

# How to Manage and Avoid In-Session Violence and Threats

It is an invaluable reminder that we are working with individuals who are mentally ill and that this can pose serious risks. Working with individuals along the antisocial spectrum increases the risk of being the target of several types of crime, including stalking and assault. This exercise is designed to assist you, the clinician, in maintaining control of the session and to help you be ever vigilant about how your client is responding internally and externally.

The following is a list of indicators that your client may be having difficulty with session content.

| Client Indicators  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Client has an increase in respiration and sweating</li><li>• Client begins to fidget (when this is not usual)</li><li>• Speech tone may deepen or rise</li><li>• Speech rate may increase</li><li>• Increase in motor movement (e.g., hands shake or legs bounce)</li><li>• Client moves closer to the edge of his or her seat</li><li>• Client sits forward</li><li>• Client's eye contact drastically changes between fixation or avoidance</li><li>• Client attempts to avoid certain topics (that he or she is not prepared to address)</li><li>• Client displays loss of future orientation</li><li>• Client displays decompensating mental status</li><li>• Client displays deterioration of insight and judgment</li><li>• Client displays sexual fixation on you (the therapist)</li><li>• Client begins to discuss acts of violence in vague terms, but it appears relevant to you</li><li>• History of violent acts or intimidation toward perceived authority figures</li><li>• History of questionable medication compliance</li></ul> |

This list is not all-inclusive. You know your client best, but it is critical to be aware of these issues and keep yourself safe. Managing in-session violence includes more than just monitoring your client's mental and physical state; it also includes the therapist taking steps to ensure his or her own safety.

### Therapist Safety Procedures

- Therapist Safety Procedures
- Sit closest to the door
- Alert other staff about possible client problems and have protocol in place if violence occurs
- Never see clients without other professionals or support staff present
- If after hours or on weekends, make sure you send texts or e-mails to other professionals or support staff at the start and end of session
- Be cognizant of and avoid intense power struggles
- Screen your clients and know their backgrounds
- Permit colleagues or support staff to walk in if there is yelling or loud or odd noises
- Be aware of pictures, drawings, or other personal items in your office (which can increase the likelihood of stalking)
- "Google" yourself and use other internet search engines to check the availability of your home address and personal information
- Monitor your Facebook®, Twitter®, LinkedIn® and other social media traffic for odd or unusual connections

When you have a client who begins to get upset and you feel that he or she may act out in session, follow these steps:

1. Make a mental note of the content that appears to be upsetting the client.
2. Calmly and slowly remove all sharp or threatening objects from within the client's reach (e.g., pencils or pens).
3. Immediately move to more benign content.
4. You can end the session here, but be aware that the client may go out and harm someone else.
5. Maintain control of the session by using a soothing and slower tone. If the client models your behavior, he or she is deescalating.
6. Try not to look frightened. (Clients on the antisocial spectrum find this particularly encouraging.)
7. Suggest some relaxation techniques:
  - a. Deep breathing
  - b. Mindfulness
  - c. Progressive muscle relaxation

8. If the client continues to be unabated in his or her frustration or intimidation, firmly state that you think the session should end for today, walk to the door (never turning your back on the client), and ask him or her to leave. Be aware that he or she may go out and harm someone else, and consult your state rules and guidelines pertaining to Tarasoff.\*
9. Make detailed notes about the session and consult a colleague about the incident, giving the client's name and other identifying information—this is not a breach of confidentiality, as your safety and the safety of others is in question.
10. If you see the client again, you can process the experience, but do so from a curious and cautious standpoint; for example, "You seemed to become very upset when I mentioned ..." or "Tell me what it was like for you last session."
11. Be aware that no one thinks that in-session violence is going to happen to them until it does. One example is the murder of Kathryn Faughey, Ph.D., a psychologist who was stabbed to death in her office (Munsey, 2008).

\*Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California was a case in which the Supreme Court of California ruled that mental health professionals have a duty to protect individuals who are being threatened with bodily harm by a client. The professional may notify police, warn the intended victim, and/or take other reasonable steps to protect the threatened individual. See your state rules and guidelines pertaining to "duty to warn."