

Managing emotions and de-escalation: staying grounded in stressful situations

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Description

Staying calm and clear-headed during stressful or emotionally charged situations is a critical skill — especially in conflict, where stakes are high and tensions can rise quickly. This guide outlines key concepts and tools to help you hone your capacity for managing emotions.

The reflection questions invite you to think about the techniques you use to de-escalate *yourself* in those moments. By identifying your own strategies, and learning from others, you can strengthen your ability to respond with intention, not just reaction.

Definitions

- **De-escalation** is the intentional process of reducing tension, aggression, or unproductive conflict through calm communication and empathetic engagement.
- **Managing emotions** (emotion regulation) is a proactive or ongoing process of recognizing and regulating one's own emotional state.
- **Conflict resolution** refers to the formal or informal process of managing disagreements between two more parties to work towards a mutually satisfactory and lasting solution.

(Note that the concepts of de-escalation and managing emotions are often used interchangeably as they are closely related. De-escalation puts more emphasis on a reactive response to a charged situation, whereas managing emotions emphasizes ongoing strategies.)

Tools for de-escalation and emotion regulation during conflict

Understand your circle of influence

The circles of influence model helps you separate what you can *actually do* in a tense situation from what you might *wish* you could control. It's a practical way to stay grounded, avoid escalation, and focus on actions that move a conflict toward resolution rather than frustration.

- **Circle of Control**
This is where conflict resolution *starts*. It includes your own behavior, tone, and choices during the conflict. You can't control the other person—but you can control how you show up.
Includes:
 - My attitude and mindset
 - How I respond to other people
 - My daily habits (sleep, exercise, diet)
 - How I manage my time
 - The words I choose to say

- **Circle of Influence**

This is where conflict resolution *happens*. You can't force agreement, but you can shape the conversation, build understanding, and create conditions that make resolution more likely.

Includes:

- Team decisions at work (through input and collaboration)
- Relationships with friends and family
- Workplace culture (by modeling behavior)
- A group project's direction
- Community issues (through volunteering or advocacy)

- **Circle of Concern**

This is where conflict often *gets stuck*. These are the things you care about in the conflict but cannot change, and focusing too much here tends to increase frustration or escalation.

- The weather
- Global events or politics
- Other people's opinions or behavior
- The past
- Economic conditions
- Policy decisions

Distinguish between behaviors, assumptions, and feelings

Distinguishing between behaviors, assumptions, and feelings is essential for staying grounded and responding effectively in stressful situations. When people confuse these three things, misunderstandings and conflict often escalate quickly. Separating them helps you communicate more clearly, avoid jumping to conclusions, and respond with greater self-awareness and empathy.

- **Behaviors** are the observable actions someone takes, such as raising their voice or walking away.
- **Assumptions** are the interpretations or stories we create about why those actions happened, which may or may not be accurate.
- **Feelings** are the emotional responses we experience, such as frustration, fear, or disappointment. We can't always control our feelings, but we can seek to understand what those feelings are telling us.

Recognize your hot buttons

These examples are "hot button" behaviors that may result in emotional reactions that set you off balance. Recognizing personal hot buttons increases self-awareness and helps us pause before reacting, allowing us to respond more calmly and thoughtfully. Do any of these push your buttons?

- | | | |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| • Whining | • Conning | • Tears |
| • Threats | • Silence | • Meetings |
| • Anger/defiance | • Evasion | • Repetition |
| • Self-pity | • Poor planning | • Sarcasm |
| • Attacking | • Specific words | • False compliance |
| • "That one" person | • Analyzing | • Blaming |
| • Condescending | • Glaring | • Minimizing |
| • Projecting | • Promises | • Falling short of goals |

Calm your body

Recognizing physical response to conflict is an important part of emotional regulation and de-escalation. The body responds to conflict by:

- Elevated heart rate (100+ bpm)
- Adrenaline and cortisol released into blood
- Vision narrowed
- Inner ear compromised (not picking up high or low tones)
- Cognitive processing, attention, and perceptions compromised

Learning to calm your body before, during, after a stressful interaction is important for addressing conflict effectively. Some common techniques include:

- **Walking or movement** – Taking a short walk or engaging in light physical movement can help release built-up stress energy and support emotional regulation.
- **Relaxing muscle tension** – Unclenching the jaw, lowering the shoulders, or stretching can interrupt the body's stress response.
- **Deep, controlled breathing** – Slowing the breath helps reduce heart rate and signals safety to the nervous system.
- **Taking a brief break when appropriate** – Stepping away for a short period can allow the nervous system time to settle before continuing a difficult conversation.
- **Staying hydrated and regulating physical needs** – Hunger, fatigue, and dehydration can intensify stress reactions and reduce emotional resilience.

Voice and body language

Voice tone and body language can either escalate or de-escalate conflict. Using calm, non-threatening verbal and nonverbal communication helps reduce defensiveness and supports emotional regulation.

Voice	Body Language
Use a calm, steady tone of voice	Maintain open body posture
Speak at a moderate pace	Be mindful of facial expressions
Keep volume low and non-threatening	Respect personal space
Use clear and simple language	Avoid sudden movements or aggressive gestures

Take a pause

Taking a pause during conflict helps calm the body's stress response and creates space between an emotional reaction and a thoughtful response. This can reduce impulsive behaviors and support clearer communication, emotional regulation, and de-escalation.

Ways to create space

- **Normalize brief silence** – Allowing a short pause before answering can feel uncomfortable at first but is often effective in keeping the interaction calm and thoughtful.
- **Take a deliberate breath before responding** – A slow inhale and exhale gives your nervous system a moment to settle and creates space to choose your words carefully.

- **Write down key thoughts** – Jotting notes helps slow reactivity and keeps you focused while you process your response.
- **Sip water or take a small physical action** – A natural, brief action like taking a sip or adjusting posture can create a pause without drawing attention.
- **Use short “bridge” phrases:**
 - “I’m gathering my thoughts and need some time before I can respond”
 - “I’m formulating a question”
 - “I’m thinking...”
 - “Can you repeat the question?”
- **Suggest a structured break:**
 - “Let’s take a break”
 - “Could we come back to this issue when we can have a more productive discussion?”
 - “Could I have a couple minutes to regroup? I will call you back in 15 minutes.”

Self-distancing

Self-distancing is the practice of stepping back mentally from a situation so you can observe it with more perspective rather than being fully immersed in the emotional reaction. Some people describe this is getting off the dance floor and onto the balcony.

By shifting from “What is happening to me?” to “What is happening in this situation?”, can help you regulate emotions, think more clearly, and respond with intention instead of reactivity.’

Here are some effective self-distancing questions you can use?

- How might someone else view this?
- What would my best self do in this situation?
- What is my goal here?
- How will I feel about this in one month?

Connect to your values and purpose

When we are escalated, the brain tends to narrow focus toward threat and short-term reactions. Reconnecting with values—such as respect, fairness, integrity, or compassion—helps re-engage the parts of the mind involved in reflection and decision-making, making it easier to respond intentionally rather than impulsively. Connecting to your values as a person as well as your organizational or team values help you stay grounded and focus on what matters.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some hot buttons you have? Knowing these hot buttons, what are some ways you can manage your reactions when these come up?
2. How do stress or high conflict interactions affect you physically? How do you hold stress in your body?
3. What are some ways you use to calm your body so that you can address stressful situations more effectively? Are there any new techniques you would like to learn?

4. When a conversation starts to feel emotionally charged or personal, what strategies do you use to create space between your emotions and your response?
5. Is there a phrase, mental image, or internal dialogue you use to help you 'zoom out' and see the bigger picture during tense moments?
6. Affirming core values and purpose have been shown to help people feel grounded even under stressful or challenging circumstances. Write about one or two personal values that feel most meaningful to you?
7. What larger purpose feels most urgent to you right now in your work role? How do you stay focused on that purpose when tensions run high?
8. What is one small change you could try next time you feel emotionally activated during a conflict?

Resources

Books

- [Permission to Feel](#) and [Dealing with Feeling](#) by Marc Brackett
- [Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life](#) by Marshall Rosenberg
- [Mindwise: Why We Misunderstand What Others Think, Believe, Feel, and Want](#) by Nicholas Epley
- [The Mindful Guide to Conflict Resolution](#) by Rosalie Puiman
- [Forgive For Good](#) by Fred Luskin
- [Collaborating with the Enemy](#) by Adam Kahane

Scientific articles

- [Emotions in conflicts: understanding emotional processes sheds light on the nature and potential resolution of intractable conflicts](#), by Eran Halperin and Michal Reifen Tagar, *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2017.
- [Purpose in Life and Conflict-Related Neural Responses During Health Decision-Making](#), by Yoona Kang, Victor J. Strecher, Eric Kim, and Emily B. Falk, *Health Psychology*, 2019.
- Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). [The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention](#). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 333-371.
- Correll, J., Spencer, S. J., & Zanna, M. P. (2004). [An affirmed self and an open mind: Self-affirmation and sensitivity to argument strength](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(3), 350-356.
- Creswell, J. D., Welch, W. T., Taylor, S. E., Sherman, D. K., Gruenewald, T. L., & Mann, T. (2005). [Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses](#). *Psychological Science*, 16(11), 846-851.