The Verbal De-escalation Cycle

USBE Prevention Series

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Learning Intentions

By the end of this training, learners will:

- identify which **Protective Factors** can enhance behavior support through de-escalation,
- understand the architecture of **behavior basics and supportive communication,** and
- know the different phases of the **Verbal De-escalation Cycle**, (including student behavior and staff response) and how it aligns with the larger Crisis Cycle.

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The Protective Factors

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Protective Factors and De-escalation

Knowledge of Development

- Understand how communication and skill acquisition are developed - order of learning
- Know what stage the student is at in the developmental process

Social Connections

- During times of calm, establish and foster a supportive, trusting relationship with students
- Rely on positive experiences during times of escalation

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Behavior Basics and Supportive Communication

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Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC)

- Behavior follows a sequence known as the three-term contingency
- Engineering or altering the antecedent or the consequence can impact the likelihood that a behavior will occur again in the future



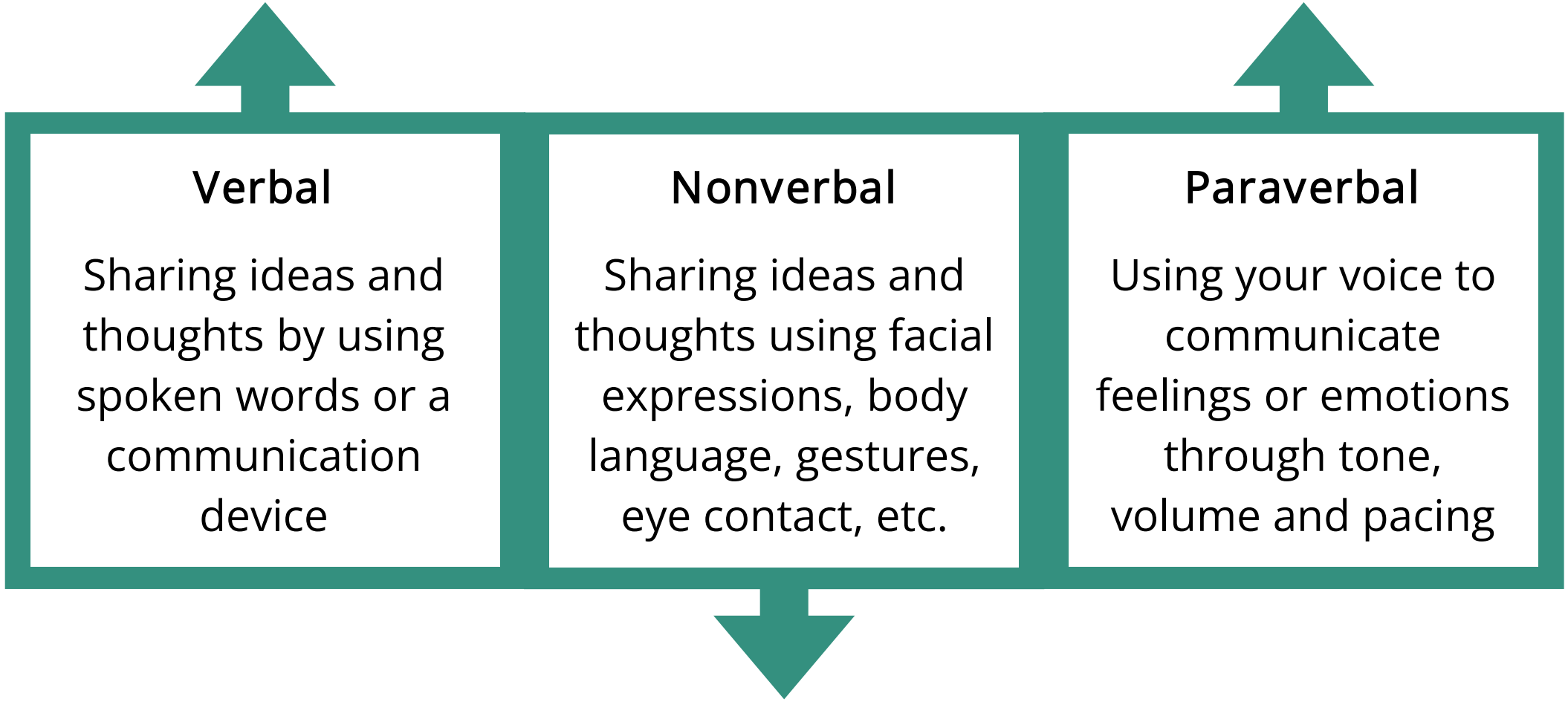
Creates the conditions for a person to respond in a certain way

The person's response to the antecedent

The impact on the environment created by the behavior

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The Architecture of Communication



The Verbal De-escalation Cycle

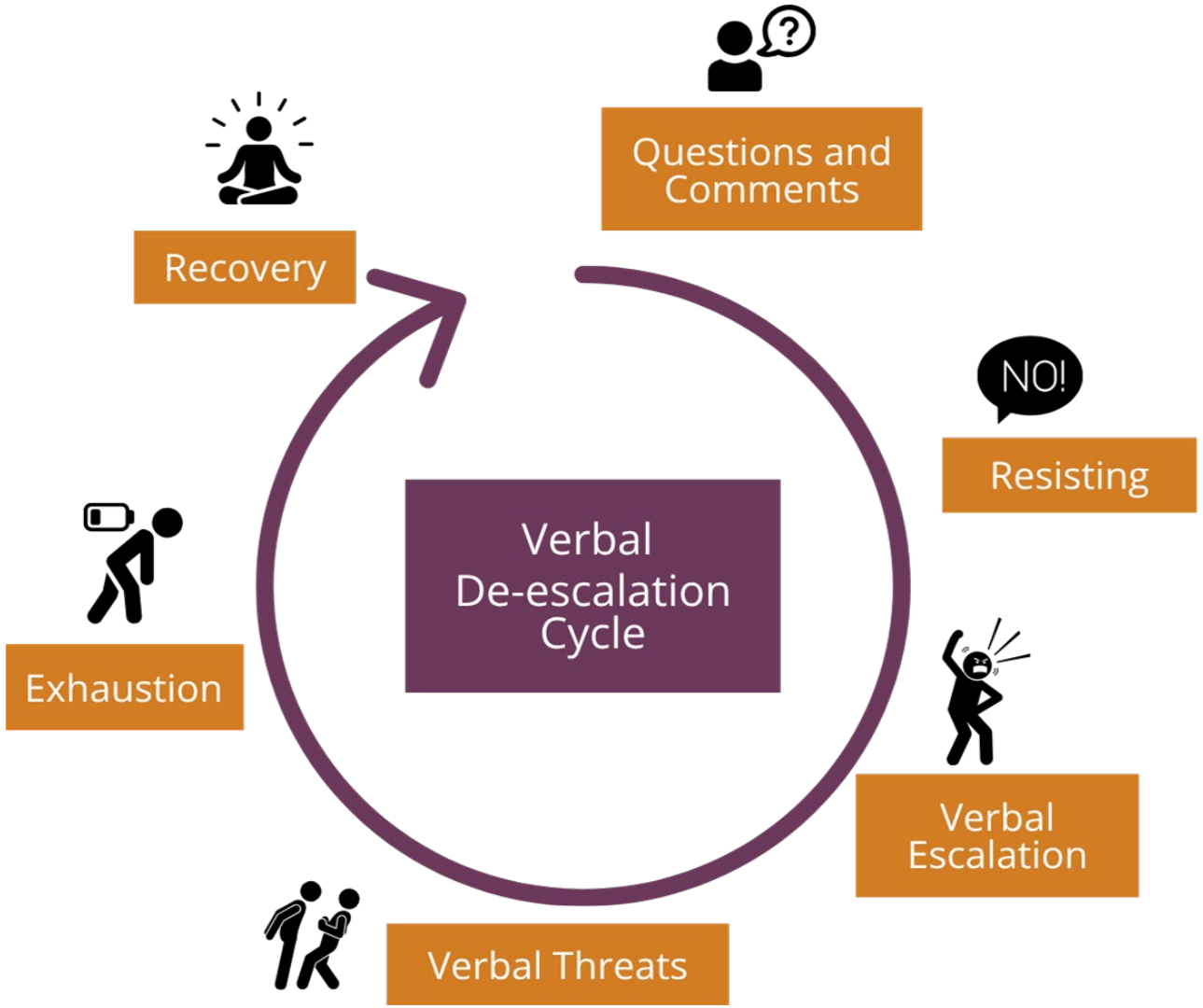
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The Crisis Cycle



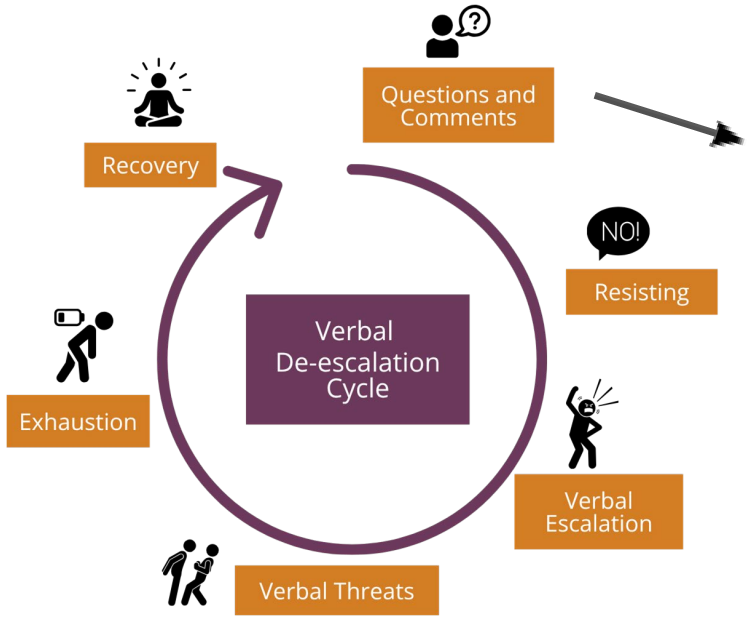
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Verbal De-escalation Cycle



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Stage 1: Questions and Comments



Looks Like

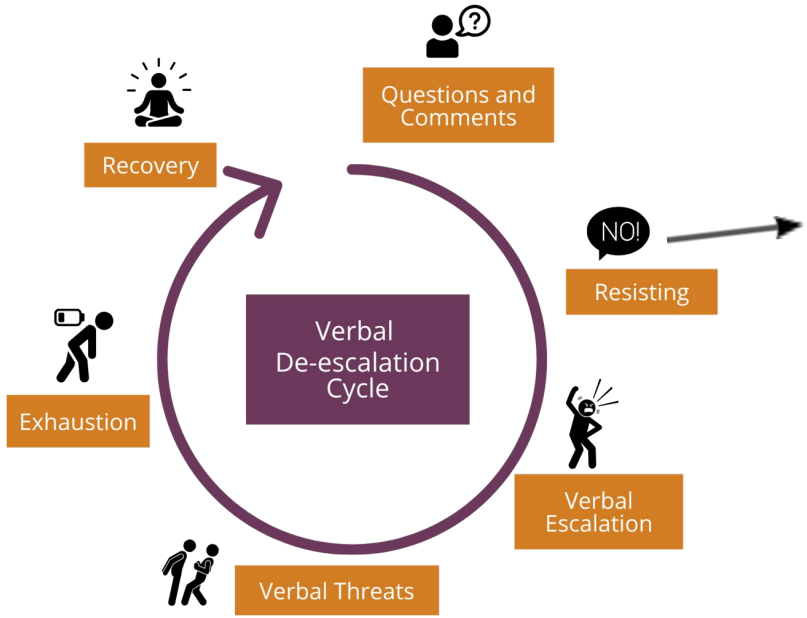
- Questioning staff
  - "Why?"
- Power struggle comments
  - "Don't tell me what to do"
  - "You should be fired"

Strategies

- Provide information
- Provide assurance
- Ignore the "challenge"
  - Redirect back to the topic
- Address the concern
  - Skill vs. will

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Stage 2: Resisting





Looks Like

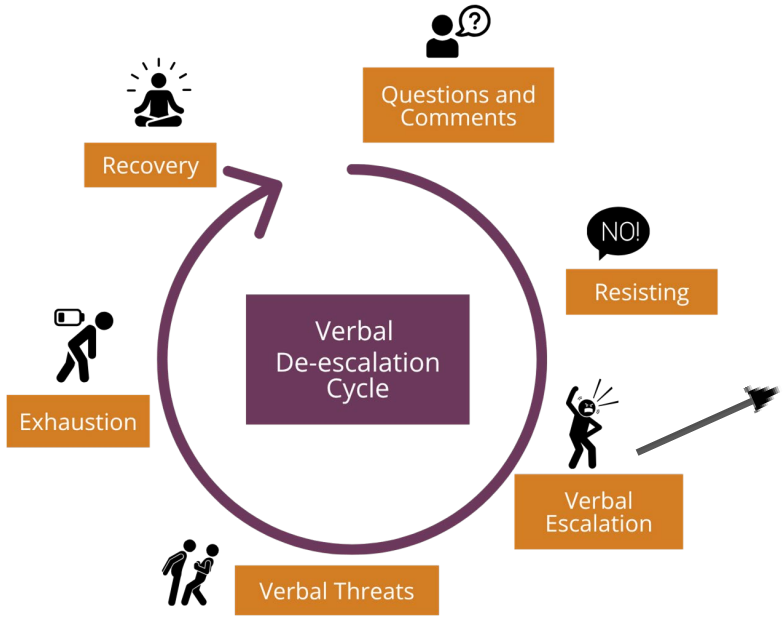
- Non-compliance
- Ignoring
- Head down
- Refusing
- “No”
- “I am not doing that”

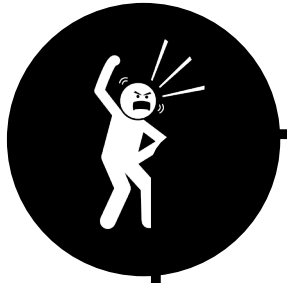
Strategies

- Offer choices
- Fail-safe choice
- Reinforce limits
  - Level system
- “If…then…”
- “When…then…”
- Precision request
  - Negotiate

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Stage 3: Verbal Escalation (1)





Looks Like

- Loud emotional outburst
- Yelling
- Screaming
  - Crying

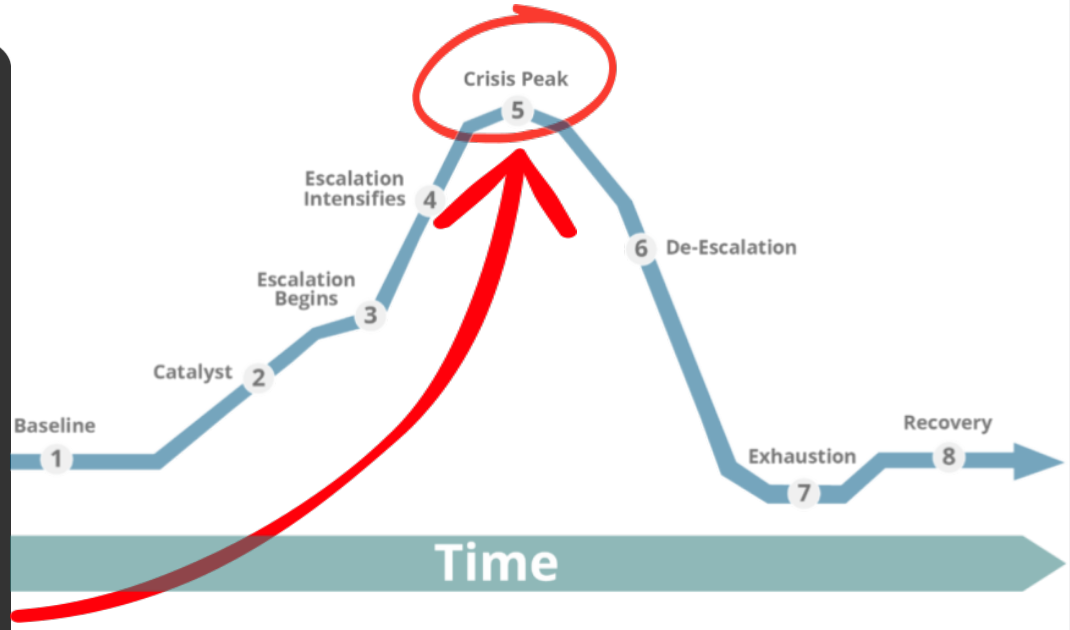
Strategies

- Active listening
  - Empathy
  - Validate feelings
- Use privacy

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Stage 3: Verbal Escalation (2)





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Stage 4: Verbal Threats

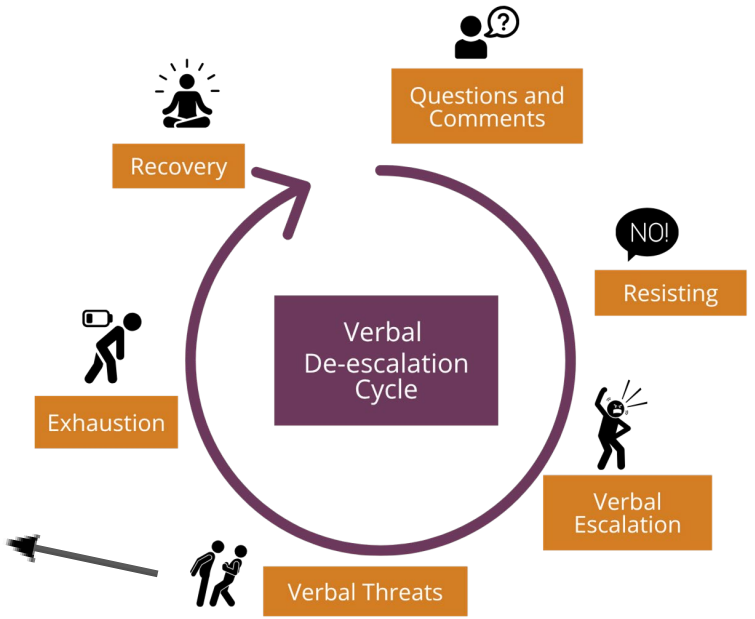


Looks Like

- Verbal threats of harm to self or others
- Nonverbal threats of harm to self or others
- Written
- Gestures

Strategies

- Follow local education agency (LEA) safety protocols
- Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG)
- Find a friend



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Stage 5: Exhaustion

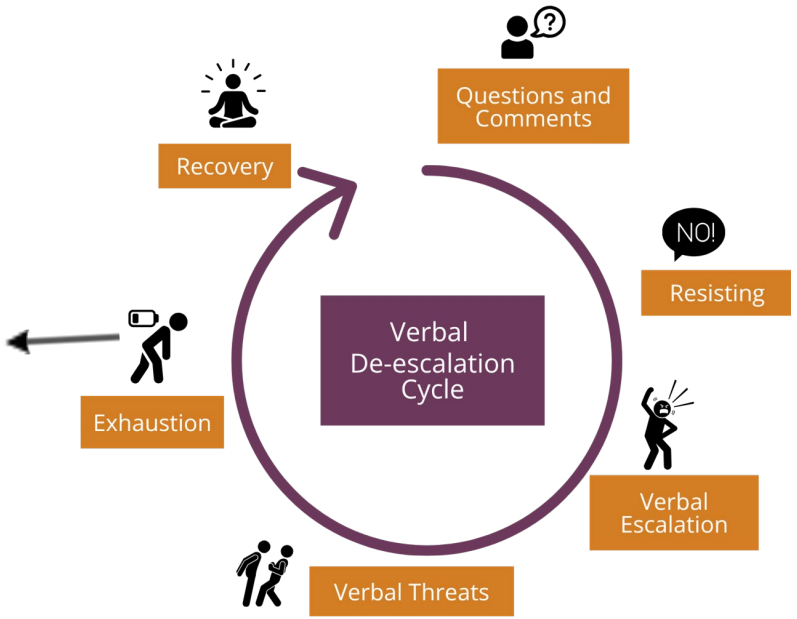


Looks Like

- Detectable decrease in physical activity, communication, intensity
- Breathing re-regulates

Strategies

- Empathic understanding
- No judgement
- Invitation to process
- Validate feelings
- Support problem solving



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Stage 6: Recovery

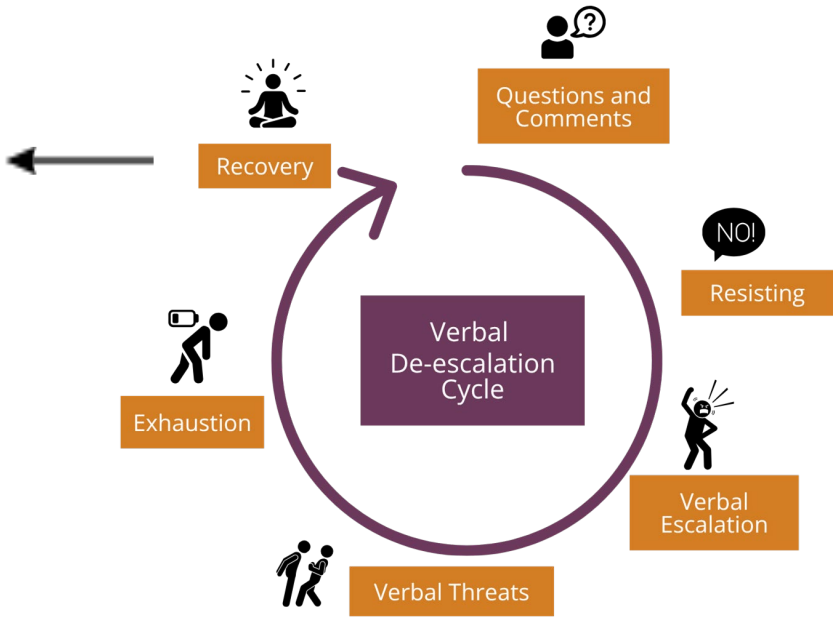


Looks Like

- Ready to return to work
- Accepting of consequences
  - Calm and regulated

Strategies

- Re-establish trust and rapport
- Problem solve a “no”
- Return to class and/or participation



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Verbal De-escalation: Key Takeaways



- Remain calm and professional in all actions
- Switch out with another adult and have them take over support (for yourself or another staff member) to ensure that the student is receiving everyone's best
- Document all interactions according to LEA and school policy
- Debrief with a team to ensure adjustments to student plans and staff actions are appropriate and consistently improving
- Engage in self-care for staff to prevent compassion fatigue

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References

- Crisis Prevention Institute: Seven Principles for Verbal Intervention
- USBE Least Restrictive Behavior Interventions (LRBI) Manual
- USBE Evidence Based Interventions for Student Behavior Support (2026)

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Thank You

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Professional Learning Feedback

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