourteen scenarios have been prepared to allow participants to practice their verbal de-escalation skills when responding to behavioral health- and/or IDD-related crisis situations. Each of these scenarios is presented below.

The primary goals and objectives of participants in these scenarios remain consistent.

Participants should:

- ✓ Introduce themselves, get the person's name, identify the person's emotions (reflection), and summarize the person's statements;
- ✓ Keep the person safe, themselves, and others safe;
- ✓ Help the person *feel* safe;
- ✓ Demonstrate a calm, confident entrance and presence in the scenario;
- ✓ Use a calm, even voice tone;
- ✓ Show empathy and respect;
- ✓ Use active listening; ask open-ended questions, be attentive, and provide minimal encouragers;
- ✓ Be genuine;
- ✓ Be reassuring and hopeful in the resolution;
- ✓ Repeat questions and ask simple requests;
- ✓ Speak directly to the person;
- ✓ Pay attention to body language – both their own and that of the person they are responding to;
- ✓ Avoid an aggressive stance and/or voice tone;
- ✓ Slow things down, take their time;
- ✓ Be patient;
- ✓ Set appropriate limits; and
- ✓ Offer choice, when able.



Scenario # 1

Name	Adolescent Experiencing Depression
Dispatch	Dispatched to a disturbance at a home involving the family's teenager (son/daughter). The officer is advised that the youth is in the house throwing things around, cursing, and threatening to kill themselves. The parent called and is terribly upset explaining that they need help immediately.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Parent: You tell the officer that the youth's other parent died last year in a car accident. Since that time, the youth has been experiencing several challenges, most likely in response to this traumatic event. The youth is 14 years old, doing poorly in school, getting into fights, and getting suspended. The youth often says they are sick to try to get out of going to school. You have taken them to the doctor, who prescribed medication for depression, but they won't take them.</p> <p>Youth: You were just suspended for being accused of cheating on a test and then cursing at the teacher. You are pacing, cursing, telling everyone that you are going kill whoever comes near you and then you will kill yourself because "things just don't matter anymore." You tell the officer there is nothing they can do and to go away unless they want to kill you. You are pacing a lot; you also get quiet sometimes and don't answer questions, then you get frustrated, telling the officer, "No one understands, no one likes me, and I am picked on at school." You also state: "I just want to go be with my (mom/dad)."</p>
Role(s)	(1) Single parent (2) Youth experiencing depression
Props Needed	None



Scenario # 2

Name	Person Experiencing Homelessness Who Has Schizophrenia
Dispatch	Dispatched to a disturbance where many people experiencing homelessness live. The officer is informed that one individual is complaining that someone stole something. No further information is available.
Role Player Briefing	<p>You are living in an unsheltered area with many people experiencing homelessness. You have no money and are currently taking medication for schizophrenia. If the officer asks you about medication, just say, "I take medication to calm down so I can sleep."</p> <p>Without getting too excited, act very distraught, because someone has taken your food and you want it returned. You may say something like "I was really looking forward to eating (food item) and now they are gone!" You are highly agitated and distrustful of others in the area as someone took your food. Your main concern at the moment is getting your food back.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Individual experiencing homelessness and living with schizophrenia
Props Needed	Clothing and items to give the appearance of a person experiencing homelessness



Scenario # 3

Name	Person with Autism at a Playground
Dispatch	A dispatcher receives a call from a concerned citizen. The citizen reports there is a person in their thirties acting strangely at the playground where many young children are playing. Officers arrive on the scene to find the person playing on playground equipment.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Person with autism - When officers approach, start to make a clicking sound with your tongue repeatedly and continue to play on playground equipment. When officers ask your name, don't reply, and keep playing. As the officers continue to ask your name and move closer to you, become agitated, flailing your arms, and screaming. (If the officer moves back, slow down your agitation/if the officer does not move back, continue to become more upset.)</p> <p>Neighbor of the person with autism - let the scenario play out and then come in to check on your neighbor. Let the officers know that the person has autism and frequently visits the park to play on the swing. Tell them that the person with autism has always interacted appropriately with children and that he tends to avoid other people, including children, altogether.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Person with autism (2) A neighbor of the person with autism
Props Needed	None



Scenario # 4

Name	Person with Bipolar Disorder
Dispatch	Dispatched to a busy intersection where a person is in the street yelling at cars passing by. (Provide a description to officers that matches the role player).
Role Player Briefing	<p>Pace around, swing your bag, and make statements to vehicles passing by: "Don't you know who I am? If you did, you would stop for me; I am very important; I know lots of important people, and they would be upset you didn't stop. I have the answers to staying young and everyone wants that. I know the mix of the right ingredients and all you want to do is ignore me. You will be sorry one day."</p> <p>When the officer approaches you, you talk about being important and having the secret to staying young. You talk about all the famous people you have sold your products to and how you are in demand by politicians and other world leaders so they can stay young.</p> <p>Continue to talk fast and ask a variety of questions which may seem unconnected, i.e., "Are you married?", "How long have you lived here?", "Do you want to buy my product?", "You like me, don't you?", and, "You think I am young and cute – well that just shows how much my product works."</p> <p>Eventually, you can acknowledge to the officer that you take medication to help your mood. You claim however that the medication makes it difficult for you to have the energy to sell your product, so you stopped taking your medication. You have been off the meds for three weeks, and you think you are doing fine.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Person with bipolar disorder
Props Needed	Some type of handbag or duffle bag



Scenario # 5

Name	Person with Both Schizophrenia and an Intellectual Disability
Dispatch	<p>Dispatched to a person who lives in a third-floor apartment building in a high-crime area of the city. The complainant is reporting that at approximately 2 am, two people came into their apartment and would not let them go back to sleep. The complainant has no idea who these people are or how they got into the apartment. The caller says they are afraid of these people and want the police to get rid of them. The officer is informed that there have been numerous calls to this location regarding similar complaints.</p> <p>Upon arrival: The apartment door is slightly ajar. You and your backup knock and ask to come in.</p>
Role Player Briefing	<p>You have schizophrenia and experience delusions and auditory hallucinations. You also have an intellectual disability and have a tough time understanding the officer's questions and instructions. You just want the problem to go away. You are pacing and quite agitated when the officers arrive. You are experiencing paranoia and are sure that there are others trying to hurt you. There are some pill bottles on the floor.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Person with both schizophrenia and intellectual disability
Props Needed	Several pill bottles



Scenario # 6

Name	Veteran with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in a Park
Dispatch	<p>A two-officer unit is dispatched to an affluent neighborhood park for a report from the neighbors stating they do not recognize this person from their neighborhood, and the person is acting a little strange because, at times, they will pace and mumble. The person is dressed nicely but looks disheveled. They are wearing a ball cap with a military logo. When you arrive, you find the person sitting on a park bench.</p> <p>Upon arrival: you approach the person and notice a couple of beer cans on the ground. The neighbors tell you they have not seen this person before and would like them gone from their neighborhood, stating “This is where your kids play; you don’t want a stranger in your park, and they should not be drinking out here.”</p>
Role Player Briefing	<p>You are a Veteran, and you have PTSD. You have been having nightmares and flashbacks lately. You have been drinking beer but are not intoxicated. You are despondent from losing your job because you were too tired to make it in regularly due to lack of sleep. You do not think life is worth living. You and your spouse are arguing a lot, you don’t know how you will make ends meet, and the pain of the memories seems too much to handle.</p> <p>Sit on the bench with your head down and mumble passively, “It is not worth it anymore,” “I don’t know what to do,” “No one cares,” “The VA doesn’t care, the government screwed me, and I shouldn’t be here, my buddies should,” “Why did they have to die?” Look down until the officer asks you to look up. If the officer doesn’t ask this, keep looking down.</p> <p>At some point, get up and start pacing, slowly becoming more agitated - “I can’t live like this anymore.” You tell the officer, “I served in Iraq – 2 tours, I was in the army (or whatever branch your props signify); my buddies and I were hit by a roadside bomb, and many didn’t make it out. It should have been me. Since coming back, I have had a tough time keeping jobs. I don’t sleep well, lots of nightmares and flashbacks. I get services at the VA, but it seems like they just want to push pills. They don’t seem to understand me.”</p> <p>You have been married for five years, and your spouse complains a lot because they want you to go out places with them, but you don’t want to go anywhere because you are afraid to. You are afraid people will attack and hurt you or your spouse. Make some absolute statements like, “Nobody cares” and “All cops just want to take people to jail!” You have a weapon but not on you – it is in your vehicle, and you share that with the officer if they ask.</p>
Role(s)	<p>(1) Veteran with PTSD (2) Neighbor(s) in the park</p>
Props Needed	Empty beer cans and hat or clothes with military insignia



Scenario # 7

Name	Person with an Intellectual/Developmental Disability
Dispatch	Dispatch receives a call from a bystander about a distraught person on the street. The bystander relays that they saw a person crying and very distraught. When trying to help, the bystander is unable to obtain any information from the person and says they think the person has a speech impairment or some type of issue going on with them, since they are not responding to questions in a coherent way. The caller thinks the person might be dangerous and is worried about their own safety. The caller uses inappropriate language when describing the person to dispatch (for example, they are acting “crazy” or seem “stupid”).
Role Player Briefing	<p>Complainant: You have had no prior experience talking to people with disabilities and you suspect something is “off” about the person. You want an officer to come as soon as possible so you can leave quickly. You tell dispatch that you are in a hurry and can’t stay and that you’re worried this person might do something dangerous. When the officer arrives, they ask you questions about the situation. You respond that this is how the person was when you saw them and you don’t know why they are so upset, but they said something about a bike. You tell the officer you were afraid the person was going to become violent or that the person is “scary”, so you called the police. You may say something like “people like this shouldn’t be left alone on the streets without supervision.”</p> <p>Person with IDD: You were riding your bike when you stopped at an intersection and a person you never met before began to chat with you. The person seemed very nice at first and acted like they wanted to get to know you. They finally asked if they could try your bike and you didn’t know how to say “no,” so you let them. You thought you may be able to make a new friend, and those can be hard to come by. Then, out of nowhere, the person took off on your bike. You are severely distraught because you love your bike, and your only mode of transportation was taken from you, and you are sure your parents will be angry with you and not let you get a new one.</p> <p>When the officer arrives, you are visibly shaken, upset, and pacing back and forth while making sounds incoherently. You are by yourself on the sidewalk or street. You have a backpack on with your ID inside, which you can show if asked. If you are communicated with appropriately and patiently, you calm down and begin to answer questions. You use either very simple language or you may use a lot of language, but not necessarily correctly. You may exhibit stimming behavior that becomes more extreme when you are upset. Stimming may include hand-flapping, closing your eyes, grimacing, or rubbing your face or hands. Your level of anguish may seem extreme for your age.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Person with IDD (2) Complainant
Props Needed	Bike helmet, riding gear (gloves, shorts, etc.), backpack containing identification



Scenario # 8

Name	Person with Schizophrenia
Dispatch	A parent calls 911 regarding their adult child who is locked in their room. Officers are dispatched to a house with a 32-year-old person who has locked themselves in their room and won't come out. The parents are very concerned because their adult child has been isolated for days and refuses to take their medications. Upon arrival, speak to the parents to get information as to the problem.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Parent(s) – Your child will not come out of their room, has not taken their medication for two weeks, and you are very concerned. Tell the police you hear strange noises coming from the room and talking. When you try to coax them out, they get loud and don't make sense. Explain to police that your child has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and this cycle happens about three times a year. Tell police there are no weapons in the room.</p> <p>Person with schizophrenia - You are telling everyone to leave you alone. You believe everyone is part of a conspiracy to hurt you and poison the water. You believe your parents have been poisoning your food. You go on to talk about the terrorists in the neighborhood and how someone needs to arrest them or blow them up. You talk about the messages you receive from the streetlights and how you know people are watching through your window at night. At some point, you open the door slightly, but you don't want the officers to come in initially. You talk through the crack in the door.</p>
Role(s)	<p>(1) Parent</p> <p>(2) Person with schizophrenia</p>
Props Needed	<p>Door/barrier (or similar item) for person to stay behind to feel safe.</p> <p>Water bottles (optional)</p>



Scenario # 9

Name	Person with Bipolar Disorder (both mania and depression) at Their Home
Dispatch	Dispatched to a residence to check the welfare of a person. Caller reports they are concerned about their friend who recently broke up with their fiancé and they seem to be getting worse. Upon arrival, you will meet initially with the caller.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Caller – Advise the officer: “They just don’t seem right, sometimes they just look lost, just staring into space. Today, I was checking on them, and they became angry, accusing me of planting untruths on Facebook and saying that I am the cause of their life problems.” The officer instructs the caller to remain outside while they go in and talk with the friend.</p> <p><i>After the officer has started talking with your friend, attempt to come into the room to see what’s going on and express to their friend that they are concerned and that maybe it was for the best the relationship ended – that sometimes God works in mysterious ways.</i></p> <p>Person with bipolar disorder - There are two bottles of pills near where you are sitting. If the officer attempts to move the bottles, grab the bottles, and become hostile at the officer’s invasion of your privacy and a violation of your constitutional rights (this should be a repeated expression of frustration). You talk to the officers but are somewhat evasive while suggesting that your problems are your problems and that you will deal with the consequences if forced to act. Continue to be evasive and avoid directly explaining what your issues are and become a little agitated while talking about how your fiancé cheated on you. Continue to remain upset and go off on a tangent about how men are no good, and that they only care about themselves. After a few minutes, you get despondent and say, “It’s not worth living anymore.” <i>As the officer continues to explore this call, the role player with bipolar disorder opens up a little more when the officer expresses sensitive de-escalation skills.</i></p> <p>Fiancé - <i>Come in after some time passes wanting to know what’s going on – that he received a text from their ex that didn’t make sense. Both parties attempt to talk to each other – but the role player with bipolar disorder becomes agitated and wants everyone to just leave.</i></p>
Role(s)	(1) Caller (2) Person with bipolar disorder (3) Fiancé
Props Needed	Pill bottles



Scenario # 10

Name	Person with a Substance Use Disorder Who is Actively Suicidal
Dispatch	You're sent to an intoxicated person on the roof of a five-story apartment building. The caller is a resident of the building who states they do not know this person. The caller is no longer on the scene but is concerned because the person is sitting on the edge of the roof with a beer and looks like they may jump.
Role Player Briefing	While sitting in a chair on the roof's edge, drinking a beer, you aggressively yell at the officers to back up when they first make contact. You are somewhat belligerent to the officers, but more so in just wanting them to leave you alone. When the officer asks what is going on, explain to them that your ex is threatening to get full custody of your children. You were served with court papers earlier today because your child had an injury from a fall off the swing. Your ex-spouse believes that you intentionally injured the child. You are temporarily unemployed and believe life is not worth living without your children. This is how you ended up on the tallest building you could find.
Role(s)	(1) Person with a substance use disorder who is considering suicide
Props Needed	Beer cans Displaying a visual effect/picture of a roof's edge projected on a screen behind the role player can add to the scene (optional)



Scenario # 11

(Corrections Officer)

Name	Person with a Developmental Disability in a Local Correctional Facility Refusing to Shower
Dispatch	Supervisor requests an officer check on an inmate who is refusing to shower
Role Player Briefing	<p>You have a developmental disability. You often use stimming behaviors to self-regulate your emotions when you are experiencing sensory overload (e.g., rocking back and forth, tapping feet or fingers, saying repetitive sounds or words). You are currently in jail awaiting a court appearance on charges (make up an appropriate low-level crime relative to your state/governing body). You get upset when officers ask you to shower, and you refuse to do so. Stay verbally combative while using your stimming behavior to try to calm yourself but allow the officer to pull out of you the reasons why you do not want to take a shower. Reasons may include a lack of knowledge of how to shower, fear of breaking your usual shower routine (staying in a routine is important to you), not wanting others to see you, not being able to stim easily while showering, or being afraid you cannot stop stimming and others would see.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Person with a developmental disability in a correctional facility
Props Needed	<p>Laying three tables on their sides and connecting them to form a U-shape can simulate jail cell walls.</p> <p>If you have an inmate jumpsuit, you can have the role player wear that.</p> <p>Advise the participant and officer to simulate that the cell has bars on the opening side of the U-shape, you can use painters' tape on the floor to simulate a cell too if you choose.</p>



Scenario # 12

Name	Missing Teenager (or Youth) with Autism and Cerebral Palsy
Dispatch	Dispatch receives a call from two very concerned parents that their teenager, who is 14 years old, wandered off during a family outing and has been missing for over 4 hours. The parents inform the 911 operator that their child has autism and has wandered off in the past, but that the youth had never been missing for more than an hour, and that they are worried. The parents provide a description of what the youth is wearing. Dispatch relays to the officers that the youth has autism and notes what the youth is wearing (have this description match what the role player is wearing).
Role Player Briefing	<p>Youth with autism - Within 30 minutes of searching the area where you went missing, officers come across you wandering aimlessly near a lake, and ask a series of questions. You are non-responsive to the officers, appear to be afraid and agitated, and are standing near the water. As the officers ask more questions, you become more agitated.</p> <p>Officers will likely want to move you away from the water and get you home. Stay near the water, and if the officers demonstrate the skills and strategies they learned by slowing things down, repeating questions slowly, having patience, and displaying non-threatening behavior, then gesture about writing as a form of communication. See if the officers can pick up on this and comply with helping you communicate in the form that works best for you.</p>
Role(s)	(1) 14-year-old child with cerebral palsy and intellectual disability
Props Needed	Park/lake photo displayed on the screen



Scenario # 13

Name	Distressed/Suicidal Person with a Knife
Dispatch	Dispatched to check on the welfare of a person in distress who is sitting on the ground against a building in the park. The person appears to be holding a knife.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Distressed person holding knife – You are exhausted from life and very upset at yourself. You feel like a failure. You have been out of work due to a back injury for over a year now. Your back is not getting better, and your prescribed pain medication has run out. You have started to seek other forms of pain management outside of the medical field (heroin/pills) and feel completely hopeless because of this. You feel that suicide is the only way to stop your pain. You have no other family that will talk to you anymore.</p> <p>Remain seated on the ground holding the knife (you can stand up, but don't advance towards the officers; remain stationary). When officers approach you, tell them to stay back and not come closer to you or you'll make them shoot you. Only engage the officers in conversation and start to de-escalate if they use The Four Plays and try to connect with you. If they notice and make mention of the props (team/military shirt/hat) cooperate with them eventually. If they continue to just say "drop the knife, drop the knife, drop the knife" continue to be agitated and tell them to shoot you.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Distressed person
Props Needed	<p>Red knife, red guns, the person with the knife should wear some type of clothing or have some type of prop that the officers hopefully identify and attempt to use that to connect with the person (i.e., favorite team or military hat/shirt, stuffed animal), something the officers can use to "find the hook".</p> <p>SAFETY IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE. REMEMBER TO BE CERTAIN THAT NO LIVE FIREARMS OR KNIVES ARE ON ANY PERSONS DURING THIS OR ANY OF THE SCENARIOS</p>



Scenario # 14 (Dispatcher)

Name	Distressed/Suicidal Caller Standing on a Bridge
Dispatch	This scenario can be completed using cell phones – one for the dispatcher and one for the role player in another room. The dispatcher should answer the call as they would any 911 call coming in. For example – “911 what is your emergency”, “911 – do you need police, fire, ambulance, or mental health”.
Role Player Briefing	<p>Distressed/suicidal caller standing on a bridge (if asked where you are, use a bridge within your area): You are very distraught over the thoughts you are having and your current situation. You have lost hope and feel like a failure. The company you worked for went out of business and you have been out of work for over a year. The bank has taken your house and as soon as they find your car, they will be taking that too. You have been living in your car for about 6 months now. You often come to this bridge to reflect on things, but you feel different today. Today you’re feeling like life may not be worth living anymore. You have no other family that will talk to you anymore. You have a dog that is older and in poor health and you worry about it often and wonder who will take care of it. You do not really want to jump off the bridge, but you are not seeing any other option right now.</p> <p>Tell the dispatcher not to send any police to the bridge and if they do you will jump. You only want to talk on the phone right now, no police.</p> <p>Only engage the dispatcher in conversation and start to de-escalate if they use the “four plays” and try to connect with you.</p>
Role(s)	(1) Suicidal caller standing on a bridge
Props Needed	<p>Cell phones (one to simulate the 911 line and one for the caller to use from another room)</p> <p>NOTE: Place the cell used by 911 on speaker so the rest of the participants can listen to the call</p> <p>Sound effects – street noises playing in the background can draw more reality into this scenario. Platforms such as YouTube have many videos/sounds (search “street sounds”) that you can play in the background while the caller is talking to the dispatcher. You may need an additional phone/streaming device to do this.</p>