



# *Safety Circular*

## **Aggression**

It is the policy of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to promote prevention and reduction of staff injuries during confrontational situations with offenders.

Each employee must make every effort to ensure the safety and well being of the offender population; however, not at the risk of staff safety. An employee's primary responsibility is to remain unharmed. When working with aggressive offenders, a professional, calm, and mature approach to handling aggressive offender behavior will eliminate many staff and offender injuries.

The protection of staff, offenders, and the institution may all depend on how well an employee manages aggression. What requires skill, and what everyone should be proud of, is using your skills and understanding of human nature to avoid a use of force. Granted this is not always possible, but it should always be your goal when interacting with an aggressive individual.

### **Signs of Potential Aggressive Behavior:**

- Yelling
- Shaking fists
- Threatening staff or offenders
- Hand tremors
- Change in mood
- Change in tone of voice

### **Signs that may not be obvious:**

- Change in environment
- Personal/family problems
- Learning new behaviors or skills
- Changes in treatment
- Changes in medication

### **Characteristics for Predicting Violent Behavior:**

- History of violence
- Evidence of psychosis
- Evidence of Erotomania — a preoccupation with sexual activities, thoughts and fantasies
- Chemical or alcohol dependence
- Depression
- Delegation of blame and responsibility
- Elevated frustration level, particularly when low frustration tolerance exists
- Interest in weapons
- Evidence of personality disorders
- Vocalization of violent intentions prior to a violent act.
- Evidence of strange or bizarre behavior over a period of time

The most significant risk factor, and often the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Particularly when it comes to predatory psychopaths who demonstrate a propensity toward violent or aggressive acts against other offenders and staff.

## Causes of Aggression

### Stress

Stress plays an important part in many cases of aggression. Everyone experiences stress from pressures at work, pressure at home, financial issues, etc. These things can build up and make a person over-stressed.

### Social Reinforcement

When social reinforcement follows acts of aggression, it may serve to reinforce the aggressive acts and increase their future occurrence. In this way, the social reinforcement can be both a consequence and at least a partial future “cause” of further aggressive acts.

### Frustration

It is often a strong emotional response to opposition, anger, and disappointment. People become frustrated when they are unable to change something or achieve something.



## Redirection and Stimulus Change

Often when an individual is displaying pre-aggressive behaviors, it may not be possible to calm them by talking with them about the stressor. The more you talk about the stressor, the more they may continue to think about it which just prolongs the distress.

Some individuals cannot pinpoint what is upsetting them. There may be nothing you can say or do that will change a particular disturbing situation. In such situations, there are several things that can be done. If you are able to determine what is upsetting an offender, you may help to calm them by simply removing what is upsetting them from their area. You might also be able to remove the offender from the area. For example, an offender may get quite upset because he is trying to watch TV and another offender is yelling and screaming. Perhaps the easiest way to calm the offender would be to separate the two offenders. This type of change is called a stimulus change.

Another way to calm an offender, is to redirect their attention from what is upsetting them to something else. If you can get them to talk about something else, which is pleasant to them, they may stop thinking about what is upsetting them and calm down.

If they are non-verbal or will not talk, you may simply lead them to a chair and ask them to sit down and relax and just talk to them about a subject you know they enjoy. It is usually difficult to think about stressful things if one continues to think or talk about pleasant things.

Always remain with the offender until they have calmed down for a while. Do not assume that they will remain calm just because they appear calm at the moment. When redirecting an offender who is becoming aggressive, never attempt to bribe them. Never threaten them. By using these techniques you can prevent the majority of actual aggressive incidents. The faster you intervene when someone begins to become upset, the greater the likelihood that you will be able to prevent aggression and injuries to yourself and others.

## General Awareness

- Be aware of and alert to the surroundings.
- Visually search offenders and the surrounding area for possible weapons.
- Be aware of where fellow employees are who could assist if needed, and when possible, avoid entering an area alone.
- Maintain a safety zone between yourself and offenders, avoiding easy striking distance.
- Be prepared to take evasive or defensive action, and move quickly and expediently.
- Remain calm while assessing the situation and maintain control.
- Prevent personal feelings or emotions from dictating actions.
- Do not respond to verbal taunts.
- Be firm, fair, and consistent while interacting with others
- Do not panic. Give calm, controlled orders instead of loud, agitated commands to achieve compliance.

## Professional Conduct

Remember that it is very important to remain professional in your actions as officers, staff, managers, and leaders. Everyone should strive to be courteous, polite, respectful, considerate, and positive when communicating and working with others. We should address all issues beginning at the lowest level and remind others that inappropriate or unprofessional behavior will not be tolerated. According to our agency's ethics policy ED-02.01, actions and decisions of employees should be based on the core values of the agency.



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The Safety Circular, a publication of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Risk Management Department, is published monthly in an effort to promote and enhance risk management awareness on issues relating to TDCJ employees. Comments, suggestions and safety related items are welcome.

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**References:** ♦ Texas Department of Criminal Justice Prevention of Employee Injuries Due to Offender Aggression –AD 03.48 ♦ Texas Department of Criminal Justice Ethics Policy—ED 02.01 ♦ Texas Department of Criminal Justice CID—Management Operations/Correctional Training and Staff Development—Mental Health Training for Correctional Officers ♦ Mayo Clinic—<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/anger-management/art-20045434>