



# Spotlight on Safety

*Officer Safety, Wellness, and Resiliency*

## Defusing Difficult Encounters

Law enforcement officers across the nation make tens of thousands of public contacts every single day, including those resulting from casual encounters, responses to calls for service, traffic enforcement, and arrests. The majority of these contacts are routine and uneventful, with most members of the public recognizing and complying with lawful instructions. Sometimes, officers become involved in interactions in which achieving compliance is more difficult, as the result of either willful resistance or a person's inability to comply. In either scenario, the first priority of involved officers is their own safety and the safety of those around them.

# Defusing Difficult Encounters

Officers can have a significant influence on the outcome of difficult encounters based on their decisions and actions. By learning and employing some basic defusing tactics, officers can enhance the safety of everyone involved and help bring such an encounter to a successful conclusion. These tactics include slowing the situation down and using time as an advantage; constantly assessing the environment to maximize safety while maintaining control and tactical advantage; and last, taking action when necessary that is objectively reasonable based on the totality of the circumstances. All actions must be consistent with policy and applicable legal standards.

Law enforcement agencies, likewise, have a responsibility to ensure that their officers are prepared to effectively defuse difficult encounters. Agencies can accomplish this by advancing a general organizational culture of safety and accountability and by providing their officers with training in defusing tactics (slow down, constantly assess, take action) so that they have the skills needed to confidently handle such encounters.

Well-trained, disciplined officers who are both technically and tactically proficient with defusing techniques can reduce potential physical injury to themselves and the subjects they encounter, mitigate agency liability, and encourage trust within the communities they serve. The ultimate goal in learning to defuse difficult encounters is to provide a safe outcome for all involved.

## Reasons for Conflict

There are many reasons why a person may be resisting or unresponsive to lawful direction. Sometimes, noncompliance is intentional; it may be criminal in nature or politically motivated. The emergence of law enforcement resistance movements has led to many difficult encounters, often designed to bait officers into responding inappropriately while capturing the encounters on video. It is particularly important in these situations to maintain composure while following agency policy and procedure.

In some instances, resistance or noncompliance may not be the result of criminal or political intent. Officers may encounter people who are incapable of fully understanding or responding to a situation. Any of the following conditions (see below) may be present, which could require a change in tactics to be more effective.

It is important to note that the absence of criminal or political intent does not necessarily mean that a situation is any less dangerous. Caution should always be exercised, and the same defusing steps should be followed, regardless of the reasons for the resistance or noncompliance. Communication in such situations is paramount. Situations that involve confrontation and resistance are fluid and dynamic. Officers have to remember that a subject can quickly decide to become aggressive, regardless of the officer's attempts to lower tensions. The use of force may become necessary in certain instances; however, defusing strategies should be used when safe and feasible. The goal in defusing difficult encounters is to seek the best outcome for the officer, the individual, and the community.

## Conditions That Could Require a Change In Tactics



# 3 Simple Steps to aid in defusing difficult encounters

## 1 SLOW DOWN

Slowing down a difficult encounter is a defusing tactic with a three-part purpose. First, it provides an opportunity for additional resources to respond, whether they be additional officers, medical services personnel, or mental health professionals. Second, slowing down a situation brings a sense of calmness and control for both the officer and the subject into what may be an emotionally driven encounter. Both verbal and nonverbal communication are key to the direction of an encounter. It is important when speaking to use calm, even tones and professional language. This may help assuage the subject and also reflects well on the officer and his or her agency should the encounter be recorded. Third, engaging the subject in calming, open-ended questions keeps his or her attention on the conversation, rather than on taking any sort of action that might cause further difficulties. Employing these tactics to resolve aggressive or noncompliant behavior may take additional time; however, it is a much safer alternative than rushing a difficult encounter.

### Slow Down Strategies:

- » Project an image of calmness, patience, and professionalism through both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- » If possible, get the person's name and inquire about the nature of the conflict.
- » Ask open-ended questions that allow the person to talk. The more the person is talking, the less he or she is acting.
- » Use active-listening skills and clarify the subject's situation. Paraphrase his or her statements to show that you understand.
- » The goal is to get the subject to say yes and agree with what the officer is saying. It is difficult to remain in conflict with someone with whom the person is agreeing.

## 2 Constantly Assess

Difficult encounters are often dynamic and complex in nature. Officers must cultivate a mind-set of assessing a situation in its entirety, both up-front and continually throughout the encounter. Considerations related to this assessment include the immediate environment, the condition and actions of the person involved, and the officer's own physiological response. Officers who constantly assess a situation are more likely to make better informed decisions in defusing difficult encounters. Communication during the assessment phase is critical. Effective communication is an invaluable skill which, like any other skill, must be the subject of training, practice, and refinement.

### Assessment Strategies

**Monitor for any changes in person's behavior. Clenched fists, a raised voice, changes in body language, changes in eye contact, or a fighting stance may all be indicators of escalation.**

**Ensure that there is no immediate threat. Continually consider whether additional backup may be required.**

**Remain mindful of your physical environment. Maintain appropriate reactionary space.**

**Determine through observation or conversation the nature of the encounter: whether any noncompliance is the result of willful resistance or inability to comply because of other factors.**

# 3 Simple Steps to aid in defusing difficult encounters

## 3 Take Action

If circumstances allow you to slow down the encounter using defusing techniques, the next step is to take action based on your assessment of the situation, with the ultimate goal of resolving the encounter with a minimum of force or no force at all. Taking action does not necessarily imply a forceful act. Taking action can sometimes be as simple as continuing a conversation while assistance arrives, offering assistance, moving from one space to another, and gathering additional information.

### Take Action Strategies



### Summary

Having the ability to defuse difficult encounters by following the basic steps outlined above provides officers with the opportunity to positively impact the direction and the outcome of many situations that they handle. If a situation permits, incorporating the principles of **slow down**, **constantly assess**, and **take action** provides an alternative means to understand a difficult encounter, tone down a potential conflict, and defuse the event. The result of this effort is increased safety for the officer, the subject, and anyone else involved in the encounter.



The VALOR Program, through various educational initiatives, can provide law enforcement officers with training to better prepare them for the challenges they face in defusing difficult encounters. Well-trained officers are valuable assets to their agencies and their communities.

## For more information on **Spotlight on Safety**



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Resources

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