

CALM EVERY STORM

*Preventing Aggressive Behavior
With Your Words*



Brendan King

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Words

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CALM EVERY STORM[®]

Learn How. Know When.

CRISIS CONSULTANT GROUP, LLC

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ISBN: 1514346257

ISBN-13: 978-1514346259

PREFACE

This book combines over 20 years of front-line crisis prevention and intervention experience and lessons learned, into 80+ easy to understand and easy to implement verbal de-escalation techniques. These techniques are designed to help you calm challenging or aggressive individuals, safely and professionally.

You will learn to:

- Control Your Own Responses and Avoid Taking Things Personally
- Empower And Influence Others To Make Positive Decisions During Crisis
- Build Relationships and Rapport With Persons in Crisis
- Calm the Most Difficult and Stressful Situations with Your Words.

After speaking, presenting, and training thousands of people to better manage hostile and/or aggressive persons around the country, I thought it was time to take some of my most unique learning experiences and put them to paper.

I hope you enjoy learning from my mistakes, and are able to find a way to utilize the methods discussed in this book. Please allow them to help you navigate your way through crisis situations you encounter on the job, or in your personal life. Society could surely benefit from more talented persons like yourself out there trying to calm things down for the rest of us.

Thank you for purchasing this book. Be safe, and go change lives.

Brendan King

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Please feel free to reach out to me directly at: bking@crisisconsultantgroup.com or visit the company website to find out more about our online or on-site training options.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Authors, pioneers, experts and mentors referenced herein, acknowledged,
and thanked for their wisdom and experience:*

Gavin De' Becker, De'Becker and Associates

Tony Blauer, Blauer Tactical Systems

Dr. Stephen Covey

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman

Dr. John Maxwell

Mr. Brett Whyson

Mrs. Melissa Shultis Peters

Mr. Robert Matt Thompson

Grand Master Kun Hwa Lee, Hwal Moo Do Federation

Sink or Swim, You Decide

As an airplane leaves the gate the flight attendants review with the passengers a set of safety instructions that passengers must follow. It only takes a few minutes and oftentimes, passengers aren't paying attention. They start by sharing where to find written emergency instructions (in the pocket in front of your seat). They then tell you how to buckle your seat belt, how to use the oxygen masks should they drop down from the ceiling in mid-flight, and they share what to do should the plane experience any type of emergency, including landing in water. It's this last part that intrigues me.

One of the things I often think about when dealing with someone in crisis is what the flight attendants tell passengers about using the seat bottom as a flotation device in a water landing. Seriously, If your plane has landed in water, and you're thinking that it might be time to grab that seat cushion to keep you above water, then I would say things could easily be considered to be a bit . . . well . . . it's a pretty bad situation, no matter how you look at it. You've reached that point where last minute, critical thinking is a must. In other words, it's sink or swim.

The same can apply in a crisis de-escalation. Things seem to be going fine and you feel as if you're making headway with the individual. You're thinking *this is good, we're making progress. It should be over soon*. Suddenly, it starts to re-escalate. The reason it's happening isn't important—it could be something as simple as using the wrong word or phrasing. The point is, the other person starts to become angrier and you realize you're losing ground. For whatever reason, the connection you were starting to build with the individual is disappearing. The situation is escalating. It's reaching the point where you either sink, or swim. You realize you need to find something to help change the situation. You need something to save it from going under. You start looking around for a "flotation device".

This is where the seat cushion analogy comes into play. Take a quick look around your environment. Identify whether there is anything nearby that might be helpful. Furniture, equipment, other people, creating distance--anything that can lessen anxiety and act as your "flotation device". Even calming words, something like "Sir, I understand you're upset. How about we go over there and have a seat? We could keep talking about this right here, if you want, but over there might make us a little more comfortable." Words to that effect could be very helpful.

This is also the point where it's important to remember the saying, "You can't save your ass and your face at the same time!" I believe that saying is especially true in de-escalation situations. I believe you have to know when it's appropriate to "Lose the battle, to win the war." You may have to give up a little ground to gain the whole field.

When things get really bad, you have to determine whether it is time to step back, or take a moment to regroup. You need to realize there are going to be times when what you have to say isn't going to have a significant impact on the other person, or their perspective. They're angry and just aren't able to listen at that point. You may have to take a step back and step away from the situation, so a coworker (who may have a better rapport) can step in. Use this opportunity to quickly look around, identify who may be able to help, and if possible, bring them into the situation.

So, to wrap it up, just as airlines have plans in place in the case of an emergency, you too must have plans at the ready for managing an escalating situation. Two points to remember:

You can't save your face and your ass at the same time, and although you may not have a seat cushion to keep you from sinking, there are always other options.

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Preparation

Everyone is securely buckled in their seats and they've been made aware of the safety procedures. The plane is finally taxiing to the runway. At last, you begin to settle into your seat. Everything is going smoothly. Then, there he is. That one guy. He has realized he must have his laptop. Right now.

The flight attendant immediately picks up the microphone and makes a stern announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen, the seat belt sign is still on, please take your seat and fasten your seat belt." It is then likely accompanied by a few dirty looks towards the rogue passenger. Usually, he shrivels back into his seat like a worm. He went outside of the rules, he did something unexpected. The reality is, the flight attendants are there to protect you from exactly that, the unexpected. Nearly everything a flight attendant has to do on your flight has to do with safety and *preparation*. The airlines and the FAA want passengers to be safe while traveling, so they make sure everyone on the plane is ready in the event that the plane encounters turbulence or some other unexpected event. It is true that, sometimes, pilots are made aware of areas of turbulence or rough air prior to getting to that area, though that isn't always the case. Sometimes it just happens--without warning--and anything (including people) that isn't secured, might go flying through the cabin. It's too late when that occurs. The best way to ensure everyone stays safe is to keep all passengers securely fastened in their seats prior to something happening.

It's the same in crisis de-escalation situations. It's too late when things have unexpectedly spiraled out of control. It's best to be prepared ahead of time so that everyone is safe. When I hear the reminder to fasten your seatbelt while seated, I'm reminded of preparation and how important it is to be prepared while at work.

Think about it. You show up to work, but you're distracted. You're thinking about home, you're thinking about problems with your boss, you're thinking about coworkers with whom you don't get along, etc. You're worrying about everything except what you should be thinking about—the job at hand. You're not in the right mindset to de-escalate a situation should one occur. You're simply not prepared for it. Where does that leave you? Vulnerable to crisis. You must be mentally prepared to do the job or you may get caught up in the air, or knocked out of your seat.

In addition to being mentally prepared, you must also ensure your body is physically prepared for emergency situations. I try to stay in shape. It's something I've always been aware of and have tried to stay consistent with. As I age though, it definitely isn't as easy as it used to be! It's not just that I want to try and look good when I go to the beach. No. It's because, if there's a crisis that needs my help, I'll have to be ready to assist, no matter where the situation occurs. It may be halfway across the building, on the other side of the facility, or up one or more flights of stairs! When the call for help comes in, it is part of my job to physically respond. I can't be out of breath when I arrive. I can't be so exhausted upon getting to the scene that I'm no help at all or, worse, create more of a problem due to poor health!

So, how can I prepare, mentally and physically, for a crisis? I have to evaluate myself: Did I sleep enough last night? Did I eat right yesterday, or so far today? Am I taking care of myself and what I

need? If I cannot answer in the affirmative to the majority of these questions, I am behind the curve. Have you heard the phrase, “sharpening the saw?” Steven Covey talks about this. Sharpening the saw means making sure you keep yourself sharp so you are able to produce to the maximum of your abilities. That is when you make the most positive impact you can, because you are taking care of yourself and achieving your own personal greatness.

Most of us who work in human services or perform shift work, or both of those things together, find it very difficult to find time for ourselves. The problem is, that if we don’t take that time, we get out of balance. When you get out of balance, it affects everyone and everything around us, leading to trouble. We are impatient, we are often quicker to judge and more likely to take unnecessary risk. Don’t let this happen to you.

Remember: Preparation is vital for success, so prepare as best you can.

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Pass It On

One of our trainers, Matt Thompson, once worked in a facility with adolescent youth – specifically, incarcerated males. During most days, the schedule allowed for the young men to go to the gym for recreation time. During those years, it was the fashion to leave shoes untied. So, in keeping with the latest trends, the boys would leave their shoes untied. This, of course, meant their shoes made an odd, chakunking noise as they walked down the halls. Chakunk. Chakunk. Chakunk.

On certain occasions, some of the kids would stop and lace up their shoes. The boys would get to the gym, they'd start playing, a little elbowing begins, and presto—they're in a fight. As the new staff member you're left wondering, "What happened?" "They were fine just a few minutes ago?" "I didn't even see this coming!" Somehow though the veteran staff were all over the situation, reacted immediately and shut the crisis down in a heartbeat. Later some of them tell you they knew something was about to happen, they just didn't know when.

How did they know? Let's look at it. When your shoes are untied, it becomes very easy to slip out of them. When you tie the laces, your shoes stay put. It's only logical that, if you see a kid tying their shoe laces before getting to the gym, you'd think, "Oh, they want to play basketball. They don't want to slip out of their shoes." That's sensible, right? Nope. That's wasn't the case at all. The kids who weren't ready to fight, and who weren't planning to fight in the first place, would continue to play basketball, even with their shoes loose and flopping on their feet. That was the style and that's what they did. The seasoned staff members saw kids starting to lace up, they took it as a sign. To them it was a key. "Hey, we'd better be on guard because something's about to go down." These are the little tricks you don't get during regular job orientation.

They usually don't teach you these things during those first few days of "official" training; the days before you hit the actual units. It's not because they want you to fail. It's only because there are many little details that can only be learned once you're on the job.

When officers are first assigned to their Field Training Officer, they are always told, "Forget everything you learned in the Academy. You're going to have to be re-taught." While that may not be entirely true, there *are* a lot of details you simply can't get from the formal classroom education. Experience is the only way to learn some things.

Lesson? If you have some experience, have acquired certain skills, know little tricks of the trade, or learned a few secrets of how to keep things calm, pass it on. Pass the information on to your co-workers. Pass it on to the newbie. Remember, at one point **you** were the newbie, and needed all the help you could get.

Give Respect, Get Respect

A number of years ago, we were conducting training sessions with a particular client in the upper Northeast. We were discussing power, control, and crisis situations. We were, specifically, going over the type of situation where people felt they had to draw a line or “make a stand” so to speak.

One gentleman made an interesting comment. “You know Brendan,” he said, “When it comes to the kids here, I don’t give them respect until they earn it.”

At the time my first thought was, *Wow! Sounds like a real joy to work with.* His attitude surprised me quite a bit, as you might imagine, as one of the first things we learn in dealing with people in a hospital or treatment setting is to treat them with dignity and respect. I knew in that moment that my work was cut out for me. This gentleman was a supervisor, and had been at the facility for a long, long time. It was apparent that he was very set in his ways. Regardless of the fact that my company had been brought to this organization by the State to help fix their crisis response, his attitude was clear that he didn’t think he had much to learn, and already had all the answers. As I quickly gauged the other faces in the room (about 25 or so), it was clear that most of the rest of them didn’t agree with his comment, though they were not going to speak up out of fear of retaliation from this supervisor. It made for an interesting next 30 minutes as I opened the conversation up and gently let him know I thought his attitude towards dignity and respect was not helpful, and likely led to the issues they currently had, and that we were called there to fix. Let’s just say, I wish I had that conversation recorded. Anyhow, this attitude within him had developed to this point for whatever reason. He had been in the industry a long time and maybe he was just burned out. I don’t know the reason, but he’d come to a point where he felt he didn’t have to show respect to anyone until that person had earned it. I wonder how many others feel that same way. Do you?

Maybe you work in corrections. Maybe mental health. Maybe you’re in law enforcement, or security, and you think, “You know what? I’ve got the authority, the badge. I’ve got the gun. Therefore, you do what I say.” Maybe that’s the way you approach these scenarios. But let’s think about it for a moment. Doesn’t that sound more detrimental than beneficial? Can’t you see that walking into a conversation with someone in that “top dog” position will likely only garner resistance?

I don’t know about you, but my experience -- especially when I was working with adolescents -- has been that they’re not going to give you respect right from the start. Instead, it’s been quite the opposite scenario. Typically, I’ve had to establish myself with *them*. I’ve had to earn *their* respect prior to them returning respect to me.

When I demonstrate respect to another person, I do expect to receive respect in return, but I’m going to be the first to show it. I’m not going to make the other person be the one to make that first move. I will start from a position of Cautious Submission™. Cautious Submission™ is a concept CCG came up with to represent ones attempt to be situationally aware, open-minded, and respectful, while willing to submit ego and pride in order to gain compliance and peaceful cooperation. I understand this concept may not be widely accepted at first, though the reality is, it’s

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what's worked for me time and time again. If I enter a situation with the attitude of *you have to earn my respect before I give that back to you*, I'm already behind the 8-ball. I'm already in a shaky position. Instead, I come from a position of, *Hey, we are in this together. I want to help you. I'm here to try to get us both through this situation as efficiently and as safely as possible.*

When I arrive, I make it a point to carry myself with a certain level of dignity, professionalism, and tact. Those with whom I'm dealing will recognize this presence as soon as I enter the room. So it should be with you. Those who you are trying to help should immediately recognize that you deserve respect simply by the way you carry yourself, by the words you use, and the manner in which you walk. This is not control or fear based respect. Instead, they know you mean what you say, and care about the outcome being positive. You're going to do what you say you will do, and you will follow through on promises. When you do, they will begin to trust you. Soon you'll develop a rapport, then a relationship, and little by little, respect grows.

Start from a position of Cautious Submission™, showing the other person respect in the hopes of receiving it in return.

Approach with Caution

At one point, when I was working in law enforcement, I became certified as a Field Training Officer. One of the things you have to go over is “hot calls.” In law enforcement a “hot call” is one involving immediate danger. It might be a man with a gun, a robbery, a burglary, or a domestic in-progress. On the way to those calls, your adrenalin is rushing through your body, you’re probably driving fast, you’ve got your lights going, the siren is blaring, you’re sending information back and forth to dispatch, maybe you’re reading notes on the MDT (the computer in the cruiser) -- in short, you are preparing for war.

The same type preparation happened back when I was working with youth, in the psychiatric hospital. In a hospital, the “hot call” would come out over the P.A. system, “Paging Doctor Strong, Paging Doctor Strong,” or whatever goofy message we’d use to indicate a crisis situation. We’d run to wherever the crisis was occurring, or wherever help was needed, we’d go busting through the doors, ready to take on whatever crisis we found. The entire time on the way there, we’re thinking *we’ve got to get there; we’ve got to get there fast! Adrenaline is pumping, you are mentally shifting to a crisis response mindset and then*, boom! We were there. We’d end up on the unit quick, all psyched up, hyped up, and ready for war.

The problem was that poor little Johnny over there was, maybe, having a crisis, but not necessarily a level ten crisis. He sees four or five staff members come barreling through the door full on beast-mode. It looks to him like the goon squad is here to tackle him, take him down, and take him to the quiet room/seclusion room and likely strap him down to the restraint bed, and leave him for hours on end. This raises the anxiety of not only little Johnny, but the staff members who are also there on scene, as well as the other patients in the area, watching it all go down.

Let me give you something to consider. In your haste to get to the site of the crisis, how much information did you miss? In your rush to the scene, you might have run right past other situations – perhaps other patients who may be involved in their own conflict over on the side, or a staff member who needed help with another situation related to little Johnny’s crisis. Did you see the weapon in the hand of the patient off to the left of the door? Did you get tunnel vision and miss important information before you got there

I encourage you, when working in a crisis environment, whether it’s on the street or in a hospital setting, to slow down a bit when the call for help comes in. Approach the situation with caution. Slow down, get yourself right, and get into a mental mindset where you are ready for whatever might come your way. Prepare for whatever might be on the other side of that door. The idea is to slow down enough that you’re not going to miss any critical information that might end up causing you or someone else harm or that might raise the anxiety level in the unit.

Remember the flashing sign: *Approach With Caution.*

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Body Language, What Message Are You Sending?

What do you know about body language? Probably a lot by now. You've heard, read, and seen plenty of things that talk about body language, and how important it is in the message that it sends. Here is your assignment: Go stand in front of a mirror. Try a few of these postures and facial expressions and see what they really look like. Which ones are not comfortable for you? Do you look the way you envisioned?

1. Arms crossed in front of chest while standing
2. Arms down by your sides
3. Hands in pockets
4. Hands on hips
5. Hands behind your back/rear pockets
6. Hands clasped in front of you
7. Hands outstretched/pleading
8. One leg staggered behind the other (having a rear leg with more weight than the front)
9. Disappointed face
10. Smiling face
11. Frustrated face
12. Confused face
13. Angry face
14. Scared face
15. Overwhelmed face

Hopefully this exercise helped to show you what you really look like to someone else. Think about what message you're sending when you show up to a de-escalation. Pay attention to not only what you bring into the unit (or onto the scene) with you, but also consider the message you're sending while you're listening to that person in crisis. There's more nonverbal information than you likely realize being put out there for all to see. The nonverbal signals are you sending may be telling the other person more about what's going on inside your mind than the actual words coming out of your mouth.

Ring Your Call Bell for Assistance

If you need help, how are you going to get it? If you need support from your coworkers, how are you going to get it? Do you carry a radio? That's great. However, those of us who have been in hands-on situations know that, most often, the first thing to fly off your belt in a real fight is your radio, the walkie-talkie. You can't get to it. You're struggling with the other person and help, which you desperately need, is just a phone call or a walkie-talkie push of the button away; but you can't get to it. So, how are you going to get that help?

Years ago, I was involved in an incident on a unit that had everything to do with communication difficulties. One evening I was assigned to an adolescent residential female unit. It was late, past lights out, so the patients were all in their rooms. I was sitting at a small desk in front of the nursing station, which was behind glass windows. The nursing staff in the station could see me, and they could see the entire unit through the windows, although we were not able to hear each other. There was a phone on the desk, however which I was supposed to use if necessary.

So, the nursing staff was inside this glass enclosed room doing all their paperwork and documentation for the shift. I was sitting out in front, in the unit, the evening shift was going on, and everything was calm. I remember thinking it was going to be a quiet night. All of a sudden I looked down the hallway and I saw two patients trying to cross the hall undetected. I watched as one girl ran across the hallway to the other girl, and I immediately heard an argument starting up.

Instinctively I jumped up and I started to head down the hall, when I quickly realized, "Oh, crap, I'm going to need help." I needed more than just the two nurses who were inside the station. I needed the crisis response team to come. I needed to get to the phone. I turned around, frantically waving my arms towards the nursing station windows, but none of the nurses in the station saw me. I got back to my desk and quickly grabbed the phone.

As I picked up the receiver it came right out of the phone. It had been completely disconnected and was not working. Later I found out that the night before, one of the kids had thrown that phone across the unit during a crisis. The staff, not really thinking about it, because that wasn't the most important thing they were dealing with at the time, set the phone back up on the desk. They didn't realize the receiver had actually been broken. Neither had I.

The point is, when you go to your unit, show up for duty, clock in, etc. wherever it is, be sure to check your walkie-talkies, your telephones, whatever communication system you have available. It's not enough to just say, "Oh, yeah, if I need help I'm going to get on my radio or my cell phone and call for help." No. Make sure you check it at the beginning of your shift, throughout the shift, and at the end of your shift, as well. Just check it. It's better to know ahead of time that you have a problem with communication rather than waiting until you have an issue. When you know, you can make alternate arrangements or get the problem fixed.

When you need help, they need to find you, they need to get to you, but first, they need to know you're in trouble. You can only let them know if you're able to communicate with them. Know how you will do so, prior to needing to do so.

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Work Smarter, Not Harder

I believe one of the “unofficial” slogans of the Marine Corps is “Work hard, Not Smart.” No offense to any other Devil Dogs out there, but you know it’s the truth. The reality is, when I was in the Corps, there were a lot of things we were told to do, (*especially during in the war in Iraq*), that didn’t seem to make sense. Filling sandbags was one of the things we had to do at one point. When we dared ask, “Hey, First Sergeant, why are we doing this?” The answer would inevitably be something like, “Shut up, Marine. Just do what you’re told.” “Sir yes, Sir!” We quickly began to fully detest this absurd concept of work hard, not smart.

I told myself that, as soon as I got out, I wanted to avoid that mentality in every part of my life. I wanted to think about how I was working. I wanted to be aware of whether I was working smart or whether I was simply working hard. I encourage you -- in your agency, in your facility, in whatever it is you’re doing, especially as it relates to crisis intervention – do your best to work smart.

Think about what you’re doing. Put time and energy into addressing issues within your organization that may be getting in the way of successful de-escalation. Maybe it’s a change in some small part of a work uniform that needs to be addressed. For instance, over the last few years a lot of places require employees to wear these lanyards around their necks. Is this a safety issue? They say, “Oh, no, it’s okay. It’s safe to wear because it’s breakaway.” Well, yeah, it’s breakaway *if* it’s grabbed on the other side of that breakaway so it will stretch out and snap off. If not . . . well . . . you don’t need a whole lot of rope to choke somebody. Don’t take my word for it, let somebody who understands this concept show you. All I know is that I wouldn’t want anything like that around my neck.

The reality is you find yourself in a workplace environment where you are working hard day in and day out, running up against the same problems, the same negative staff, or the same stale policies and procedures that have not caught up with the changing times. You are working hard, not smart.

I want you to take it upon yourself as a staff member who is invested in the future of your facility, or your organization, to just simply try to make your job easier. I want you to figure out how to work smarter, not harder.

Get a team together, come up with some ideas, brainstorm, and/or create a pros and cons list, all the while thinking about whether you’re in an environment where you’re just running your head up against a wall. If so, what can you do about it?

Instead of sitting back and becoming one of those people who say, “Well, this is just the way it is, because this is the way we’ve always done it,” take that step outside the box. Change things. Say, “You know what, I’m going to step outside the box. I’m going to be the person to present these ideas.” If you can’t do that, why go to work? Why go day after day, if you’re not going to be the person who is willing to try to make improvements in what’s happening, and how things are going.

It’s about finding that purpose driven life, right? It’s thinking about the impact you can have. How you might change your organization. I can tell you that, a little over ten years ago, I never imagined I’d be running a company that now operates in 27 states. I never imagined I’d be teaching in

schools, hospitals, police academies, fortune 500 companies, creating DVD's, and now a book! All in efforts to to try to help people survive during chaos. I never imagined it. I certainly never imagined it 20 years ago, or even earlier, when I started working in mental health at 19 years of age. I never imagined what would happen by stepping outside the box, and saying, "What we're doing is not effective, and there has to be a better way."

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Don't Text and Talk

We're all told, "Don't text and drive." That's good advice for a number of reasons. We know we shouldn't do it, but how many have? I thought so. I have too, and I shouldn't. Another concept we should all work on is, "Don't text and talk". We already talked about body language and how we need to be aware of the messages we're sending. In the same way, think about conversations you've had recently.

We are all used to having these gadgets around. The phone is in our hand and we're able to talk and text with family and friends at all times. So there you are, texting with someone, and somebody else is trying to talk to you. They want to tell you about their day; they want to talk to you about their problems or tell you about some crisis they're in.

"Okay, yup. No, I'm listening, I'm listening" . . . "Yeah, yeah, one second" . . . "Yup. Okay what? Okay. Just give me one minute . . . okay. Yeah. Yeah, go ahead."

What message does that send? If you guessed the message is that you're distracted, you're right. If you guessed the message is you care more about your texting than that person's feelings, you're right. If you think it is likely preventing effective communication, preventing building rapport and trust, you would be 3 for 3.

There was a social worker I used to work with at the psychiatric hospital (nearly 20 years ago now) who had this uncanny ability to make you feel like you were the only person on the planet. Her name was Melissa. She was amazing. Everyone who worked there knew that no matter the issue, whether they were struggling with something or just needed someone to talk to, they could go to her. The level of attention and focus she would give you was second to none. I've never met anyone like her. I don't know how much of the skill she was born with, and how much was acquired. It doesn't really matter. Somehow, she had learned how to tune out everything else and give the person with whom she was dealing her full, undivided attention. It encouraged conversation. It encouraged you to open up. She let you know that someone else was listening, and cared about every word you were saying.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Now, I'm sure you're thinking a lot of these tips are very simple and just plain common sense. For the most part, they are. Yet, most of us forget to do these simple things.

When you listen to somebody, specifically if they're at risk, remember that they're likely in some type of crisis. You must make them your total focus, and don't allow anything to distract you. Don't look off to the side. Don't look past them and at the rest of the unit. Don't worry about what other people are doing, or glance off. Don't look at other staff members to see what's going on. The person in front of you needs you. That person in crisis needs you to stay focused on what they're talking about, and their issue(s). Nothing else matters in that moment.

That said, you will use your peripheral vision to be aware of what's going on around you, and remain situationally aware. Try though to focus in on the person across from you, and listen. In short, don't text and talk.

Like A Rock

Your foundation is critical. It is very important that you be strong, steady, and solid, like a rock. At the same time, think about how imperative it is to focus on what's important. You need to stand your ground when it's time to stand your ground, but you need to know when it's time to stand down, and give up some ground. Lose the battle, win the war.

We may have covered this earlier, but I think it's an incredible statement, and it makes perfect sense. Sometimes you have to lose the battle, because you know that, later, you're going to win the war. I think about it as being firm. It's standing your ground, and knowing that, when it's time to stand firm, you stand firm. You don't back away. You don't back down. If it's a limit that needs enforcing for safety or security reasons, we don't back down. We don't allow our own physical safety to be compromised.

On the other hand, if it has to do with telling Johnny to go take a time-out, or come out from under the desk, or to stop throwing his belongings around his room, lower his voice, etc. you might want to back down a bit. You might want him to do what you're asking, but these things aren't necessarily a direct safety or security issue. Safety and security would be is punching, kicking, fighting, throwing things at you or someone else—those kinds of behaviors. That's where I'm going to stand my ground. I'm going to pick and choose my battles. This is stressed in our training, and it makes good sense.

Lose the battle, win the war. Remember this phrase. If an issue with an individual is based on safety or security, if it's an issue where the person is going to hurt themselves or someone else, then absolutely, we stand our ground. We set limits. If it's anything else, remain flexible. Do the best you can to find a work around, remain flexible, and try to identify when to let it go. There is nothing wrong with telling yourself, "I'm going to lose this situation. But it's okay. I'm going to let them have it, this time, because I know that, ultimately, I'm going to win the war."

Calm Every Storm – Preventing Aggressive Behavior With Your Words

Learn the Language

“*Whassss uuuuuuuuuuuup?*” (*best Budweiser frog impression*). Remember when that advertisement came out? What does that phrase mean? If you were to say, “*Whassss uuuuuuuuuuuup?*” to your grandparents, would they understand it? Would they *really* know and understand what it means?

Doesn't that one phrase stand for a multitude of emotions and different meanings? Sure it does. Nowadays, there are many similar “*languages*” used by adolescents, not just verbal even, now there are even text languages!. There are so many now, it is possible that you may not understand what someone is telling you when they are in crisis simply due to not knowing the language! There are words and phrases that you think mean one thing, but they literally mean something else entirely. You have to be really careful because, if you try to use them and you don't know what they mean, you could wind up in a lot of trouble. I encourage you to learn the language instead of just accepting that you don't understand, or worse, insisting they speak in a manner in which you understand in order to communicate. Don't get me wrong, there's a time and a place for using a universal language, and ensuring that an individual understands how to communicate with their audience. At job interviews, public speaking events, or in a professional setting for example. That's not where we are, though. We're in a situation where the person you're dealing with is in crisis. Is it truly going to be helpful to say, “Excuse me young man, I don't appreciate that type of language, and quite honestly, I don't understand what it is you're saying. You're going to need to speak to me like a human being, and as an adult, so I can understand this situation.”

What do you think that's going to do? Nothing. It's going to get you nowhere. This person is in crisis. You may not understand their way of speaking, but if that's the type of clientele with whom you're going to be working, you need to learn *their* language. You need to be able to shift, move, change, adapt. In that moment of crisis, I don't want you to get hurt, I don't want you to be attacked, and I don't want you to say the wrong thing. I do want you to be able to understand this individual no matter what “*language*” they may be speaking.

Don't Leave Home without it

“Don't leave home without it.”¹ We've all heard that before, haven't we? We know what it is. It's your American Express card, right? It used to be. Think again. From now on, you need to think of it as your enthusiasm. “Don't leave home without your *enthusiasm!*”

You need to be one hundred and ten percent every day, regardless of what you're working on. It doesn't matter if you're going to work in a substance abuse treatment center, going to work in a hospital, security, retail, sales, law enforcement, etc. Whatever it is, you need to give one hundred and ten percent. You may be saying, “Well, Brendan, how am I going to do that? How am I going to give one hundred and *ten* percent?” Let me tell you a quick story.

At the first locked residential facility I worked in I had this supervisor. His name was Stan. I'll never forget him. I was, maybe, 20 years old, working in this facility with adolescents. One of the first things he told me was, “Brendan, you can't afford to not be at a 110% every day when you come in here to work.” I thought he was setting the bar pretty high so I asked, “How am I going to be a 110%?” He told me, “Hopefully, yesterday, you did he best you could.” He paused. “Today, you need to do better than the best you did yesterday.”

Here it is, 20 years later and I haven't forgotten that lesson. I've got to do my best today, but I've got to go above and beyond what I did yesterday.

Think about the people with whom you are dealing and the environment in which they are living. They need your best and, in fact, they need better than what you did yesterday. The words you say to someone in crisis may be the only few words, or the few simple things you do, or the few minutes you ever give to them. For you, it's only a small thing. For them, it may be the difference between life and death.

That said, it could potentially be life or death for you, as well. Think about these active shooter situations that have happened, in recent years. Look at the terrible scenarios and incidents that occur in the world today. It's sad, isn't it? We all have these knee-jerk reactions, saying, “Oh, this is awful! We should do this! We should do that!” The reality is that, if we all did a better job of giving each other our best, we would have less overall violence to begin with. I'm not saying that you're going to stop every active shooter—not by any means—but I have to wonder if one or two of them could have been avoided, if there were someone in their life giving them their best. If someone enthusiastic tried to connect with them and built a rapport, would it have made a difference? I would bet on it.

When you show up to work, to your loved ones, to your routine day-to-day interactions, give it your best. There's no reason not to, and quite honestly, what's the point? If you're not going to try and give your best, then why bother giving anything at all.

Calm Every Storm – Preventing Aggressive Behavior With Your Words

Reach Out and Touch Someone ¹

I can already hear you saying, “Whoa, I work in a facility! Hold on! Wait a minute! We can’t touch anybody, it’s a hands-off facility.” I hear that and I understand. Bear with me.

Unfortunately, some people who wind up in treatment centers, or similar type crisis environments, have never had anyone provide appropriate physical contact with them. Years ago, I worked on the children’s unit in a locked psychiatric hospital. I actually worked on the adolescent sex offenders unit for about a year. These kids were charged offenders, but, as you can imagine, the way they got to the point where they became one, was awful. At some point in their early lives, they had done to them the things they later did to someone else. It was a difficult population to work with. But, the reality was that they--most of them, anyway--had never known what it was like to experience appropriate touch and positive physical connection.

By this I mean something as simple as placing a hand on someone’s shoulder, and telling them, “Hey, I understand. I understand you’re upset, how about we walk over here and try to talk this out.” Gentle, appropriate touch. Again, you have to figure out whether it falls within policies and procedures, and whether it’s appropriate for that situation. Obviously, you have to be very careful, because even a slight touch might be taken as an assault, or seen in the wrong way, thinking that it’s more than what is intended. Be professional, be respectful of boundaries, and use an appropriate gentle touch, kind escorting, if you will.

Sometimes just gently saying, “Okay. Alright, sir. I understand. Let’s step over here,” and putting out your hand to simulate what you want them to do. You don’t even have to place your hand on the person’s shoulder. Just put your hand out to tell them, *Hey, let’s go over here.*

For example, while working as a law enforcement officer, I was called to a car accident. There were people freaking out. There was a gal who had been in one vehicle involved who was hysterical, half screaming and half sobbing. Had I quietly tried saying, “Please Ma’am, step over here. Please step over here. Let’s get out of traffic.” Wouldn’t have worked. I had to be a bit more forceful in my tone, and body language saying; “Okay. Okay, I know. I know. Ma’am, let’s go over here; let’s step over here so we don’t get hit by any traffic.” I put my hand up in the air near her body to gently persuade her to step off to the side. That added physical gesture was appropriate for the situation considering the emotional overload going on. Always keep in mind that you have to do this very carefully. You have to be professional, tactful, and use appropriate touch. That positive contact, either feigned or actual, can make the difference for someone in crisis.

Calgon, Take Me Away ¹

I might be dating myself with that title, but for those of you who remember, Calgon® was a type of bath product. You dump it in the bathtub, and it's supposed to give you this great relaxing experience. In the television ad, there's a woman in a fluffy pink bathrobe. Her house is in chaos, one thing after another goes wrong. As things reach their boiling point, the woman remarks "Calgon®, take me away!" The next thing you see is the woman relaxing in a bath and all is calm and quiet. It was the perfect escape.

Who knows? That might have been how Calgon® worked, but when I consider that slogan, I wonder what is it you do that gives you that feeling of escape? What is it that you practice on a daily or weekly basis that's going to keep you sane? What do you do that's going to help you to decompress? What is it that will allow you to let go of the stresses from every crisis you were involved with over the work week? When I worked at the hospital, and especially when I became a supervisor, one of the most difficult things was keeping the positions in the facility filled. There was a high turnover rate of employees in the crisis prone environment. This was especially true in working with an at-risk population and it was difficult to fill positions.

Because the facility was in a state of constant crisis, I worried about the mental health and mental wellbeing of my co-workers. Not just the people who had been there a while, but the new people who came in, as well. With new hires, especially, I was concerned about making sure they had an appropriate process of debriefing, letting off steam, and letting go of stress. If they didn't, they wouldn't make it past the first few weeks after orientation.

So, I ask again, what do you do to escape? What do you do to get some distance from the crisis situation?

One of the things that comes with my experience and background in working in mental health and with people at risk, from being in Iraq and the war, and then working in law enforcement for a long period of time, I have, unfortunately, seen some difficult things. Things that most people never should, or will see. The reality is that, at one point, I had to take a serious look at what all that negativity was doing to me, and figure out how to get a break from all of it.

Many of us watch the news and we're bombarded with negativity over and over and over again. Believe me, I know. Watching the news is something I have to do to stay current in the industry. You don't realize the effect all that negativity is having on you. It changes your viewpoint of the world and the people out there. You become very isolated and suddenly realize you're judging everyone as if they are going to be the next mass murderer.

So, think about what you might do to escape. Hopefully it's professional and legal--that's important! Also, make sure you don't put it off for so long that the stress and crisis you've been facing on the job turns inward, and ends up leading you down a road where potential medical or psychological conditions develop. Don't internalize it. Plan to secure some time to be taken away from it all. If you have to use Calgon® and a tub full of bubbles, go for it.

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The Quicker Picker Upper ¹

Do you remember what “The quicker picker upper” is from? Sure, you do! Those paper towels, right? *Bounty*, I believe.

Let me ask you this. If you were to see that something happened, that something was wrong, maybe you witnessed something where somebody messed up, or maybe there’s a spill, there’s trash, or something out of the ordinary, what would you do? Would you just sit back and say, “It’s not my job. I don’t have to do that. It’s not part of my job description.” I can’t tell you how many times I heard that back when I was working in the hospital. Once I became a supervisor, I held people accountable. Just because it’s not your job or just because it’s not your crisis does not mean you aren’t going to help.

It’s a part of what we talked about earlier. It’s part of being at one hundred and ten percent. It’s part of being at your best. If you see something wrong, if you see somebody not picking up the slack, or not doing their part of the job, it doesn’t mean that I’m going to sit back and go, “Oh, well, they didn’t do it, so why should I?” No. Instead, I’m going to take the initiative. I’m going to complete that task. If it’s something of a negative nature, I can address it with the appropriate parties later, if necessary.

If you see a wrong or if you see something to be done that’s worth doing--something that someone needs to do, but no one is doing it--take the initiative and do it yourself. You’ll be glad you did. You never know how taking the initiative can be the act that prevents a crisis down the road.

You're in Good Hands ¹

“You're in good hands.” It sounds good when it comes from the gentleman announcing the Allstate® commercial, doesn't it? It sounds reassuring. Well, the beauty of that statement is that it *is* reassuring. It gives you the feeling that, “Hey, somebody's looking out for me.” In the case of the commercial, there's been a car accident and the pressure of taking care of the car after the accident is on somebody else's shoulders. You can relax. You can lower your anxiety. Someone else will take care of everything.

The same is true in crisis intervention. You're in good hands, even when you're dealing with somebody in crisis and they're upset. I remember that I am in good hands along with the knowledge that the outcome is assured. *What? The outcome is assured? How can you say that?* I hear you thinking. You're right, the crisis could go in a million different directions. Maybe somebody gets injured or somebody gets into a physical hands-on situation. Maybe it gets de-escalated. It's true that we have no guarantees. However, when I approach a situation I remember that I have effective training. I've trained to the best of my ability for this given situation. I rely on that training.

In addition, I have a group of co-workers with me who are going to be supportive. They are going to help me through this situation. Hopefully, I work for an organization that's also trying to help me to do a better job for those consumers with whom I'm working. So, if I put all those things together, I can walk into a situation and say, with confidence, “The outcome is assured.” In potentially any situation, I'm able to recognize that I may not know, exactly, how it's going to turn out, but I know I'm going to be okay. I've got a team with me and, together, we're going to deal with whatever happens. Whether it's a simple de-escalation, or something that may become physical, the team and I are going to deal with it.

The fact that I have confidence in my training, confidence in my team, and confidence in the organization for which I work, means I can go into the situation with much less anxiety, much less stress, much less worry, and the confidence that the outcome is assured. I'm in good hands, I've got a good team, and we're going to take care of this situation. Of course, everything I do to lessen my own anxiety will be communicated and visible to the person I'm trying to help.

In short, quality training, a quality team, and a quality organization equals effective de-escalation where the outcome may not be known immediately, but it can be assured.

Calm Every Storm – Preventing Aggressive Behavior With Your Words

Trust Your Instincts

You've heard before that you should trust your instincts. You've heard it from self-defense pioneers, you may have heard it from a guy by the name of Gavin de Becker, and you've even read his book, *The Gift of Fear*.

Trust your instincts. Your body has a built-in survival system. A gentleman, who I deeply respect and admire is Tony Blauer. He's the founder of *Blauer Tactical Systems Personal Defense Readiness Spear System*. Check him out on YouTube, it's fantastic stuff. He teaches a personal defense system that takes what your body wants to do naturally (in an ambush type situation) and converts that action into a combative application for self-defense. If you have any interest in that subject, please look him up. Also in his system, he talks about how your instincts and your body will let you know when something is off. When you walk into the unit of a facility or correctional institution and feel something isn't right. There's a tension in the air. You can feel it. You can almost taste it. Those of you with experience know what I'm talking about.

As you gain experience in the industry, you realize there are certain behaviors you pick up on. These may be things you see happening out on the unit or right in front of you, and you recognize that something's not right; something's off. The only thing I ask you to do in those cases, is to trust it. You can go through all kinds of training and other really cool stuff, you can read all kinds of great books, but the reality is that your body has a built-in survival system, and if something *feels* wrong, it probably *is* wrong.

Interestingly, women are usually better at this than men. As an example, you go out on a blind date. How quickly can you tell that the date should have never happened? The appetizers are not even out yet, and you're sure you're not going to make it to dinner. How long does it take? Most women will say, "About ten to fifteen seconds, maybe a minute or two at the most." They know almost immediately that something is wrong/off. Men are a bit more optimistic in those situations, and the conversation goes a bit more in-depth even if only internally. That hesitation can cost us our life in other scenarios.

I encourage you to use that same concept when you're dealing with someone in crisis. If you feel like you're too close, if it feels a little uncomfortable, if it feels like the position you're in is not safe for the situation, get out of there. Move. Get to a better spot. We like to say in the tactical world "*Get off the X!*" The "X" is where you are right at that moment, which is making you vulnerable or off-balance, or distracted due to that uneasy feeling. Move to a different place. Instead of staying put and not doing anything, use that feeling as your signal to move and change it up.

Honesty is Always the Best Policy

“Well, no officer. I don’t know why you stopped me.”

Really?

“How much have you had to drink tonight?”

“Two beers.”

Two beers. Oh really.

Actually, two beers is the most common answer. Have you ever said these things? I can tell you that I’ve heard it quite a few times. More times than I care to count. Is it always immediately clear that the individual is lying? Usually. Nine times out of ten they are.

I believe, for the most part, people are fairly intuitive. People who are in crisis are especially sensitive, and ready to pick up on anything. That includes any type of feedback you’re providing. If you are going to be dishonest when dealing with someone in crisis, (for instance, you tell them you’re going to do something when you know that you’re not) you need to realize that doing so, is something that can get you into trouble. Are you going to get caught in it? Most likely. Because they know you’re bluffing and you are under the microscope at that moment due to their heightened state.

Any body language, any message that you’re sending, they’re ready to jump on it. If they feel you’re not listening or you’re not being respectful, they’re going to jump on that negativity, and they’re likely to try to use it against you. So, in any instance where you’re getting ready to tell them something that’s not true, hold back. Stop. It’s better to tell them the truth, “You know what? I’m sorry, but I’m not going to be able to do that,” or “I’m sorry sir, I understand you’re upset, but I’m really not going to be able to do that,” or “There might be another option we can figure out, but I’m not going to be able to do that. I’m not going to let you drive home tonight, sir.” Any of those statements are honest. He’s not driving home. Period.

Compare those statements above to this one: “Well, let me run you through a couple of these tests. Let me see how you do and we’ll make a decision from there.” Sounds kind of wishy-washy, doesn’t it? Now, might that be a tool to use in the moment? Sure. The results of the field sobriety tests will determine whether or not you let them drive home. You may know he’s already past the limit, but by law, you have to run you through those tests. However, individuals in crisis are apt to recognize when you are saying something, or leading them down a road, that is, quite frankly B.S. Avoid that at all costs. Try your best to be honest and up front with them. Let them know: this is what I can do; this is what I can’t do; this is what I know, this is what I don’t know.

If you don’t know something, tell them, “I may have to ask somebody else to get you that answer, sir.” If you make a mistake, quickly admit it. Maybe you said something you shouldn’t have or promised something you couldn’t get to, whatever it is, be honest with them and admit it.

Calm Every Storm – Preventing Aggressive Behavior With Your Words

We have to give respect to get respect. So, when we make a mistake, we admit it. We don't lead people in crisis, down a road that's dishonest. They're going to know we're telling a lie, and when we're caught, we have a much lower chance of success in resolving that situation as now we are working from a position of distrust.

It has been said, "Trust makes conflict, a pursuit of truth." I agree wholeheartedly. With trust, you have the power to influence thought and behavior.

Keep Your Body Odor in Check

Have you ever gone to work only to realize you forgot your deodorant? I don't know about you, but it's happened to me. It's a terrible feeling. You know you forgot it. You can smell yourself, it's uncomfortable and, maybe, you're in a position where you can't do anything about it. Let me repeat, it's a terrible feeling.

I really hope your body odor isn't the thing causing a crisis situation. Don't be the coworker who is making everyone upset and uncomfortable because you lack good hygiene and you aren't taking care of yourself. Sounds silly, doesn't it? It sounds funny, but it's the truth and it's something to keep in mind. Also, it might be a good idea to keep those little travel bottles of scope with you. After lunch, when you go to deal with somebody in a crisis, there's nothing worse than trying to de-escalate little Johnny only to have him say, "Get out my face man, your breath stinks!"

How embarrassing is that? I have to tell you, it's happened to the best of us. Be cognizant of it. Be conscious of it. Do the best you can to keep your body odor in check. Don't let it speak for you. Remember, "Have a heart, brush your teeth."

Calm Every Storm – Preventing Aggressive Behavior With Your Words

It's Time to Make the Doughnuts

Wouldn't it be nice to work at a Krispy Kreme doughnut shop? Oh man, that would be good! I love those doughnuts, and every now and then I just have to slip one of those in.

A lot of us have these ideas of what it would be like to have a different job, live in a different place, and do something different for a living. Quite honestly, in every job we think is easy, hard work is required. Over the years, people have said to me, "Brendan, it must be great to travel, to teach, to meet all these people, and do this fun stuff." Sure, there are some positives to it, but I can tell you that, in the 28 states (as of this writing) where CCG has been utilized, I know almost nothing about those states. I can tell you what every hotel near the local regional airport is like, and I can tell you whether or not they offer a continental breakfast. I could probably even go down the list and tell you exactly what that breakfast consists of in every Hampton Inn or Holiday Inn across the country.

"Ah, well that's still fun," you say? Yeah, it is fun when you go away on vacation and you get a free breakfast, but when you travel a lot, and you're sitting in the airport dealing with flight delays and everything that goes with it, it's not as much fun. There are always hard parts to it. Don't get me wrong, there are benefits, but the reality is that the grass isn't always greener on the other side. Everything takes work.

There may be things in your life that are worth changing simply because you want them to be better. Don't mistake that with thinking that somebody has an easy job, or they've got it a little better than you. Just because all you see them do is go to work and type paperwork every day doesn't mean that's all they do. There is, most likely, a lot more going on behind the scenes that you don't see.

What if you know exactly what their job is, and you say to me, "No Brendan, their job is super easy. They actually come into work and they push a button. That's all they do all day long. Oh, and they watch a computer screen. That's it." Okay, that's probably not very difficult, but what about the other 18 hours of their day, or whatever time they spend not at work? I wonder what's going on in their life that is probably more difficult than yours. Remember, there is hard work in every easy job. Be cautious that you don't judge a crisis or person by their cover.

Fair and Balanced

How many times after hearing the phrase, “fair and balanced,” do you find yourself wondering, “Really? Is it fair? Is it balanced?” I don’t know -- that’s up to you to decide for yourself.

However, I offer this question to you. Are you fair? Are you balanced? When you’re listening to someone, or when you’re dealing with people around you, are you being judgmental? Are you taking the situation and applying your own personality, your own problems, past issues, and judgments and placing them on the person with whom you are dealing? Or are you able to be unbiased and open to the individual and to what it is they are trying to share with you.

When I was working with troubled kids, I quickly learned not to set my expectations of appropriate behavior too high. Sometimes our expectations of behavior, and what it is we want from an individual, particularly while they’re in crisis, is so high were we to place those same expectations on ourselves, we wouldn’t be able to reach them.

Keep in mind, when you’re dealing with somebody in crisis and they’re going through a struggle, they are not functioning at full capacity. They are likely not at their best. They’re struggling in certain areas. They have different issues with which they need help and, as a result, what they’re doing at that moment may be the best they can do. I’m always going to encourage somebody to try harder. I’m going to encourage them to try to control their behavior, and not let it get out of control. At the same time, I’m not going to set the bar so high that there’s no way that they can ever reach it. I mean, they’re in crisis, and I’m expecting perfection? I wouldn’t expect perfection even when they were functioning at their full, potential; when they’re at their strength. No one is perfect. We may strive, but we all fall short. Try to keep things fair and balanced.

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It Keeps Going . . . And Going . . . And Going . . . And Going

What is it that keeps going—seemingly forever? That’s right--the Energizer® Bunny! Most of us know this great little commercial, and most of us probably buy Energizer batteries because of it. It’s an effective ad, because it gets the message across that the batteries last a long time. *That’s great*, I hear you thinking, *but how does that apply to crisis de-escalation?* I believe it applies in two distinct ways—listening and speaking.

We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. What might that reason be? The best answer I’ve ever heard is that it’s because we’re supposed to listen twice as much as we talk. Keep that in mind when you’re dealing with somebody in crisis. Try to listen more. Listen for what’s really being said and listen for what’s not being said. Pay attention to the nonverbal cues, as well. Watch their body language, looking for things they may not be directly saying. Put that whole package together--their facial affect, their body language, as well as the words they are speaking and you will get the “message”.

Try to identify what’s really going on the situation, underneath what they may be saying. It’s commonly known that when people are in crisis they don’t always tell you exactly what’s going on. They don’t always tell you exactly what problems they’re experiencing. So, you have to try to figure it out through your questioning techniques. You may have to dig a little bit, asking open-ended questions and listening intently for the response. You’re trying to discover what is really going on with the person, and you’re trying to help. Don’t just question for the sake of questioning, though. Make sure to listen to their response. If you’re so consumed with thinking about what you’re going to say before they even finish their thought, are you really listening? I’d say not.

Secondly, avoid talking the individual to death. I’ll admit it, I have a problem with that. I like to talk. I like to communicate. Some people have told me, “Brendan, you just, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. You just keep going and going and . . .” Well, you get the idea. My defense is that I have to talk for living. I earn a living through talking, teaching, etc. It is hard to separate that part of who I am from my day-to-day interactions. But the reality is that, in a crisis, I need to close my mouth and listen. As thoughts of speaking up and responding enter my head, I deliberately take a deep breath while I’m listening to and/or watching how the other person expresses themselves.

So, I’m watching. I’m listening. I breathe in deeply through my nose, and let it out through my mouth very slightly, (so it’s not taken out of context by the person in crisis). Doing this helps to keep me calm myself down and slow my thought process so I can remember, “Don’t speak yet. Take a moment, evaluate, and then respond.” It often helps me keep that balance so I’m listening more and talking less.

In short, it keeps me from going, and going, and going . . .

Imagination at Work

I believe that one of the most important pieces to crisis intervention is being a good salesperson. Why you ask? Well, we have to be salespeople during an intervention because we're trying to convince another person to see things the way we do. To believe that the situation is as we see it. We want them to "buy in" to our ideas of de-escalation, etc. The person in crisis is likely saying something like, "Look Brendan, I'm upset! I'm pissed off! I want to punch somebody! I am going to go off!" It's our job to convince them that what they want to do is not a good idea. It's not likely the best solution for the situation. We have to convince them that their way of handling the situation will most likely result in creating more problems. At this point we have to *sell* them on these points.

So, how do we actually convince somebody to see things in a different way? How do we do it, especially when they are likely entrenched in the way they are currently seeing it?

First, as in all manner of sales, you must believe in the product and you have to believe it's worth selling. Next, you have to convey that message in a way that makes sense and *is* believable. It has to be conveyed so that the other person can feel that you want them to change their behavior or follow directions, and that feeling is coming from a positive place. The way this feeling is communicated is crucial. If you can't make it believable, then you aren't going to sell the concept. For example, saying something like, "*Hey John, I know you're upset. I am hearing you right now, and I completely understand how you are feeling. I want to help you, I really want to help. Can you just take one deep breath? That's all I'm asking you to do. Breathe in. Two seconds in—and now breathe out. Nice and slow. Breathe in, and out. Just once. Go ahead, just try. I have done this myself many times when I have been pissed off, and it really can work*" If you say this with true sincerity in your voice, and you are believable, you will likely sell them on your request. You have personalized the experience, and let them know that you also have been in their position as well. You are in effect "begging" them to trust you, and just try. When you come from that position, and they can hear the empathy in your voice, you are very likely to win their cooperation.

The next time you find yourself managing a crisis, think of your current position, consider the situation, and think of it in terms of *selling* the person on your "product" of de-escalation. Use your imagination. Convince them why doing what you're asking them to do is the right thing for everyone, and most importantly, themselves.

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The Louder They Get, the Quieter You Get

If you want to capture somebody's attention, whisper. I work with another trainer, Matt Thompson, who does this quite well. When people are upset, and becoming more escalated, he lowers his voice. He gets quiet. He teaches this in his training sessions and he reports that it's been very effective during crisis. When people are yelling and out of control all he does is lower his voice and the other person, almost immediately, starts to calm down. Depending on the situation, you may feel that you want to yell back at them, to express your side of it, to enforce some limit, or set a limit. It's normal to want to do that. The problem is, trying to enforce a limit on someone already fully engaged in crisis is poor timing. Teaching limits and boundaries should happen when someone is at their Baseline, not once they are in the middle of a crisis.

Yelling back at someone in crisis has real consequences aside from just escalating the situation. Imagine you are in a crisis situation where the person is yelling and screaming at you. You then respond in kind, trying to "overpower" them with your words and volume. Now imagine there is a video camera inside of the room recording the action. The video playback though is broken, and it only records audio. Now imagine there is a trial, and the jury only has this audio recording by which they will determine whether you were in the right or whether you were in the wrong. The last thing you want is that jury wondering which person posed the greater threat. They were unable to determine which voice was the individual or the responder as they were both at a "10". Which person was more out of control? Was it the person in crisis? Or you?

We all know we could find ourselves in exactly that type of situation. You don't want someone to walk in, or anyone to hear that audio, and not immediately know who the greater aggressor was, or immediately know which person was more out of control.

I'm sure you've seen this before. You hear this type of power struggle or back-and-forth between officers, patients, staff, co-workers, etc. Maybe the patient and the staff are both yelling back and forth "*You need to calm down! You need to go sit down! You're going to lose your points! You're going to go back on gym restriction!*" Whatever it may be. It's so loud that somebody walking up wouldn't know which person poses the greater threat. You cannot gain ground in a screaming match.

So, to calmly diffuse a situation and protect yourself from costly liability and potential violence, remember: the louder they get, the quieter you should get.

Failure is Success if We Learn From it

We've heard many statements regarding failure. We've been told things like, "without failure, there is no success," or "there can be no success without failure." I read recently that Malcolm Forbes said, "Failure is success if we learn from it." How true.

How many times have I been in a crisis situation and failed? How many times, during, or even after, a crisis situation, have I realized that what I'm doing is not working? We've all been there. You're in the middle of a situation, and you realize you're not behaving appropriately, or saying things that you know you shouldn't be saying, or you know you're just not at your best, and it's creating a bigger problem. I think one of the most difficult things to do is to have the self-awareness to stop, close your mouth, step back, and try to start over. Doing that may entail, literally, stopping and saying, "Time out."

Take a deep breath and start again. *"I apologize, Mrs. Smith. I really apologize. I'm getting this wrong; let me try again to understand what it is you need."* Using words to that effect will convey to the other person, *"It's on me. I'm not doing a good job here. I'm not getting this right; let me try this again."* I think more often than not, people get caught up in power and control, believing they always have to be right. They think you can't show they have made a mistake, or that they are wrong. It's truly beautiful when you take an opportunity in the middle of committing a blunder, or doing something wrong, to catch it and try to reset things.

To be able to say, after the fact, *"Wow, I wish I hadn't done that; it really didn't work,"* means it's been a great learning experience. Yet that is only if you have a level of self-awareness that allows you to recognize that something went wrong. What I'm striving for, even in my personal life, is to get to a point where I recognize what I'm doing the moment it happens. Being fully present, no matter the situation. I want to catch it, realize what I'm saying and doing right then is not beneficial to this crisis, and then just close my mouth. I can then get back in control and start over. Success from failure--what a concept.

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Remember the Positives

In the last section, I was talking about making success out of failure. In this section, I want to talk about strengths. How significant is it that we associate the word “strength” with positives? Usually, when we think of our strengths, we think of times in our lives where we’ve been successful at something.

When you’re dealing with someone in crisis, it’s imperative to focus on the small positives. Find something the person might bring to the situation that may have helped them in the past. Look for and remind them of those things that have been positive. *“Look, Johnny, I know you’re upset. Do you remember last week when you were getting ready to punch little Sally? Remember, you went into your room, you counted to ten, then you came back out and talked to me? Do you remember that? I know you’re upset, man. I know. Do you remember when you did that? It worked, didn’t it? It worked. Try it, again. It might work for you, now.”* Using a strength based approach is huge. In a crisis, what are some strengths you might play upon that are going to help resolve the situation? Identifying some strengths prior to a crisis occurring with that individual can be highly beneficial. Have a plan.

I will have to truly “sell” that strength to the individual, as was discussed earlier. I’m trying to remind the individual of a time and a skill that the individual has already proven is a strength. I’m going to try to get them to remember. I want to try to bring them back to that positive moment, bring them back to that time when they did complete this task. I want them to remember a time when they were able to de-escalate successfully, so they can be reminded of their strength. Very often, people in crisis don’t remember their strengths. For most of us, when we’re struggling with something, we don’t usually think to ourselves of our successes, we don’t think, *“Oh, I feel so great about all the accomplishments in my life right now, so good in fact that I won’t struggle with this now.”*

No. Crisis situations usually occur when a person is feeling out of whack, when they’re entering a place of uncertainty, sadness, fear, etc. or when they’re trying to work through something difficult. In those circumstances, people are not thinking about their past successes. Think about how you might remind that individual of the positives in their life. Have you worked with them recently and witnessed them doing something that was successful? If you have, bring it up to them. Remind them of it. Use the strength-based approach and help them to remember the positives.

I've Fallen and I Can't Get Up ¹

I hate to say that commercial was funny because it depicted a serious situation—an elderly woman falling and hurting herself is not funny. But, the line, *“Help! I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!”* was hysterical. Probably because of the way it was delivered more than anything. They didn’t spend a lot of money on the commercial, that’s for sure.

When you’re dealing with somebody in crisis, it can often be to your advantage to think back to when you were in a situation that might have been similar to theirs. Think about how you got through it, and go back to that time, emotionally. Doing that will help you to empathize with the individual and understand where they’re coming from.

Let me share with you a story. In 2002, I was involved in a motor vehicle accident. It was late at night, and suddenly an individual came darting across the highway in front of me. He was not in a crosswalk and was intoxicated. I slammed on my brakes, but ended up hitting him with my vehicle. He came up and over the front of the car and through my windshield. I jumped out, performed CPR on him as best I could. Unfortunately, he didn’t make it.

Years later, while working patrol in law enforcement, I received an emergency call that no officer wants to get. It turns out an elderly couple was driving to visit family. On the way to their house, in a small neighborhood, some teenagers were walking down the street. For some reason one of the teens thought, *“Oh, it’ll be really funny to jump out in front of this car and scare them when they get close. It will freak them out!”* Well, the kid didn’t consider the driver possibly not seeing him so easily, or reacting quickly enough. As a result, he was hit, and suffered a severe skull injury.

So, I arrived on the scene, and found this elderly couple standing there. They were absolutely beside themselves. As you can imagine, they were very, very upset. There we were, trying to get information and figure out what happened. The helicopter arrived and medevac’d the teenager to the hospital. I was trying to take down information and begin the accident report when it occurred to me that my past experience in a similar situation might be helpful. So, while they were upset and struggling to come to terms with what had just happened, I shared with them my experience. I just told them, *“I understand how you feel. I understand this is a terrible situation, and it just so happens, I was in a very similar situation.”* I then went on to tell them the fear and uncertainty that I had felt at the time, and it was the same as they were now feeling. The circumstances were a little bit different, but the reality was that I knew what it was like for them. I can tell you that while the scenarios and outcomes were different, I know it was helpful and comforting for them at that time. In that moment, I was able to bond with them. About six months later, I received a card from them thanking me for sharing my story, and expressing how much it had helped them in that moment.

Fortunately, the kid they hit lived and recovered fully. When you’re dealing with someone in crisis and they’re going through something difficult, try to think back and see if you can pull out a story or information to share that might help bridge that gap. I encourage you to try, on some level, to relate to them to help get them through the crisis situation.

The Five Steps of De-Escalation:

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Step 1. What's In It For Me?

I believe, the very first step in managing a de-escalation situation has nothing to do with the other person, and everything to do with you. It may sound odd, but in order to successfully de-escalate somebody in crisis, you first have to identify what's in it for you. What do you stand to gain from de-escalating this person? You've got to identify for yourself, what you are going to get out of this through trying to calm or resolve the situation. Think about both the best case and worst-case scenarios. In some situations, the worst case scenario would not only be that you don't do a good job of de-escalation, but that the situation escalates and it leads to a physical altercation, which might cause you, a co-worker, or someone else, great harm or even death.

So, it's important to establish—even before showing up, or as the situation is brewing--*What's In It for Me (WIIFM)?* If you can't figure out what you have to gain from the situation, you're not going to have much success at de-escalating it. If you don't care about it, you could just say, *"Well, there's no reason why I should get involved. There's nothing in this for me."* Quite honestly, that will be very transparent to the individual with whom you're working. So, I want you to ask a couple questions. First, you have to determine, what's in it for you? Secondly, determine why should you try to de-escalate the situation? Thirdly, what do you have to gain by not ignoring it? If you're able to keep from turning it inward, and are able to resist taking it personally, what is it you have to gain?

When I was working in law enforcement, one of the biggest things I had to do was paperwork. Right off the bat I knew that, if I could show up to a situation and do a good job of de-escalation, it would be one less report I'd have to write. The circumstance was what it was, but the reality is most of us don't want to do extra paperwork. So, when you show up to a crisis, if you haven't already done so on the way there, immediately think, *"what do I have to gain from resolving this successfully?"* Then, try very hard, using every bit of skill and ability to successfully de-escalate that crisis situation. This is Step 1.

Step 2. Demonstrate you're Not a Threat

Step 2 is to demonstrate that you are not a threat. I travel around the country teaching, primarily, law enforcement officers. When I get to this part and tell them, *"I want you to demonstrate to the person in crisis that you aren't a threat"* their response is interesting, as you can imagine. Usually, they say something like, *"Whoa! Whoa. Wait a minute, Brendan. Time out. They teach us at the academy that you have to go in, take control and establish your dominance over everyone and everything there."* *"Are you saying to forget all that?"* They give me this whole big argument and try to say how that concept won't work for them, etc. I'm going to save you the argument for another day, because the reality is, by demonstrating to someone that you're not a threat, you lessen their anxiety and therefore are far more likely to gain compliance and cooperation and avoid confrontation. That is a fact.

What I do tell them is; It's true. You do have a job to do there, and it does often require using the "power of the badge" I tell them they have all the tools at your disposal on your belt --hand cuffs, pepper spray, Taser, baton--everything you might need should you absolutely need to go there. I want them to keep in mind, though that seeing all of that gear not even being put to use yet, can be scary to someone else, and they may immediately feel threatened, just by the visual picture they are seeing. If the other person perceives you as a threat, be it verbal, psychological, or physical, the reality is their anxiety is going to increase. They're already

in crisis, and you don't want to make it worse by demonstrating a threat before it's required. Too often that power and threatening body language, tone, approach, etc. is used as the first approach.

You don't have to come off as Mr. Tough Guy with the mentality that people had better do what I say, or else. If you're confident in your abilities, and your skills, you know you have the ability to go hands-on if you have to. Using the loud authoritarian approach isn't always necessary. Saying things like, *"I'm not going to ask you again,"* or, *"Hey, you better step back and calm down, or else!"* *"You can do this one of two ways, the easy way, or the hard way!"* often only results in the *"or else"*.

I remember one time in particular, I was working Patrol and responded to an automobile accident. To make a long story short, the person involved in the accident was drunk. He had just wrecked his car. He took one look at me, and the very first words he uttered were, *"Fuck you, pig!"* That was how the conversation started. It could have easily gone downhill from there. Instead I put my hand over my badge, basically covering it up, and said, *"Wait a minute, hold on a second. Pretend I'm not a cop for one second. Is that your car down there in a ditch? Let's get you a tow truck and get it up out of that ditch. Can we do that first?"*

When I put my hand over the badge I was, basically, demonstrating that I wasn't a threat. I was trying to help him in that moment, and was trying to make a connection with him. Yes, I was still a cop. I was still in uniform with my badge and the whole bit, and yes, I still had to take him to jail. But for that moment, I was trying to let him know, *"Hey, we're on the same team. I'm not a threat."* Honestly, though, it wasn't about me actually *being* a threat, it was his *perception* of me as a threat. For me, it was about, *"Hey, you shouldn't be driving. You're drunk. You wrecked your car. Let's get that fixed."* I was able to show him that I was there to help with the situation, to make it a safer scenario, and that I was not a threat to him as he first believed. So, Step 2. In the process is to *Demonstrate You Are Not A Threat*.

Step 3. Find an "In"

So far, we discussed step one, which is to figure out what's in it for you and step 2 where you demonstrate you're not a threat. This is step 3, "Find An In." In discussing step two I mentioned an individual whose vehicle had gone over the ditch. I tried to demonstrate to him that I wasn't a threat by covering up my badge and helping him to see me as just another person, and not a police officer. When I had his attention, I was able to take it to the next step.

Seeing his vehicle down in the ditch, I said, *"Hey, wait a minute, man. Isn't that the new Camaro? Man, that car looks like it should be one of those Transformers things! Man, that's beautiful! What happened? Tore that thing up, huh?"* In that moment he completely forgot I was Law Enforcement. He was no longer thinking of me as a cop. I knew I had developed a little bit of an "in" with him when he went, *"Yeab man...It is a beast of a ride."* I know he was thinking *"This man appreciates that car, and how cool it is"* Maybe, in his mind he's thinking, *"This is one of those cool cops, he's going to let me go, I bet!"* -- (Not exactly what happened, but...)

Find an in. You're dealing with somebody in crisis and you've already demonstrated to them, *"Hey, I'm just here to help you. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm not here to make this situation more difficult for you. I'm here to help. Talk to me, tell me what's going on."* The words you use aren't that important, just use them to find an in. Maybe it's an article of clothing the other person is wearing or maybe it's their hair style, it could be anything. For instance, if I'm talking to somebody who's angry and I see he's got a shaved head, I might use that to my

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advantage. *“Hey man, I know you’re really upset, but I got to tell you, I like the cut. I really like the cut.”* Depending on the scenario, I’m going to look for an in. I’m going to try to redirect them away from how angry they are at whatever the situation is you’re dealing with, identify something where that person and I can relate, and build a small bit of rapport in those few seconds. Sometimes all it takes is the tiniest bit of rapport building, and you can get them over to your side.

Step 4. Meet a Need

Step 4 in the five steps of de-escalation, is to “Meet A Need” of an individual in crisis. The trick is in trying to identify that need. You’ve already found an “in,” and have bridged a little bit of a gap. Now you’re trying to identify a need we can meet. To do this we refer to *Maslow’s Hierarchy**. Whether or not you’ve heard of Maslow’s Hierarchy before, you may want to take a look at it. Maslow believed there are different levels of human needs, at the base are the physiological needs—food, water, air, shelter, clothing, etc. Next is safety and security, followed by love and belonging. Self-esteem and self-actualization are the next two levels. The needs at each level correspond to the needs in the prior stage. If the needs at each level have been met, you’re not going to be able to progress up through that pyramid, to self-actualization. In a nutshell, Maslow’s hierarchy is a common theory of human motivation.

So, understanding that Maslow’s Hierarchy has to do with people and their basic needs in order to survive, someone who is in crisis, is usually in that position, because one of their basic physiological or psychological needs is not being satisfied. Their needs are not being met, and as a result they are led to acting out in crisis behavior.

Maybe, they didn’t get enough sleep, didn’t have enough food, they don’t have adequate shelter, or they’re in a position where they feel physically unsafe. Those are situations where I try to identify that need they feel is not being met, and if I can, I then try to do something to help alleviate that feeling.

For example, I can see if the other person is overheated. We’re outside and it’s a hot day. They’re stressed out and they’re angry. I might say, *“Sir, I want to hear you. I want to understand what’s going on, but first, can I get you a bottled water? It’s really hot out here, and we could both benefit from some cold water”*. Sure, that person might look at me and say, *“Man, I don’t want any water, get out my face.”* Even if they do react negatively, at least I’ve offered and have addressed one of their basic needs. No matter whether they accept or not, the information you receive can help start to build that foundation in Maslow’s Hierarchy. It will help tell you where they are in the hierarchy.

Let’s look at the scenario from the previous step. There’s a car in a ditch, and a very unhappy owner. The last thing he wants to see is law enforcement and he made his feelings known. I looked for that “in,” the rapport building that lets him know I understand what he must be feeling. In this case, my “in” was his car.

The next step, is to figure out what he needs. He’s worried about his car and he needs it out of the ditch. So, I approach him with something like, *“Hey, I know you’re worried about going to jail and all that, but let’s not think about that right now. Don’t worry about the sobriety tests. For right now, let’s get a tow truck. How about that? Let’s get somebody out here to get that vehicle out of the ditch.”* In his mind, he’s thinking, *“Wow, this is a nice cop. I may not be going to jail and he cares about my car.”* I am meeting a need he has, possibly on the safety/security level and/or esteem needs level, which will help lead him to a better more cooperative place.

Why plant these seeds? It’s simple. Later, I’m going to start to ask him questions. I’m going to run through

sobriety tests, or whatever it is I have to do to get my evidence for the drunk driving case. For now, though, I'm trying to build a rapport with him, because if I gain a little traction here, it's going to be a lot easier to get what I need later.

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Step 5. Provide Options

In Step 1 of the five steps of de-escalation, we learned to identify what's in it for you. Step 2 is to demonstrate you're not a threat, followed by step 3, where you find an "in," and in step 4 we learned to meet a need.

That brings us to step 5, where you identify an area where you can find a compromise. Somewhere or something the two of you can work out together to come up with a successful resolution. Of utmost importance is providing that individual with options that work for them but that also works for you. I like to say, "Give to get."

I'm going to give somebody something if they're asking me for it, because they're in crisis, and they're yelling at me to "Get out my face," or "You need to leave me alone," or whatever they think they want in the heat of the moment. I might give them one of those things they think they want, but I'm not going to give it to them without getting something that I need in return. As I like to say, "Give to get." As an example, "Okay, sir, I understand you're upset, I'm going to back up and get out of your face, but you're going to promise me that you're also going to lower your voice, and you're going to take a few deep breaths. Can we agree to that at least?"

Basically, I tell them what I am willing to do for them, and I explain what I expect from them in return. It's really all about compromise. Both sides are encouraged to come up with a solution. In the given scenario of the drunk driver, you might say, "I understand you're upset. I know you don't want to run through these tests, but how else do you think we can resolve this? How can I get the information I need to let you be on your way?"

They may say back, "I don't know. I know I don't want to take your breath test. You just need to let me go; just let me walk, man. We got my car up out of the ditch; just let me drive it home."

In this situation, we know that I can't just let this guy go, so I'm going to figure out some sort of compromise and say something like, "Well, how about this? I appreciate where you're coming from. I hear you. You just want to be on your way. Here's the thing, my boss is going to be real mad, and they're not going to want to pay this tow bill. Now, I have to check to be sure that this accident was not your fault before I let you go. But if I don't do the tests, how will I know? Somebody's going to try to make me pay the tow bill. So, here's the thing. I don't want to hold you up any longer, and you don't want to be stuck here with no car. Let's make sure you're good to drive. You run through these tests for me, show me you're good to go, and you'll be on your way. Just give me a few minutes, let's see how you do. What do you think?"

In the end, will it work? Maybe. Maybe not. But I'm still going to try, I'm going try to provide options. So, the five steps boil down to: What's in it for me, demonstrate I'm not a threat, find an "in," meet a need, and provide options.

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Brendan King