# De-Escalation

Working in a food bank often means holding more than food—it means holding stress, stories, and strong emotions. Most tense moments don't come out of nowhere; they grow from long waits, unmet expectations, fear, or hunger. **De-escalation is a set of skills that helps lower emotional energy before situations spiral.** You don't need to handle every situation perfectly or alone—this workbook is about building shared skills over time.

This resource is designed to help you:

- Understand what escalation and de-escalation mean and what's happening in the brain and body.
- Recognize emotional energy in yourself and others using the RULER framework.
- Apply strategies to prevent escalation before it starts.
- Use methods to de-escalate safely and respectfully in the moment.
- Practice skills and reflect as a team to strengthen your organization's approach over time.

Washington Food Coalition

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# Overview


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*A leadership guide for managers, directors, volunteer coordinators, and anyone who sets up food distribution.*

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This Guidebook is accompanied by two **short videos**:

"De-Escalation"
"Building Conditions for Calm"

Visit **nonprofitsafetyhero.com/de-escalation** to watch the videos, take the course, and get a certificate of completion.

## REFLECTION

**Before we start, think of a time when someone at your food bank was upset.**

What early signs did you notice?

What was the context?

What might that person have been experiencing?

What were *you* experiencing?

**Keep this story in mind as we move through each section.**

These materials are designed for **training and educational purposes only**. They offer general guidance on communication, emotional energy, and de-escalation in food bank environments, but they **cannot cover every situation, context, or individual need** you may encounter.

Nothing in this workbook should be interpreted as legal advice, clinical guidance, or a comprehensive safety protocol. Each situation requires your own judgment, your organization's policies, and support from trained supervisors.

If at any point a situation feels **unsafe, threatening, or beyond your capacity to manage**, **step away and call 911 immediately**. Your safety and the safety of others always come first.

# 1. Understand: Emotions and Energy

**Before we can de-escalate, we need to understand what is actually happening when emotions rise.**

**Every interaction involves two emotional states—ours and theirs.** Emotions are not problems to be eliminated. They are **signals** that tell us something important about a person's needs and experience. Our goal is not to make emotions disappear but to **reduce the energy around them** so people can think clearly, stay safe, and reconnect.

In food bank settings, escalation often isn't about anger alone—it's about fear, hunger, uncertainty, or being told "no" repeatedly. Understanding what's *underneath* the emotion helps us respond with dignity instead of defensiveness.

## Emotions as Energy

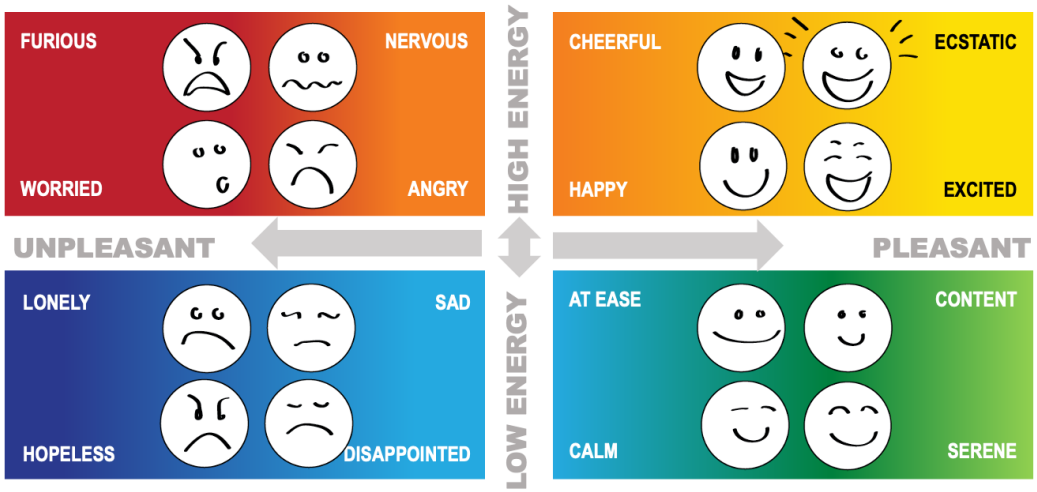
*We will draw from research done at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and their RULER method (rulerapproach.org) to talk about emotions and de-escalation. This approach is used in many K-12 schools and is relevant to working with adults as well.*

Emotions show up in two key ways:

- **Pleasantness:** how positive or negative the emotion feels
- **Energy:** how activated or calm the emotion feels

The mix of these two dimensions shapes behavior.

### Mood Meter

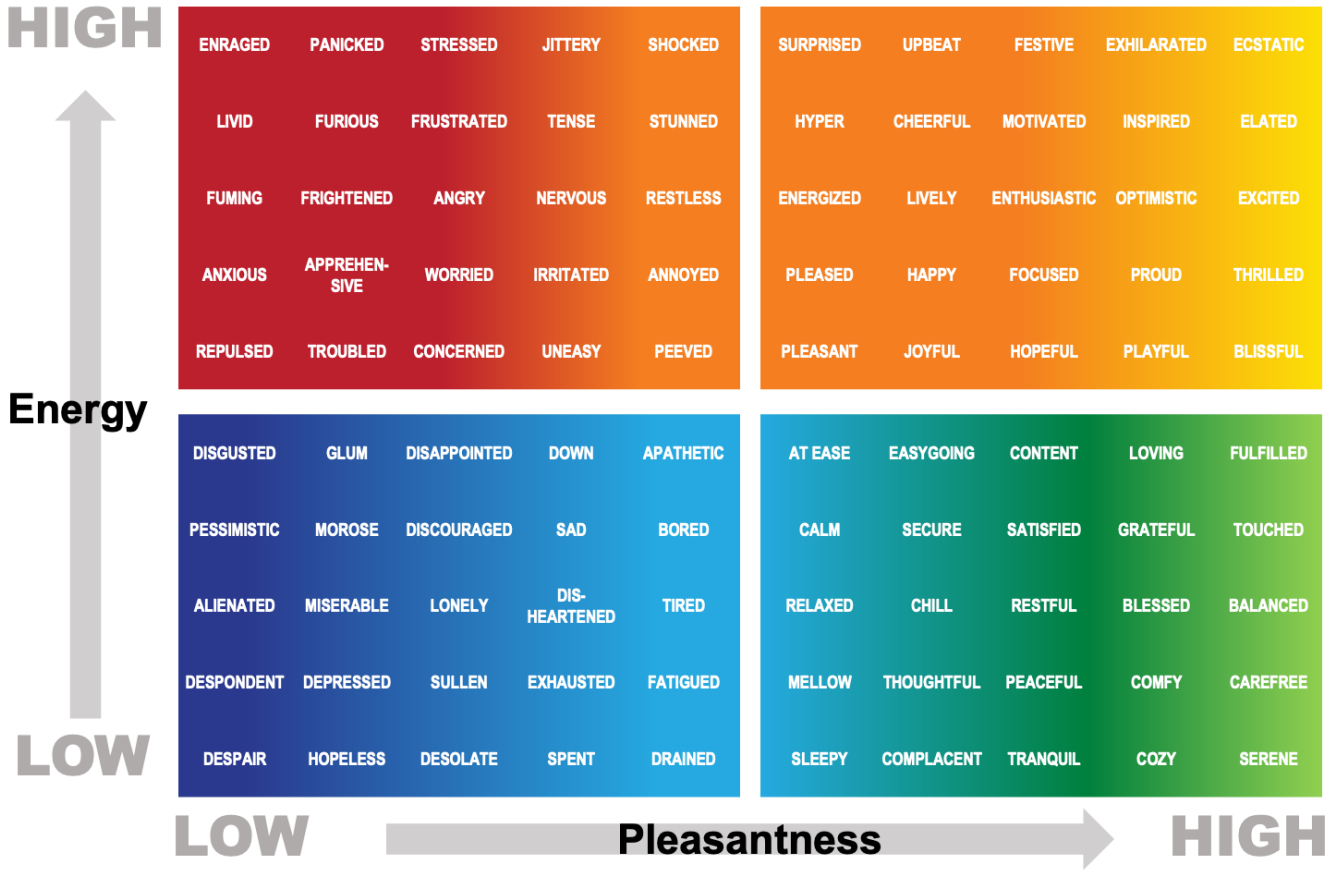


You can think of four general zones:

| Energy | Pleasantness | Typical Emotions | What It Might Look Like |
|---|---|---|---|
| **High + Pleasant** | Sociable, motivated | Excited, enthusiastic | Smiling, animated, open body language |
| **High + Unpleasant** | Agitated, defensive | Angry, frustrated, anxious | Loud voice, rapid speech, tension |
| **Low + Pleasant** | Calm, content | Peaceful, relaxed | Slow pace, gentle tone |
| **Low + Unpleasant** | Withdrawn, flat | Sad, hopeless, tired | Quiet voice, slumped posture |

**We can expand on this idea with specific emotions.**

## How are you feeling?




*Source: Marc Brackett, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence – RULER approach*

REFLECTION

Using this Mood Meter, where is your emotion now? Circle it.

How might you use this way of thinking about emotions to better understand how you and others are feeling?

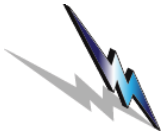
# Defining Escalation

**Escalation** is a rise in emotional energy that makes it harder for a person to think clearly, communicate effectively, or stay in control. When emotional energy becomes too high, reasoning decreases and survival instincts take over.

**De-escalation** means bringing that energy back down—not erasing the emotion but lowering the intensity so safety, connection, and reasoning return.

**In short:** *Escalation is when emotion becomes too energized to stay thoughtful—and possibly to keep people safe.*

REFLECTION



Explain de-escalation in your own words.

How might this definition help you to enter a de-escalation situation?

# 2. Notice: Recognize Escalation

**Escalation rarely comes out of nowhere.** Most people show small signals—tone, posture, pacing—long before emotions spill over. The earlier we notice these cues, the easier it is to respond with empathy instead of reaction.

This stage is about **paying attention**: to what's happening in the other person, in yourself, and in the environment.

*We use the* **RULER framework** *to guide that awareness and to stay curious about what emotions are communicating rather than judging or dismissing them.*

## Using the RULER Skills

The RULER approach helps build emotional awareness in staff and guests:

| | Skill | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| R<br>U<br>L<br>E<br>R | **Recognize** | Notice signs like voice tone, posture, or facial expression. Watch for anomalies:<br>Someone unusually quiet who is normally chatty<br>A line that suddenly stalls<br>A volunteer who stops making eye contact<br>A guest pacing when they usually sit | "She's speaking faster and her shoulders are tight." |
| | **Understand** | Ask yourself why that feeling makes sense. | "He's anxious because he's not sure there will be enough food." |
| | **Label** | Put words to emotions—naming diffuses intensity. | "It sounds like you're frustrated that the line is so long." |
| | **Express** | Model calm, respectful communication. | "I'm feeling rushed right now, but I want to handle this well." |
| | **Regulate** | Manage your own state before helping others. | "I'm going to take a slow breath before I answer." |

Let's spend a little more time on the first two ideas here.

### Recognize: Common signs of escalation

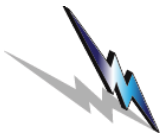
- ☐ Increased volume or pacing
- ☐ Arguing, interrupting, or accusatory language
- ☐ Tense or defensive body language
- ☐ Avoiding or intense eye contact
- ☐ Rapid breathing, shaking, or visible distress

## Understand: Common stressors in food bank settings

- ☐ Fear of not having enough food for family
- ☐ Frustration with rules, forms, or ID requirements
- ☐ Past trauma involving authority or systems
- ☐ Overwhelm from long lines or crowded spaces
- ☐ Hunger, pain, or untreated health conditions

**Remember**: Interpretation is influenced by who **you** are and who **they** are—culture, gender, and experience *matter*.

REFLECTION



**Revisit your earlier scenario:**

What signs of escalation did you see?

How might *your own experiences or identity* have influenced your interpretation of those signs?

What assumptions did you make about the other person's intent or emotion?

How might you check your interpretation in the moment — through a question, tone, or body language shift?

If someone with a different background watched the same moment, what might they see that you missed?

ACTIVITY

## Group Activity (for team settings)

**"Two Lenses" Exercise**
Use the worksheet on the next page to guide this exercise. Have participants describe the same scenario from two perspectives — one as the *guest*, one as the *staff member*. Then discuss:

- How did the story sound different through each lens?
- Where did assumptions sneak in?
- What does this tell us about how our worldview shapes what we see as "escalation"?

# Worksheet: Understanding a De-escalation Situation

Situation/what happened:

| | You | Them |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotion** | What emotion were *you* feeling during the situation? (e.g., anxious, defensive, rushed, calm, frustrated) | What emotion did *they* seem to be feeling? (e.g., afraid, angry, overwhelmed, embarrassed) |
| **Potential Triggers** | What might have triggered your response? (e.g., being challenged, running behind, noise, feeling disrespected, others watching) | What might have triggered theirs? (e.g., long wait, unmet need, confusing rule, loss of control, past experience) |
| **Energy Level** | How intense was your emotion (1–10)? How did it show up in your body or voice? | How intense was their emotion (1–10)? What physical or verbal signs did you notice? |
| **Needs Behind Emotion** | What need was underneath your emotion? (e.g., to feel competent, respected, safe) | What need might have been underneath theirs? (e.g., to be heard, fed, treated fairly, regain dignity) |
| **Helpful Response** | What helped you stay regulated (breath, pause, support, step back)? | What helped them begin to calm (tone, options, empathy, time, space)? |
| **Learning for Next Time** | What would you do the same or differently next time? | What new insight do you have about how this person—or people in similar situations—experience the food bank? |

# 3. Respond: De-escalate in the Moment

**Your goal:** Maintain empathy, restore stability, protect safety, and preserve dignity.

## Core principles

1. **Keep things simple** – use short sentences and pauses (Keep words and sentences short and clear).
2. **Create connection** – calm tone, open posture, eye contact if safe.
3. **Create calm around you** – reduce noise, move to a quieter space if possible.
4. **Affirm and agree where you can** – "You're right, this situation is frustrating."
5. **Start from needs** – "What do you need most right now?" or "Is there another way to get that need met today?"

## Three practical steps

### Step 1 – Regulate Yourself and the Space

Before you can calm anyone else, you must calm yourself and assess your surroundings.
If the space itself is adding pressure — crowd noise, close quarters, bystanders watching — start there.

**Why it matters:**
People mirror not only your energy but also the environment's energy. Reducing stimulation helps everyone's nervous system settle.

**Try this:**

- Take one slow breath before responding; lower your tone and volume.
- **Glance around**: Where can you stand that gives both you and the guest a little space?
- If there's an audience, **invite privacy** but not isolation.
  "*Let's step over here where we can talk quietly.*"
  Choose a visible, low-traffic spot — within sight of coworkers, not behind closed doors.
- Maintain a clear path to exits and keep an open stance (no crossed arms or pointing).
- If you need support, **signal a teammate** rather than leaving the guest alone.

**Internal script**: "*Slow down. Breathe. Check the space. I can help make this easier.*"

### Step 2 – Lead with Empathy and Curiosity

Once the setting feels safer, turn your attention fully to the person.
Curiosity and validation help lower emotional energy and rebuild trust.

**How to do it:**

- **Start from acknowledgment**: "I can see this is stressful." "I'm glad you are here." Reflective listening is meant to slow the interaction, not to agree with everything said.
- **Ask open questions** that uncover needs without judgment:
  - "What happened?"
  - "What do you need right now?"
  - "What would help you most today?"
- **Adjust your physical positioning**: Stand at an angle rather than face-to-face; avoid hovering or leaning in.
- **Use short, concrete sentences** (10 words or fewer) and pause between them — it gives their brain time to process.
- **Keep your gestures slow and open** and your hands visible. Match your breathing to a calm pace.

**Example phrases**:

*"You deserve to be heard."*
*"Let's figure this out together."*
*"I want to help you get what you need safely."*

## Step 3 – Seek Agreements and Closure

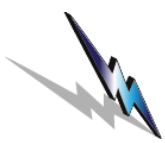
Once emotions have softened and thinking returns, move toward shared next steps.
Agreements bring order and mutual respect back into the interaction.

**How to do it:**

- Offer **simple, realistic options** the person can choose between.
- State what you *can* do before what you *can't.*
- Re-confirm understanding: "So we'll hold a box for tomorrow —does that sound right?"
- **End positively** so the guest leaves feeling respected.

**Example**:

**Guest**: "I came all this way and you're closed!"
**Staff**: "That sounds frustrating — especially after traveling. Let's step over here where it's quieter, and I'll check which pantry is open nearby. Or we can hold a box for you tomorrow. Which would help more?"



**At some point you may reach a decision point.** De-escalation may mean continuing engagement or disengaging safely with support. Disengaging is not failure—it is often the safest choice.

## Tailor your approach

| If someone is… | Try this… |
|---|---|
| Easily overwhelmed | Simplify information and reduce sensory input. |
| Showing little empathy | Recognize it as self-protection; stay steady and kind. |
| Having rapid mood changes | Mirror calm energy, avoid reacting to tone shifts. |
| Showing poor judgment | Avoid advice; focus on safety and choices. |
| Expressing low self-esteem | Offer genuine appreciation ("You're doing your best"). |
| Experiencing anxiety/insecurity | Slow down, normalize their feelings. |

**Avoid:**

- Ultimatums ("If you don't calm down, I'll call security").
- Arguing or defending policies.
- Saying "I understand what you're going through" when you don't.
- Rapid speech or sharp tone changes.
- Ignoring your own rising stress.

If you must set a limit or enforce a boundary, keep your tone calm and collaborative. *"I want to help, and I also need everyone to be safe. Let's take a minute."*

## Be mindful of culture and communication dynamics

Cultural norms around directness vs. politeness differ—even within the same language group. Language barriers amplify stress, especially in lines. Some people lead with negativity as a coping or communication style. Ultimately, feeling heard and validated matters as much as the outcome

*"A lot of cultures are incongruent with food bank culture, waiting in lines."*

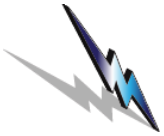
—Food Bank Leader

*"I'm Hispanic, but even different Hispanic communities have different ways of handling situations. They use different words and have different ways of speaking. Some are direct. Some are not direct. You can't generalize."*

—Food Bank Leader

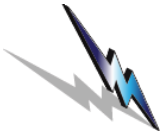
## When de-escalation is working

- Breathing slows
- Body language softens
- Tone lowers
- Guest is ready to engage or disengage calmly



**Not every situation ends perfectly.** The goal is to leave everyone safer and more connected than when it began.

ACTIVITY



**Find a partner for this exercise.**

**Think back to the situation you described earlier—the moment when someone was upset or escalated. Imagine you're back in that scene.**

Choose one of these phrases that feels most appropriate for that situation and practice saying it in a calm, steady tone:

- "What do you need right now?"
- "You're right, this is frustrating."
- "Let's find a way to make this work."

Practice it once, then adjust your tone or body language and try again, differently.

Afterward, discuss with your partner:

- What changed when you said it the second time?
- How did your tone or posture affect the message?

# 4. Recover: Reflect and Re-regulate

After tension subsides, the work isn't done.

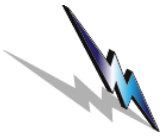
**Immediately after:**

- **Debrief** with supervisor or coworker.
- **Document** key details: who, when, what actions.

**Re-regulate yourself:**

- Step outside, hydrate, stretch.
- Reflect on what helped and what didn't.
- Normalize "check-ins": "You good?"

Encourage a culture of care. **Make it normal to check in after difficult moments**—'You good?' is a simple way to show support. What you learn during recovery should inform how you prepare next time.



What helps you reset—movement, deep breathing, or talking it out?

How can your team build a "culture of care" around debriefing?

> *"Our work requires us to be like social workers."*
>
> —Food Bank Leader

Remember that the team is navigating:

- Hunger
- Trauma
- Cultural gaps
- Systems frustration
- Community expectations

It is important for you to **make time for recovery, normalization, and support**.

# 5. Bystander Roles: Helping Each Other Stay Safe

In a food bank, anyone—staff, volunteer, or guest—may see tension and need to step in safely. Even if you are not directly involved, you have a role to play to help de-escalate a situation.

## The 5D Framework

***(adapted from Right To Be)***

| "D" | Role | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Distract** | Interrupt or redirect attention. | "Hey, could you help me with these boxes?" |
| **Delegate** | Get help from a lead or supervisor. | Quietly signal for assistance. |
| **Document** | Record what happened. | Note time, place, and actions for reporting. |
| **Delay** | Support afterward. | "That looked tough—are you okay?" |
| **Direct** | If safe, set a verbal boundary. | "Let's lower our voices so everyone feels comfortable." |

**Learn more from Right to Be:** [https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training](https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training)

## Bystander Guidelines

- ☐ **Safety first.** Don't step into physical danger. Signal for help if necessary.
- ☐ **Stay calm and grounded.** Model de-escalation with your body language.
- ☐ **Support dignity.** If someone is embarrassed, quietly redirect attention rather than adding to the audience.
- ☐ **Work as a team.** Everyone should know who to call or gesture to when situations arise.
- ☐ **Afterward:** Check in with both parties and your supervisor. Write a brief note if it might be relevant to future safety reviews.

ACTIVITY

**Role-play these three bystander moments:**

1. You see a guest raise their voice at a volunteer about food limits. What could you do using *Distract* or *Delegate*?

2. A volunteer looks shaken after an intense conversation. How can you *Delay* to support them afterward?

3. Two guests start arguing loudly in line. What *Direct* phrase could you say safely to defuse tension?

**Debrief**: Which D felt most natural to you? Which would you like to strengthen?

REFLECTION

What bystander actions are safest and most appropriate in your space?

How can you empower volunteers and guests to know these roles too?

## Closing Reflection

Think of **one practice, phrase, or idea** from this training that you want to try in the next week.

How will you know it made a difference—for you or for a client/neighbor?

# Building Conditions for Calm

Ultimately, our goal in de-escalation is to honor the other person's dignity. One of the most effective ways to do that is to **prevent escalation before it starts**. In food banks and emergency food settings, many tense moments are predictable. They don't come out of nowhere—they arise from systems, constraints, and stressors that show up again and again.

Food bank staff shared that these situations most often trigger escalation:

- ☐ Being told "no" repeatedly (eligibility rules, limits, appointment-only policies)
- ☐ Not having what people expect (items, quantities, or timing)
- ☐ Long waits, especially outdoors (often two hours or more)
- ☐ Process misunderstandings ("I didn't know that," "you changed the rules")
- ☐ Role confusion (distribution center vs. pantry; volunteer vs. staff authority)
- ☐ Changing roles or procedures, especially for volunteers
- ☐ No-shows or unavailable staff (donors, pantries, or partners)

**One of the most powerful forms of de-escalation is to prepare for common, foreseeable situations like these ahead of time.** Preparation reduces surprise, lowers emotional energy, and helps people feel safer and more respected—even when the answer can't be "yes."

## Environmental Preparation: Setting the scene for calm

Most escalation begins before anyone speaks. Both the **physical environment** and the **emotional tone** of staff shape how people experience your food bank. A calm space and a calm presence work together to communicate **safety and respect.**

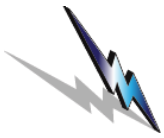
### Environmental Awareness

Your physical setup and systems shape people's experience. Transitions—opening, closing, running out of food, policy enforcement, shift changes—are common moments for escalation.

- ☐ **Create a welcoming environment** with clear signage, calm tone, and predictable flow.
- ☐ **Know your space:** ensure safe distances, visible exits, and a private area for sensitive conversations.
- ☐ **Anticipate stress points**—lines, shortages, eligibility questions, or policy enforcement.
- ☐ **Offer basic comforts**—water, seating, shade, and temperature control—to reduce physical stress.
- ☐ **Be mindful of cues**—lighting, sound, and imagery should reflect calm and inclusivity.
- ☐ **Share your community agreements**—post expectations for behavior, so everyone feels safe.

**When you can't control the environment, small actions still matter.**

Offering water, popsicles, hand warmers, shade, or calming music can significantly reduce emotional energy. Physical barriers for unloading (even when visibility remains) and emergency pickup bags defuse conflict.



Which of these ideas might you spend more time working on?

Review the Checklist on the following page. What might you work on?

What are some strategies to help you and your team stay attentive to the space as a whole—people, pace, energy—not just the task in front of you?

## Emotional Awareness

Mindset, awareness, and relational tone also create emotional safety. Your calm presence, tone, and choices can interrupt escalation before it becomes unsafe.

- **Be aware of power dynamics** and how authority can unintentionally trigger fear or shame.
- **Notice your own stress cues** (tight shoulders, quick breathing) and regulate before responding.
- **Build rapport early:** greet people by name, make eye contact, and use a calm tone.
- **Stay curious.** Curiosity helps you listen without judgment and respond with empathy.
- Recognize that **calm may look different across cultures**; what feels respectful in one context may feel distant in another.

## Leaders Help the Team Recover After an Incident

Staff and volunteers will be looking to you for support after an incident, so it is important to **check in with them and model a calm and timely response.** This sets the culture and makes it easier the next time.

Your role as a leader includes **debriefing** with team members and **helping them document** what happened. **Review Section 4, "Recover,"** and make notes about how you can create a culture of care.

What should be included in your organization's debriefs? Use the **worksheet on page 6** for ideas.

## Daily Calm Environment Checklist

Start with the changes that are easiest in your space. You don't need to do everything on this list.

*BEFORE OPENING*

| Area | Questions to Consider |
|---|---|
| **Entrance / Waiting Area** | ❑ Is signage clear about hours, policies, and process?<br>❑ Are expectations (ID, limits, next delivery) posted visually and in multiple languages?<br>❑ Is there seating or shade for people waiting?<br>❑ Are volunteers greeting people warmly and explaining the process? |
| **Flow & Layout** | ❑ Can people move easily without crowding or blocking exits?<br>❑ Are aisles wide enough for strollers, wheelchairs, and carts?<br>❑ Are "private" or quiet spaces available for difficult conversations? |
| **Noise & Lighting** | ❑ Is music volume appropriate?<br>❑ Are lighting levels comfortable and not glaring?<br>❑ Is there an echo or shouting required to be heard? |
| **Temperature & Comfort** | ❑ Is the space too hot or cold?<br>❑ Is there ventilation or fans for air circulation? |
| **Cultural & emotional cues** | ❑ Are posters or signs inclusive and welcoming (showing families, languages, diversity)?<br>❑ Do materials avoid shaming or deficit-based language? |
| **Anywhere** | ❑ When can your team huddle before opening?<br>❑ How will you remind people of roles and de-escalation plans?<br>❑ How might you create identifiable roles through clothing (i.e. colored vests) so guests know who can help?<br>❑ Who is particularly good at de-escalation who can step in as needed?<br>❑ What is your code word should this person or a backup team be needed? ("Mr. Cash, please come to reception." |

*DURING OPERATIONS*

- ❑ Volunteers are briefed on the flow and who to call for help
- ❑ Lines are managed calmly; one person greets new arrivals
- ❑ "Needs help" and "ready to go" guests are visually distinguishable (wristbands, baskets, etc.)
- ❑ Staff and volunteers know where to move guests for privacy
- ❑ When crowding occurs, one staff member steps outside to reassure waiting guests

*END OF DAY / AFTER EVENT*

- ❑ **Physical reset:** Are trash, boxes, and clutter cleared to reduce chaos?
- ❑ **Incident review:** Were there moments of tension? What environmental factors contributed?
- ❑ **Adjustments:** What can we tweak tomorrow (signage, layout, noise)?

REFLECTION

What small environmental change could make your food distribution calmer tomorrow?

Who is responsible for checking environmental factors each day? Could it rotate?

## A note about bystanders

TIP

As we said in Section 5, anyone may see tension and need to step in safely. One way to help them prepare is to **print the Bystander Roles** on page 12**. Post it** where team members can review and reference it.

# Community Agreements

At the food bank, we work in a shared space where everyone—staff, volunteers, and guests—deserves to feel safe, respected, and valued.

**Community agreements** remind us how we want to show up with and for one another. They set expectations for communication, care, and accountability, helping us navigate stressful moments with empathy and consistency.

These examples can serve as a foundation for your own team's agreements. Review and adapt them regularly so they reflect your community's values and realities.

## General example

We agree to:

- Greet each other with dignity and respect—guests, volunteers & staff.
- Stay present and listen attentively before responding.
- Speak in clear, kind language; avoid acronyms or barriers.
- Recognize power and cultural differences and hold space for diverse backgrounds.
- Work together to understand needs, not make assumptions.
- Use quiet space when needed for personal conversations.
- Accept that everyone may have hard days; offer patience and support.
- Ask for help if we are feeling triggered, overwhelmed, or unsafe.
- Celebrate the effort of all who serve and all who receive.
- Review our agreements regularly as a team.

## Community Agreement Example

***Thurston County Food Bank***
(https://tcfb.org/volunteer/orientation/), Volunteer Terms and Conditions

We believe that…

**Everyone deserves access to food that meets their dietary needs.**
TCFB strives to consistently offer equal access to food in the spirit of abundance. While working here, please trust those accessing our services to know best what they need.

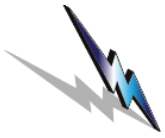
**Everyone deserves respect.**
Please practice awareness of your biases and refrain from expressing biases while in this space. Please refrain from making generalizations about any group of people, such as those of a particular ethnicity, gender expression, or those who struggle with substance use.

**Everyone deserves dignity.**
While working here, please honor how individuals express their identity, including gender identity, and refrain from making assumptions about how someone would like to be addressed. Please refrain from the use of diminutives like "sweetie," "honey," or "buddy."

**Everyone deserves control of their personal space.**
Please refrain from touching anyone or their personal effects, including a shopping cart while someone is using it, without their explicit consent.

**Everyone deserves freedom from harassment.**
Please refrain from making comments of a sexual nature. Please refrain from commenting on someone's appearance.

**Everyone deserves the assumption of good intent.**
Those who access our services experience a complex range of life circumstances. Regardless of someone's behavior, please refrain from assuming ill intent.

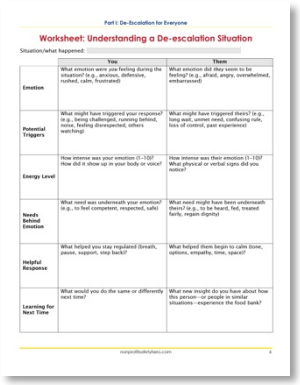
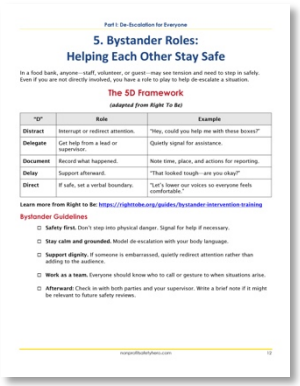
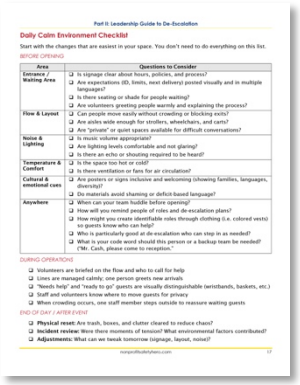


If you posted a "Community Agreement," what should be on it?

If you already have one posted, what is helpful about having expectations posted?

# PRACTICE TOOLS

In addition to the **Script Card Set** and the **Micro-Scenarios** in this section, we recommend you print out the following resources from the Guide. Keep or post them in the place they're most likely to be used:


| | Item | Page |
|---|---|---|
|  | **Worksheet: Understanding a De-Escalation Situation**<br>Helps individuals think about a situation before it happens.<br>Helps to debrief after an incident has occurred. | 6 |
|  | **Bystander Roles: Helping Each Other Stay Safe**<br>Post or share with all your staff and volunteers, so they know what they can do as a bystander. | 12 |
|  | **Daily Calm Environment Checklist**<br>Use to make sure both the physical and emotional environments are ready for the day. | 17 |

# A. Script Card Set

Each card shows a **common situation**—a staff trigger or guest statement—paired with a **suggested response** that models a calm, curious, and collaborative tone.

**How to use:**

- **Print and laminate** the card. Make copies **accessible** at service points or volunteer stations.
- Review one card with your team before each shift, or use them in quick role-plays during staff meetings.
- Focus on tone and posture as much as words—the cards are reminders of how to slow down and connect.

| Trigger / Guest Statement | Suggested Response |
|---|---|
| **1. "I came all this way and the pantry is closed!"** | "I hear how upset you are — you made the effort to come. Let's see what we can do right now. Can I check our schedule to find the next opening or another nearby site?" |
| **2. "Why do I have to show ID again? I come here every month!"** | "I hear how frustrating it is to show ID again. The rule is in place so we can serve everyone reliably. Let's look together at exactly what you have now, and I'll help you meet it if you're missing something." |
| **3. "You gave someone else more food than me!"** | "It sounds like you feel someone else got more. I'm sorry you're feeling that way. Let's look at what you received and what we can do—sometimes we can offer an extra item or connect you with another agency today." |
| **4. "The line is so long and I'm starving/ worried for my kids!"** | "I'm sorry you've had to wait this long and are worried. Let's make sure you're safe and taken care of. Can I bring you a place to sit, help you fill out a form while you wait, and check how many more people are ahead?" |
| **5. "I told you I'm allergic to ___ – why do I still have to take that item?"** | "Good point. Thank you for telling me about the allergy. I apologize for the mix-up. Let me set aside an alternative item right now and show you the shelf of safe options." |
| **6. "This food is all wrong—nothing my family eats!"** | "It's important you get food your family can use. Thanks for speaking up. Let's walk the shelves together and choose items that work for you this week." |
| **7. "If you don't hurry I'll leave and go somewhere else."** | "I hear you—your time is valuable and you need to get what you came for. I'll move as quickly as I can to help you. Meanwhile, if you'd like, I can bring the items to the table so you can resume your day." |
| **8. "Why isn't there more of ___ today? You told me there would be."** | "Thanks for letting me know. I'm sorry we're out of that today. I can check if we're expecting more later this week and get your name on a hold list, if that works for you." |
| **9. "You treat some people like they're a bother. I don't like being treated that way."** | "I'm really sorry you feel that way—I aim for respect for everyone. Let's talk about what happened so I can fix it. How can I make this right for you right now?" |
| **10. "I don't care about your reasons—I just need food now!"** | "I hear that your need is urgent. You're in a difficult spot. Let's get you fed today, then together we'll look at next-steps so you don't feel stuck like this again." |

# B. Micro-Scenarios

Each scenario presents a **realistic moment** you might face in a food-bank setting and invites you to practice how you would respond. They help teams move from *knowing* de-escalation concepts to *doing* them under pressure.

**Six role-play cases:**

A. Supply Shortage
B. ID Conflict
C. Long Wait
D. Language Barrier
E. Allergy Concern
F. Volunteer Conflict

**How to use:**

- Choose one scenario to **role-play** in pairs or small groups. One person plays the *guest*, one the *staff*, and a third observes.
- Keep each interaction brief (2–3 minutes).

**Debrief together:**

- What signs of escalation did you notice?
- What helped calm the situation?
- What could you try differently next time?
- Rotate roles so everyone practices both staff and guest perspectives.

## Scenario A: Supply Shortage

**Situation:** The pantry has fewer produce boxes this week than expected. A guest arrives, sees limited selection, voices frustration.

**Guest Statement:** "I came for the usual full box—and now you're giving me half? What's going on?"

**Staff Role:** You need to de-escalate, maintain dignity, offer alternatives.

**Debrief Questions:**

- What signs did you notice first that the guest was escalating?
- Which of our script cards could you use?
- What alternative or agreement could you offer that preserves dignity?
- How would you treat your own emotional state while responding?

## Scenario B: ID/Eligibility Conflict

**Situation:** A guest arrives without required photo ID. They've visited before but can't find it today.

**Guest Statement:** "I've been here every month—this is ridiculous. You changed the rules on me."

**Staff Role:** Enforce eligibility rules but avoid escalation.

**Debrief Questions:**

- How can you affirm what's true (they've visited before) and show you see their frustration?
- What needs might underlie the frustration (e.g., embarrassment, fear of losing access)?
- What options can you present to keep the guest engaged/respected?

## Scenario C: Long Wait Frustration

**Situation:** High traffic day, long line. A guest starts pacing, loud exhale, muttering.

**Guest Statement:** "This is ridiculous—I have to be at work soon and you're moving so slow."

**Staff Role:** Calm the situation and assist.

**Debrief Questions:**

- What non-verbal cues indicate escalation?
- What step can you take to reduce energy (e.g., offering seat, letting them skip ahead if safe)?
- What phrase could you use to show empathy and connection?

## Scenario D: Age/Language Barrier

**Situation:** An elderly guest whose first language isn't English looks confused with intake form. Another guest becomes impatient and interrupts.

**Guest Statement (impatient):** "Come on! Move it!"

**Staff Role:** Protect the dignity of the older guest, manage the impatient one.

**Debrief Questions:**

- How can you acknowledge both guests' perspectives?
- What multi-task approach can help both: calm the impatient, support the confused?
- How does environment (crowded space, noise) contribute and what can you do visually?

## Scenario E: Medical/Allergy Reaction

**Situation:** Guest opens a packaged item, discovers allergen, feels sick/angry.

**Guest Statement:** "I told you I'm allergic to nuts—how could you still give me this?"

**Staff Role:** Address urgent health concern and emotional reaction simultaneously.

**Debrief Questions:**

- How do you prioritize health safety and emotional de-escalation?
- Which script card would be appropriate?
- What commitment can you make to follow through?

## Scenario F: Volunteer Conflict

**Situation:** A volunteer is reprimanding a guest loudly about "taking more than they should." The guest becomes defensive.

**Guest Statement:** "Don't you talk to me that way! I'm here because I need help!"

**Staff Role:** Intervene, protect guest dignity, correct volunteer behavior calmly.

**Debrief Questions:**

- What do you say to the volunteer? To the guest?
- How do you restore safety for the guest and team?
- What prep or policy could have prevented this interaction?

**Free resources, videos, training, and more from**

**www.nonprofitsafetyhero.com**

Washington Food Coalition

SHIP Grant Program — Safety and Health Investment Projects — SafetyGrants.Lni.wa.gov

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