

# Integrating de-escalation techniques into policing

**Officers should consider the many benefits and uses for de-escalation techniques**

Oct 17, 2017

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When many police officers hear the term “de-escalation techniques” they often initially react with skepticism or even aversion. In recent years, policing has been inundated with public criticism, political posturing, and “expert” dissection of police tactics. While some of the commentary has been less than useful, there have been certain aspects of the systemic critiquing that has positively benefited policing. De-escalation is one such area.

[In an article I wrote on body-worn cameras \(BWCs\)](#), I emphasized the positive points about BWCs and the many benefits they provide. De-escalation should be looked at much the same way. Officers should consider the many benefits and uses for de-escalation techniques.



While de-escalation may seem like a buzzword or another temporary fad, it's not. (Photo/AMU)

## WHAT IS DE-ESCALATION?

De-escalation is defined as a “reduction of the level or intensity.” During every single citizen encounter, officers are working to de-escalate adverse or demanding circumstances. Whether they are issuing a traffic citation or calming down a frantic parent who has lost their child, officers are constantly engaging in de-escalation.

Some examples of de-escalation techniques include:

- **Slowing down** an encounter by “backing off” from immediate intervention or action. Not every situation requires immediate action. This has historically been a significant lesson in the field training of new officers.
- **Be compassionate** but firm, in communicating and “defusing” a tense situation before escalation by either an officer or citizen occurs.
- **Use discretion** to the officer's advantage. Believe it or not, there is no shame in coming back later or decreasing the enforcement action taken to enforce the law.

While de-escalation techniques are often effective, just like all tools at an officer's disposal, de-escalation techniques are not always applicable. [Active shooter training](#), for example, teaches law enforcement to actively seek and neutralize the threat. Should an officer encounter a suspect shooting individuals, the officer is required and expected to immediately eliminate the threat. The bottom line is that it is generally preferential for officers to attempt to de-escalate most situations when and where warranted, but sometimes a suspect's actions do not allow for the deployment of such tactics.

## HOW DE-ESCALATION REDUCES STRESS

De-escalation techniques can not only help diffuse an encounter, they can also help an officer reduce his or her stress level.

The one thing that all citizen encounters involve is some type of discourse. The [Police Executive Research Forum's recommendations for officers on de-escalation](#) recommends many tactics, but all of them have one thing in common: They all involve discourse and communication. Whether it be spoken, unspoken, or through body language, communication is central to the policing function. Discourse is the mechanism through which de-escalation is ultimately achieved.

Engaging in effective discourse naturally de-escalates a situation, which reduces the level or intensity of the encounter. This is beneficial for both the citizen and the officer because it results in the natural physiological reduction of stress.

## DE-ESCALATION IMPROVES COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS, JOB PERFORMANCE

Studies have shown that citizens base their perceptions of police officers off their last encounter with an officer. Communication is at the heart of all positive and negative encounters. Police officers who develop proper de-escalation techniques, use them when appropriate, and mitigate the need for force will see improved job performance. Supervisors will likely see their officers face a decrease in complaints, engage in more professional relationships, and execute higher quality investigations.

Most importantly, individual officers will reduce their chances of being assaulted, mitigate their risk of being sued, and become more effective at their job. By embracing de-escalation techniques, over time, officers are likely to see a huge return on investment in the form of increased health, life longevity, and maybe even a promotion!

## PROMOTING DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES

Fortunately, more agencies are formally including de-escalation techniques in their policies. This encourages officers to use de-escalation techniques because it keeps them policy-compliant, while also helping them to mitigate stressful situations and maintain a high level of job performance.

As a trainer and educator of police officers, my daily goal is to improve the profession by improving the officers. We must first remember something we all learned when first coming onto the job: If we don't take care of ourselves and get there safely, we can't help someone else in need.


While de-escalation may seem like a buzzword or another temporary fad, it's not. Officers should realize that these techniques are now a permanent part of policing. Rather than focusing on the mandatory aspects of de-escalation, officers should instead embrace the positive effects on their health and career that come from using de-escalation techniques.

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