



**RESOURCES GUIDE**

# Top 10 De-escalation Tips for Human Services Professionals



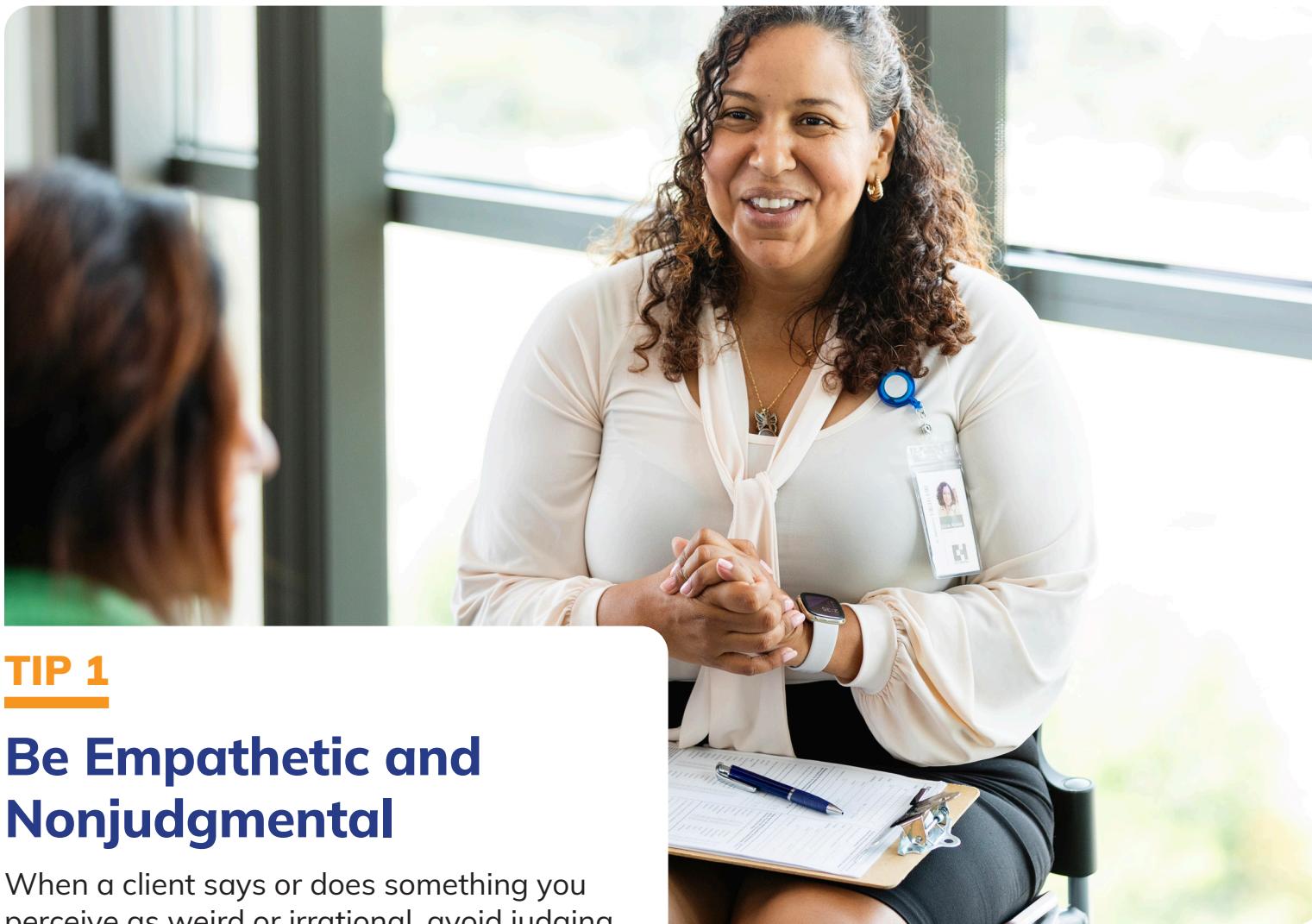
## Your Work Environment

As a human services professional, every day at the workplace presents new encounters, situations, and challenges. You may find yourself dealing with angry, hostile, or trauma-induced behavior every day. Your response to this challenging behavior plays a critical role in determining whether or not the incident will escalate into a crisis situation.

These 10 de-escalation tips from CPI provide strategies and techniques to help you respond to difficult behavior safely, keeping client well-being top of mind.

**“The investment in CPI training has helped us retain staff because they feel equipped with the tools they need. When staff know what to do in a crisis situation and have the support they need, they’re more likely to stay.”**

JAMIE NEWTON, ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR  
SOUTHWEST IDAHO TREATMENT CENTER



## **TIP 1**

### **Be Empathetic and Nonjudgmental**

When a client says or does something you perceive as weird or irrational, avoid judging or discrediting their feelings. Whether or not you think those feelings are justified, they are indeed real feelings to that person. Pay attention to them.

#### **Empathetic listening is done by:**

- Giving the client your undivided attention.
- Listening carefully to the person's feelings and the facts they're providing.
- Using positive nonverbal messages, such as eye contact and head nodding.
- Restating and paraphrasing what the client said; use their words and ask questions to clarify.

## **TIP 2**

### **Respect Personal Space**

If the space allows, stand between 1-3 feet away from the person who's exhibiting escalated behaviors. This personal space tends to decrease anxiety and can help prevent the client from lashing out or harming themselves or others.

If you must enter someone's personal space to provide care or help, explain your actions so the person feels less confused and frightened.



### **TIP 3**

## **Allow Time for Decisions**

When a client is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them time to think through and process what you've said. Just as you don't want to feel rushed, those in your care don't either. Avoid rising anxiety and stress for both of you by giving them that time.

### **TIP 4**

## **Use Nonthreatening Nonverbals**

When behavior begins escalating, nonverbals become key communicators to diffusing the situation. Be mindful of your gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice.

The more an individual escalates into distress, the less they can process your choice of words. When we speak to somebody we care about and respect, our tone and body language become relaxed, receptive, and nonthreatening. There is a special degree of patience and attention we show to those people. And those same qualities are exactly what a person in crisis needs to see so that they can safely de-escalate.



## TIP 5

### Set Limits

When a client is defensive, disruptive, or belligerent, they need limits that are clear, simple, and enforceable. Setting limits as a form of intervention is effective when limits are clearly stated, expectations are reasonable, and the limits given are enforceable—not punishable.



#### BONUS RESOURCE: How to Set Limits

[Download Now](#)

## TIP 6

### Focus on Feelings

As a human services professional, you understand how important facts are. When dealing with escalating behaviors, how a client feels is often the heart of the matter. Not all individuals can accurately describe their feelings toward what is happening to them.

Offering supportive responses lets the client know you understand what is happening and helps them filter through their emotions in a more rational manner.

**Supportive responses include:**

- > **“That must be scary.”**
- > **“I know how hard that must have been for you.”**
- > **“How did that make you feel?”**

## **TIP 7**

### **Ignore Challenging Questions**

Engaging a client who verbally challenges you often results in a power struggle. When a person challenges your authority, redirect their attention to the issue at hand. Managing a power struggle is critical to your mental well-being, as well as that of the individuals you're conversing with.

**BONUS: Practicing Rational Detachment is a critical component of avoiding power struggles.**

[Get started with these Rational Detachment tips.](#)

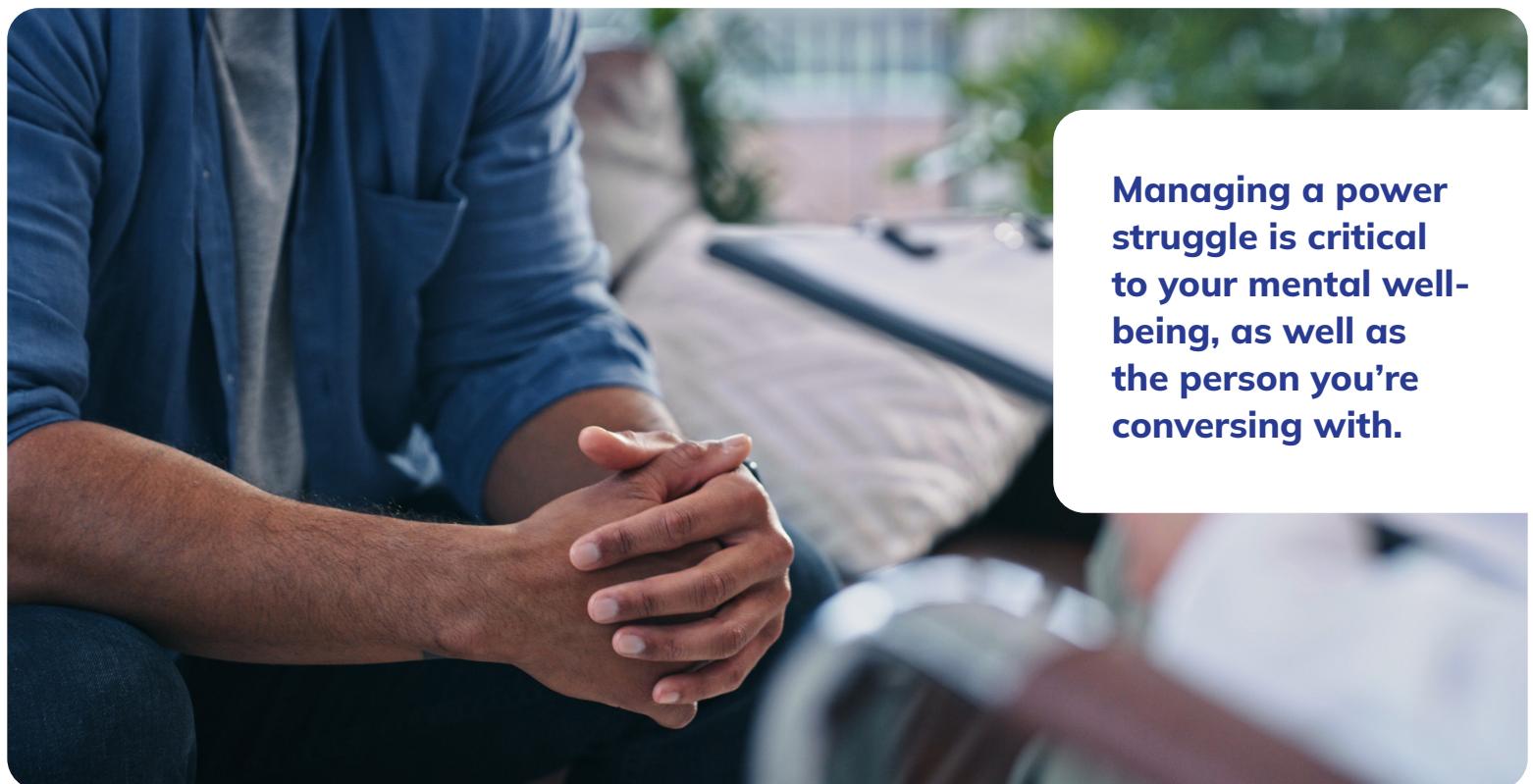
## **TIP 8**

### **Avoid Overreacting**

While you cannot control a client's behavior, you can control how you respond to them. Remaining calm, rational, and professional will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or diffuses.

**Strategies to help you remain calm include:**

- Taking several deep breaths before responding.
- Remembering that distress behavior is often rooted in fear and anxiety.
- Taking a moment to calm yourself by reiterating what the client is saying.



**Managing a power struggle is critical to your mental well-being, as well as the person you're conversing with.**

## **TIP 9**

### **Choose What you Insist Upon Wisely**

Be thoughtful in deciding which rules are negotiable and which are not. For example, if a client doesn't want to participate in group therapy, are you able to offer them the chance to observe from a comfortable place?

## **TIP 10**

### **Allow Silence for Reflection**

It may seem counterintuitive to let moments of silence occur while working with clients, but sometimes it's the best choice. This gives both you and the individual a chance to reflect on what's happening, and how to best proceed.



# De-escalation Training for Human Services Facilities

Contact us for more information at  
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