Managing Combative Behavior in the Workplace

Combative behavior is any physically aggressive act that causes or intends to cause hurt or damage to a person or object. Violence is a growing problem in the workplace, and working in long term care may bring you in contact with patients whose chronic confusion may cause them to exhibit combative behavior. Each healthcare worker must watch for clues that combative behavior may erupt, such as agitation, nervousness or suspiciousness.

Causes of combative behaviors may include:

- Health related: Hearing or visual impairment, acute illness, hormonal changes, loss of control of body functions, chemical or metabolic changes
- Psycho-social: Feeling threatened by life changes, inability to communicate, misinterpretation of efforts to provide care
- Environmental: Very bright or dim lights, blaring radios or TVs, changes in routines

Increased awareness of behaviors may give clues to the onset of an aggressive act. Patient violence occurs in many types of clinical settings and clinicians must be prepared to cope effectively to reduce the risk of serious injury to patients and caregivers. Assessing the combative episode may be the first step to future prevention. Sometimes general unhappiness can be the culprit of combativeness.

Recognizing the signals of impending violent outbursts before they happen offers the opportunity for staff to intervene much sooner with de-escalation techniques.

Here are 15 methods to handle or de-escalate combative behavior:

1. Keep the environment as pleasant and attractive as possible
2. Try to find a way to communicate
3. Maintain composure
4. Approach the patient calmly using positive, friendly expressions
5. Use a quiet voice, giving clear concise information
6. Do not initiate physical contact – touching may trigger violence
7. Try to validate reality
8. Actively listen
9. Work to maintain the person's sense of dignity
10. Take the time to gently guide the patient
11. Do not use rough, hurried or quick movements that might startle patients
12. Try to re-direct behavior and provide other options
13. Explain each action
14. Strive for containment during disruptive behavior
15. When you feel you are losing control of the situation – ask for assistance

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Managing Combative Behavior in the Workplace (Continued)

Knowledgeable de-escalation intervention is a simple way to increase overall awareness and reduce injuries to health care professionals. Up to 50% of healthcare workers are victims of violence sometime during their career. Risk of exposure to blood and body fluids increases when patients bite, scratch, spit and behave aggressively.

It is important for healthcare professionals to report all combative situations, and after a combative episode it is necessary to evaluate the staff response. Turnover can be attributed to burnout associated with combative patients, so successful interventions and strategies to reduce overall combativeness may increase staff satisfaction. Reporting violence will benefit employees and enable management to identify, address and solve problems. Employees should understand, know, support and comply with established workplace violence programs.

Combativeness is not usually directed at an individual but rather a mechanism used to communicate when patients cannot communicate verbally. Each caregiver needs to implement strategies that will recognize the patient’s predisposition to aggression and minimize the risk of injury. Regardless of the circumstances patients must always be treated with respect, preserving their dignity while minimizing or avoiding combative behaviors.