Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

Potential risks

As a security operative, you will often get a gut feeling when an encounter is about to turn nasty, but you also need to take note of the person's words and body language in an attempt to predict any aggressive action they might take; protecting against any potential risk to yourself and/or others, such as staff, customers and bystanders.

Signs which may indicate an increase in aggressive attitude include extended eye contact, more threatening facial expressions, a raised voice, a change in body stance, enlarged movement of the hands, moving closer and obvious fidgeting as the person prepares to fight.

If you can learn to recognise these **signs of escalation**, then you can prepare yourself both physically and mentally for any imminent attack. It will also give you time to summon the assistance of either other security staff or the police, as well as time to consider your options regarding the use of force.



Assessing the risks

It is not always possible to prevent conflict from happening in the workplace, and some situations will have to be approached and managed carefully.

There will be times where you are confronted with situations that are unique and cannot be specifically catered for in any generic risk assessment or assessment of a particular type of incident. Occasionally, there are conflict situations where people are hurt because they do not have a way of properly and effectively assessing the risks there and then, and as a result do not respond appropriately.

To ensure that your safety comes first, you are encouraged to use what is called a **dynamic risk assessment**. Dynamic risk assessments should be used as you deal with any potentially difficult or dangerous situations and will help you to choose the correct response in any given situation.

They are called **dynamic** risk assessments because they are ongoing. When conducting a dynamic risk assessment, you should continually monitor, review and recognise conflict to eliminate or reduce the risk. You should always take action and react appropriately to the situation at hand.

Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

Dynamic risk assessment

Before you start to deal with a situation you need to use **TACT**:



T **THINK safety first**

Do not rush in, think about your personal safety first.

A **ASSESS the situation (subjects, environment, weapons)**

What are the possible threats involved?

C **CONSIDER your options**

Consider what help you may need, and possible action you could take.

T **TAKE action**

Select the safest and most appropriate action and take it decisively.

Remember whatever action you take could have serious short and long-term effects on you, your colleagues and the subject.



S **SUBJECTS**

Who are you dealing with?

Age, height, size, drink/drugs, emotional state, previous history, etc.

E **ENVIRONMENT**

Where is the situation taking place?

Remote/secluded area, stairs, roads, furniture, escape routes etc.

W **WEAPONS**

Is there anything nearby that could be used to hurt you?

Knives, bricks, bottles, wood, syringes, tools, furniture, etc.

Assessing specific aspects of the threat

The **SEW** model is a simple, yet effective way to assess specific threats in relation to the situation where the incident is taking place, the person or people involved and any potential weapons.

As a situation escalates, you might become worried, upset, frightened or even threatened. As mentioned earlier, however, it is vital that you do not do anything that could escalate or worsen the situation. You must attempt to control your own emotions and show the correct behaviour towards the other person. You certainly do not want to do anything that might make the other person feel threatened or frightened, as this may **trigger** them into doing something bad against you.

If, while working as a security operative, you think that you are about to be attacked, particular attention should be paid to the customer's:

- head
- eyes
- lips
- facial expressions and colour
- breathing
- shoulders
- hands
- arms
- feet
- language
- tone of voice
- gesture
- spacing

Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

Ideally, you should try to prevent customers from becoming frustrated in the first place. Using pre-planned, effective, proactive delivery service strategies will help with this.

If customers do become frustrated, you should try to politely explain the situation to them in an attempt to calm them down. If this fails, however, and they get angry, then you need to use your communication and conflict management skills to try to calm them down, and then attempt to resolve the actual problem.

If they become aggressive despite your efforts, then you will need to be more assertive and use one or more of the inhibitors to prevent them from turning to violence.

If all of this fails, however, and the customer does turn to using violence against you, then you will have to use either evasive or self-defence techniques to prevent yourself from harm.



If you cannot take control of and effectively resolve a conflict situation and a customer becomes increasingly angry, aggressive and possibly violent towards you, then you need to watch that person carefully.

Factors and triggers

There are many factors that can either trigger or inhibit a range of responses in yourself and others.

Factors may include:

- actions – refusing entry or requesting someone leaves a premise
- behaviours – being rude to or about a person, ignoring someone who wants your attention
- situations – peer pressure (appearing brave or stupid in front of your friends or family)
- emotions – anger, fear of losing

As previously stated, if you or someone you are dealing with becomes emotional, then situations become more difficult to deal with as you/they are not thinking rationally as you/they normally would be.

If you start to feel frustrated, upset or angry, then you are less able to make appropriate decisions. Particularly as your brain and body start to automatically move towards the fight or flight mode, in response to what you may see as a threat, then you may be **triggered** into reacting in a worse way, possibly using aggression to deal with the situation.

A trigger is an action towards you that can cause you to completely lose your temper and causes you to resort to aggression or even violence.

It is important that you are aware of this as a security operative and do not allow yourself to be triggered by the other person, therefore not using unnecessary aggression yourself.

It is equally as important that you do not accidentally trigger the person you are dealing with, causing them to lose their temper and react with violence.

We must also bear in mind that people are often easier to trigger if they are under the influence of alcohol or some types of drugs, or if they are emotional for other reasons.

Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

Common triggers

People can be triggered into using aggression or violence for many reasons, including:

- a difference in perception – being asked for ID when they are 26 years old.
- conflicting goals – being told to wait as the venue is full.
- differences in personal values – is swearing acceptable in a normal conversation?
- misunderstandings – expressions can cause very different responses from people from differing areas or age groups, e.g. the expression 'it's sick'. Is that good or bad?
- poor communication – mumbling so the customer cannot hear you, ignoring someone, using language that you believe they will not understand, refusing to make eye contact with someone who wants your attention etc.

Inhibitors

If, during a conflict situation, you are unable to calm the other person down, you may need to use an **inhibitor** to stop them from being triggered into reacting aggressively or violently towards you.

An inhibitor is something that prevents someone from acting in an unnecessary, unreasonable or negative way because they are in an emotional state. An inhibitor is essentially the opposite of a trigger.

It is often said that when people are under the influence of drink or drugs, that they 'lose their inhibitions'. This means that they may try to do something that they wouldn't normally do if they were thinking rationally and calmly.

If you give an emotional, angry or aggressive person an inhibitor, it may cause them to think about the consequences of their actions and prevent them from doing something that they may later regret.

Examples of inhibitors include:

Personal values

These are developed based on the beliefs of our families, friends and experiences. For example, would it ever be acceptable to hit a female?

Self-control

Most people, when they take the time to think about it, do not want to be involved in a conflict situation with a security operative or another customer. The security operative should try to appeal to their self-control.

'Do you really want your family to see you fighting?'

Fear of loss or damage

People do not generally want to run the risk of damaging their clothes or losing personal items during a violent incident.

'Do you want to ruin your clothes or break your phone by fighting?'

Fear of retaliation

There is always a chance that if you fight with someone, you may come off second best.

'I don't want anyone getting hurt here, so …'

Social consequences

Many people will worry about risks to their personal reputations and their lifestyles.

'Have you considered what your friends are going to think about this?'

Legal consequences

People do not normally relish the idea of being arrested and going to court over something bad they have done. Nor do they like the idea of being fined or imprisoned. Their job may be reliant on not having a criminal conviction, and even the thought of being caught on CCTV or body-worn cameras is sufficient to inhibit some people.

'This is all on CCTV, so…'

The timely and appropriate use of inhibitors can greatly reduce the chances of someone being triggered to use aggression or violence towards you.

By the same token, you also need to consider the consequences of your own actions in heated, frightening or threatening situations, so that you don't do something that will get you into trouble or that you will later regret.

Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

TRIGGERS

- **Negative actions resulting in someone feeling:**
  - **insulted**
  - **threatened**
  - **angry**
  - **that they've lost face**
  - **ignored**
  - **peer pressured**
  - **patronised**
  - **ridiculed and not taken seriously**
  - **blocked in, physically or emotionally confused**
  - **rejected**
  - **disrespected**
  - **embarrassed**
  - **let down or hard done by**

All of the above are unhelpful in conflict situations.

INHIBITORS

- **Positive actions include:**
  - **receiving good customer service**
  - **feeling like someone cared about their problem**
  - **getting what they wanted**
  - **being treated fairly**
  - **being treated with respect**

All of the above are helpful in conflict situations.



Responses to conflict situations

There are many responses that can come from being involved in a conflict situation, for example:

- a raised voice
- finger-pointing
- reddening of face
- tensing of shoulders
- invading personal space
- fight or flight

Alcohol, drugs and medical conditions can also trigger different (potentially angry) responses to conflict situations.

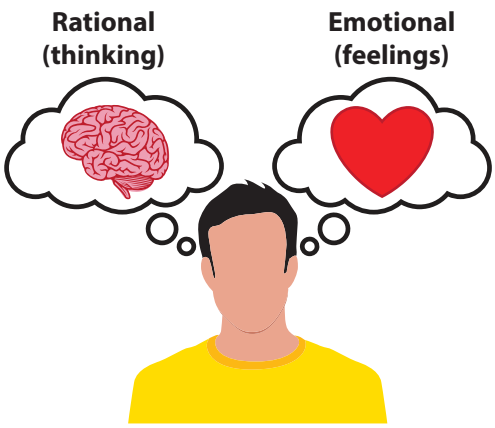
As a security operative, you need to understand the importance of showing a positive and helpful attitude towards the person you are dealing with, ensuring that you don't accidentally give them the wrong impression of how you feel towards them or about your intentions towards them.

During an encounter with someone in the workplace, you need to ensure that we give off the right signals.

Fight or flight

It is important that you understand what happens to yourself and others when confronted either by conflict or by frightening or threatening situations. Only then can you plan what is the best way for you to react, and how to treat others when conflict arises.

If someone you are dealing with becomes angry and starts to threaten you, you will automatically start to use the emotional side of your brain more than the rational side.



Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

It is a natural human response to fear a threat or potential threat to your well-being and safety.

If, as humans, we did not get frightened in such situations, our brains and bodies might not be prepared to react quickly enough or in the proper way if we did actually need to protect ourselves.

When you become frightened, your body automatically enters what is called **fight or flight** mode. This is because of the basic natural animal instinct that we all have, which helps us to survive potentially dangerous situations. When in fight or flight mode, various different things will automatically happen to your body to try to make you better prepared to deal with the threat, both physically and mentally.

The hormone adrenaline will be released into your system to increase your physical ability to fight or run away. This adrenaline rush increases your heart rate, pumping extra blood and oxygen to the muscles you need to use.

Your eyes will widen to take in as much of the situation as possible, although sometimes you will centre your attention directly onto the threat itself, causing what is often called 'tunnel vision'.

Your sense of hearing intensifies, again to try to allow you to take in as much information about the threat as possible.

Once the situation ends, whether that is by you having halted or fought off the threat, or whether you have been able to get away from it, then your brain and body begins to calm down again, in an attempt to get back to normal. Your body will slowly return to its natural relaxed state and as you calm down, your brain will return to thinking with the rational side again.

If your brain and body do not return to their natural conditions as they should, then you could go into a state known as shock. This usually only happens after a particularly threatening or frightening situation.

Stages in de-escalation

In all conflict situations, you need to correctly assess the other person's emotional state and remain aware of anything that could prevent them from or trigger them to become less or more upset or angry.

You need to listen carefully to what the other person is really saying and use your own positive communication to try and calm them down and to convince them that you will try to resolve the situation. The problem must be fully understood before you can move on, try to resolve it and de-escalate the situation.

Keeping the other person informed on what you are doing and explaining how and why you are doing it will help to resolve the problem.

Security operatives should use de-escalation techniques, such as:

- using a dynamic risk assessment to assess the emotional state of the customer
- identifying trigger factors and using inhibitors to try to counteract the trigger(s)
- trying to reduce the customer's anxiety by reassuring them
- speaking calmly and actively listening to the customer (see chapter 3)
- empathising and checking understanding (see chapter 3)
- problem-solving – resolving the issue if possible
- explaining what, when and how this problem could be resolved, providing other options
- keeping the customer, colleagues and management informed of the situation and any outcomes

FIGHT or FLIGHT

Fight or flight prepares our brains and bodies to:



stand and physically FIGHT fight off an attack

or to



run away from the situation FLIGHT to keep ourselves safe



Positioning and exit routes

You need to ensure that you attempt to get yourself into the best position in relation to the other person, to maintain your own safety and to make sure that you give the right impression of your attitude and intentions toward the other person.

This can be done by:

- maintaining a suitable/safe distance
- showing a non-aggressive stance
- ensuring that both parties can walk away if they want to by means of an exit/escape route and an awareness of where all exit routes are



Maintaining personal space

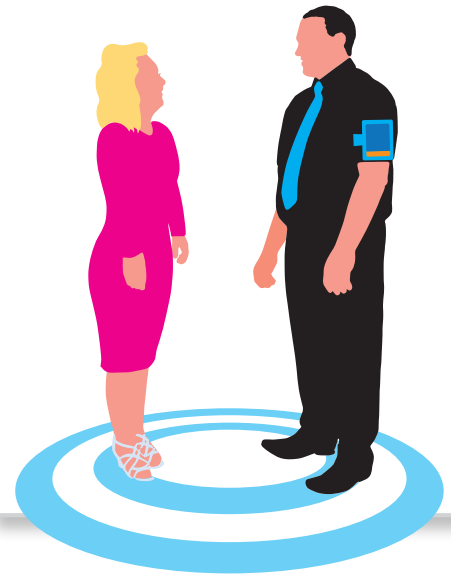
The actual distance you are from someone you are dealing with can have a profound impact on the situation. Certain situations can be helped by either increasing or decreasing the distance between yourself and the other person.

There are 3 types of space we need to consider.

Normal space

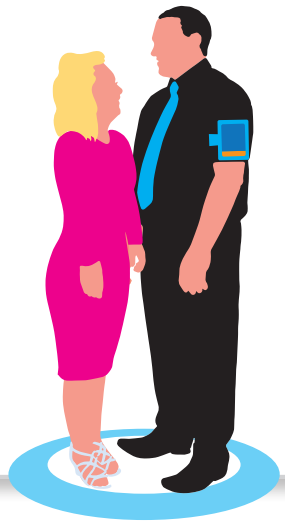
and safe space are the phrases given to the normal distance there would be between you and someone you are talking to in normal, relaxed circumstances. Imagine someone approaching you to ask a question at work, or the distance you might be from someone standing next to you that you are having a drink with in a pub. This normal or safe distance is usually anything between 0.5m and 1.2m.

To ensure that you are using the safe or normal distance when dealing with someone in the workplace, try to make sure that you are far enough away from them to be able to see their whole body, including their feet. This will mean that you are close enough to them to have a reasonable one-to-one conversation, but you are far enough away to be able to see any changes in their body language, which will give you enough time to react if the situation escalates.



Personal space

is where you are anything up to approximately 0.5m away from someone. You would usually only ever get this close to another person if they were your partner, family or very close friend. To enter the personal space of somebody you don't know may well be seen as intimidating, or at the very least could make the other person feel uncomfortable.



Stranger space

is anything from 1.2m up to 3m, which is not usually close enough to have a proper one-to-one conversation with someone. It is, however, the ideal space when trying to talk to a group of people.

Managing the space between you and the person or people you are trying to deal with will help to improve communication and improve your personal safety.



Chapter 2: Recognising, assessing and reducing risk in conflict situations

Showing non-aggression

You also need to be aware of how you come across to the people you are dealing with. It is clear that you must be careful about the words you use, but you must also be mindful of the tone you use when speaking to them.

Body language is also important.

- How do you look and sound to the other person?
- Do you look welcoming and ready to help?
- Are you showing the right attitude?
- Do you look interested or bored with the conversation?
- Are you using appropriate eye contact?
- Do you look nervous?
- Do you look confident?
- Do you look aggressive or intimidating?
- Are you a suitable distance away and positioned correctly?
- Are you using appropriate hand gestures?
- Is your stance appropriate?



You can make a much more positive impression on someone if you show a non-aggressive stance through what you say, how you say it and what you look like to them.

If you look aggressive, it is more likely that someone will act aggressively towards you.

On the other hand, if you appear professional and helpful, you are far more likely to get a better response from the person or people you are dealing with.

Exit routes

During any encounter or situation, all parties concerned need to feel that they are safe and that they can walk away if they wish to at any stage.

As a security operative, it is important for you to feel, particularly in conflict situations, that you always have enough room to be able to walk away to summon help or evade attack, should this be necessary. The people you deal with need to feel the same way.

You need to ensure that as well as using suitable spacing between yourself and those you are dealing with, that you are displaying the correct behaviour so that you do not appear aggressive. You must ensure that you are aware of the possibility that the other person may wish to walk away from the situation.

Do not physically block any person into a corner or a small space, as this may make them feel trapped. People who feel trapped tend to feel frightened, which may accidentally escalate the situation, or worse still, **trigger** them, causing them to lash out at you.

During any encounter, make sure that both you and the other person always have an easy exit/escape route, for example, by leaving the room or by just being able to walk away from the situation.

Using exit strategies

There will be occasions where, despite your best efforts, you are unable to calm down or resolve a situation. You may also feel yourself being triggered by the customer. If an encounter with someone is getting more and more heated and you feel that you cannot improve or prevent the situation from worsening, then you may feel it is appropriate to use an exit strategy to get yourself away from the customer.



An exit strategy is a pre-planned reason or excuse given to someone to get you away from a situation, without looking as though you are running away. It gives you the chance to get away from any immediate danger, to think about the best way forward, and to call for support if it is required.

Examples of exit strategies you could use include:

- saying you will ask someone else if they know of a solution
- saying that you need to go and get a supervisor or manager
- placing your hand onto your earpiece and indicating that you need to leave to attend to another matter

Using an exit strategy can give you valuable space and time to decide how best to deal with the next stage of the situation. Depending on the strategy used, you may return yourself or request that a colleague deals with the situation. Teamwork should never be seen as a sign of weakness.