

Managing work-related aggression for your team

Introduction

Volunteering with Vinnies is about showing up for people when they need it most. Every day, we support people doing it tough. In homes, hospitals, community centres, op shops, on the phone, and out in the community. It's rewarding work, but sometimes people can be stressed, frustrated, upset, or in crisis. That can occasionally lead to aggressive or challenging behaviour.

That's why we've created this learning.

Listen the introduction to this learning material

Through a series of stories and episodes, we'll walk through the kinds of situations you might come across as a people manager and how to respond safely, calmly, and confidently while still treating people with care and respect.

Read the learning outcomes for this learning module

By the end of this learning, you'll be able to:

- Spot warning signs and causes of aggression
- Know what to do in challenging situations
- Follow our Personal Threat Response process
- Help support teammates after an incident
- Feel more confident keeping yourself and others safe

Most importantly, this learning is here to support you. Because the work you do for our community really matters.

Episode descriptions these show when the episode is selected to play you are making this like a Netflix style selection:

EPISODE 1 | The Impact

Work related violence will have an impact on your team this requires active management. By understanding the types of aggression, the impact and your accountability as a manager you can reduce risk to your team.

Select play to learn more.

EPISODE 2 | Risk Reduction

Potential causes are lurking in your workplace, discover what you can do to identify risks early and be proactive. By setting clear expectations and being aware of early warning indicators. Select the play button to learn more.

EPISODE 3 | Right People, Right Skills, Right Support

Mitigation of workplace aggression is in your hands. You can help our People Leaders understand how capability and suitability act as a risk control. As help them model and coach de-escalation behaviours. Select play to learn more.

EPISODE 4 | Your Response

Vinnies has a Personal Threat Response to respond to a work-related violence incidents.

This provides people leaders with a consistent framework aligned to organisational threat response standards.

Select the play button to learn more.

EPISODE 5 | Supporting your Team

Supporting and debriefing after an incident shows your team they are valued and cared for. Reviewing an incident and key learnings is a important process to prevent recurrence. Select the play button to learn more.

EPISODE 6 | Taking the Lead

Leadership is one of the strongest controls against workplace aggression and violence. Learn what good leadership looks like and why its important and what supports are available to you. Select the play button to learn more.

MODULE 1 — The Impact

Watch and observe your responsibility as a manager. Tile Duty of Care

Voice over: As leaders, we all want our teams to feel safe, supported, and able to do their best work. We have a duty of care **to our workers under workplace safety legislation.** This includes all areas of Vinnies.

Most people who come through our doors are grateful for the help we provide. But sometimes people are stressed, overwhelmed, frustrated, or in crisis. That can lead to challenging behaviour, aggression, or even violence.

Visuals: Vinnies worker handing a food kit from a night patrol van to a patron. He looks at the food package, and it is empty. He looks distressed and angry.

Voice over: And while helping people is at the heart of what we do, aggression is never “just part of the job.”

Visuals: The volunteer is looking visibly distressed and scared. The People manager walks up to de-escalate.

Voice over: This module is about recognising the impact aggression can have on our people and understanding the important role we play as leaders in creating safer workplaces for everyone.

End frame:

Aggression is never “part of the job.”

Creating safe, supportive environments for our people is everyone’s responsibility and leadership makes all the difference.

Read about what Workplace Aggression can Look Like?

A still from the video of the volunteer and the patron together:

Toggle: examples and impact

Instructional text: Toggle to see what aggression can present as and the impact on your team

Examples of aggression:

Aggression isn’t always physical. Sometimes it’s subtle. Sometimes it builds over time.

Here are some common examples our teams may experience:

Aggression isn't always physical. Sometimes it's subtle. Sometimes it builds over time. Here are some common examples our teams may experience:

Verbal Abuse

Using insulting, hostile, or abusive language that makes someone feel belittled, threatened, or distressed.

"I'll get you fired," "I'll trash this place"

Threatening Behaviour

Actions, words, or body language that make someone feel unsafe or intimidated, even if no physical violence occurs.

Standing over a member of staff "Hey I was f**king before this person! Don't you have eyes."

Escalation

When a situation becomes increasingly emotional, aggressive, or unpredictable, often building from frustration into anger or conflict.

"I want to see the manager right now, you idiot!"

Physical Violence

Any physical act intended to harm, intimidate, or frighten another person or damage property.

A customer threw a coffee at staff just missing them

Psychological Intimidation

Repeated behaviour that causes fear, stress, anxiety, or emotional harm over time.

"I know exactly what store you work at, and I know when you leave for the day. You'll regret treating me this way."

Online Aggression

Aggressive or abusive behaviour that happens through digital channels such as emails, social media, text messages, or phone calls.

I am going to destroy your reputation online and leave 1-star reviews everywhere if you don't refund me today

Activity: Can you recognise the type of aggression?

Use the purple text as examples that the learner must categorise.

Reveal of toggle: The Impact of Aggression on your team

Work-related aggression can affect:

- **Psychological safety**
People stop feeling safe or supported at work
- **Physical safety**
Incidents can place people at risk of injury
- **Team wellbeing**
Stress and anxiety can spread across teams
- **Retention and morale**
People may lose confidence or stop wanting to volunteer
- **Service delivery**
It becomes harder to support the community effectively
- **Reputation**
Unsafe workplaces impact trust and culture

Listen to A Manager's Story

Manager Voiceover Script (Approx. 1 minute)

Visual of the employee at the EAP office looking distressed

Last year, one of our volunteers in the night patrol had a difficult interaction with a client.

The client came in already frustrated and upset. At first, it was raised voices, then personal insults. Eventually they threw hot soup just missing them in fit of rage and stormed away.

What stuck with me wasn't just the incident itself. It was seeing the impact afterwards.

My team member was shaken. She kept replaying it in thier head. They started second-guessing themselves and didn't want to work on night patrol anymore.

The rest of the team felt it too. Everyone was quieter that day. A bit on edge.

That moment reminded me that aggression doesn't just affect one person. It impacts confidence, morale, wellbeing, and how safe people feel coming to work.

That's why we take it seriously. Because our people matter.

Activity: Can you recognise the type of aggression?

Estimated time: 1 minute

Instruction for learner:

Aggression can show up in different ways. Read each one-line example and choose the type of aggression being shown.

Categories:

Verbal Abuse

Threatening Behaviour

Escalation

Physical Violence

Psychological Intimidation

Online Aggression

Question 1: Charity retail shop

A customer at the counter says, "You're useless. I want the manager now, you idiot."

Correct answer: Verbal Abuse

Feedback: Correct. This is insulting and abusive language directed at a staff member.

Question 2: Refugee services centre

A person stands very close to the worker, blocks the doorway and says, "You're not leaving until you fix this."

Correct answer: Threatening Behaviour

Feedback: Correct. Their words and body position may make the worker feel unsafe or trapped.

Question 3: Call centre supporting people in need

A caller starts calmly, then becomes louder and says, "I've been waiting all week. If you don't help me today, I'm going to lose it."

Correct answer: Escalation

Feedback: Correct. The situation is becoming more emotional, intense and unpredictable.

Question 4: Food van for people in need

A person throws a cup of hot coffee toward a volunteer after being told the van has run out of meals.

Correct answer: Physical Violence

Feedback: Correct. Throwing an object is a physical act that could harm or frighten someone.

Question 5: Delivering food parcels to a person's door

A person says, "I know what car you drive and what time you come here. You'll be sorry if you don't bring more next time."

Correct answer: Psychological Intimidation

Feedback: Correct. This creates fear and pressure by making the worker feel watched or unsafe over time.

Question 6: Charity retail shop

A customer posts, "This store is disgusting. I'm going to name and shame every staff member unless I get my refund."

Correct answer: Online Aggression

Feedback: Correct. This is aggressive behaviour through a digital channel.

Question 7: Refugee services centre

A person says, "I was here before them. Don't you have eyes? You people never listen."

Correct answer: Verbal Abuse

Feedback: Correct. The language is hostile, insulting and directed at staff.

Question 8: Call centre supporting people in need

A caller says, "I'll come down there and make sure someone pays for this."

Correct answer: Threatening Behaviour

Feedback: Correct. This suggests possible harm and should be taken seriously.

Question 9: Food van for people in need

A person starts pacing, raising their voice and repeatedly says, "This is not fair. You always do this to me."

Correct answer: Escalation

Feedback: Correct. These are signs the person may be moving from frustration into anger.

Question 10: Delivering food parcels to a person's door

A person kicks the front gate and slams their fist into the wall near the staff member.

Correct answer: Physical Violence

Feedback: Correct. This behaviour involves physical force and can be used to frighten or intimidate.

Closing message

Aggression is not always obvious at first. It may be verbal, physical, threatening, online or build slowly over time. In Australia, workplace aggression and violence are recognised as WHS risks, including psychosocial hazards such as stress, trauma, intimidation and repeated exposure to distress.

As leaders, we have a duty to identify these risks early, support our people before, during and after incidents, and understand the impact of vicarious trauma over time. The Society is committed to eliminating work-related violence wherever possible and reducing the risk and impact when it does occur. Leaders play a key role in making that happen.

MODULE 2 — Risk Reduction

Watch where and why risks are more likely to happen.

Visuals: wide shot outside of a vinnies office

Our people do important work, often supporting customers and people we assist during stressful, emotional or difficult moments. Because of this, Society personnel may sometimes face a higher risk of aggression or work-related violence. Recognising these risks early helps People Leaders put support in place before a situation escalates.

Visuals: Wide shot of a retail venue this include a busy service, a night van delivering food, a person delivering a food parcel to a home person stays the same scenes change

Instructional text: Take a look at this environment from these three different lenses. Environmental, People we assist and the organisation. Select each map pin to see the areas to focus on.

Environmental:

Risks can be higher when staff are working:

- in busy service areas,
- after hours,
- alone,
- in isolation,
- offsite or in remote locations

Visuals: the vinnies volunteers stays the same but the people they are helping change. Refugee, retail customer, homeless person, caller on phone and person at home

People we assist:

Risks can also increase when staff visit a person's home, where they may come into contact with other people such as domestic partners, family members or friends.

Aggression may also be more likely when staff are supporting people who are distressed, confused, angry, afraid or unwell. This may be linked to complex issues such as mental health, cognitive disability, intoxication, addiction, trauma or feeling they have been treated unfairly.

Visuals: back to the office view and the people leader at the office

Organisational:

- Sometimes the way work is organised can add to the risk. This can include understaffing,
- unclear processes,
- inconsistent messages,
- poor handovers,
- lack of training or
- not enough support when a situation becomes difficult.

People Leaders should consider the work environment, the type of service being provided and the people involved, as the level of risk can change across different roles, locations and situations.

Read how people leaders can reduce risk

Visual: people leader behind desk and the image is being scanned

Text come up as scan happens

Our policies require leaders to identify violence and aggression hazards, assess the risks, put controls in place, support staff, provide training and make sure incidents are reported and followed up.

People Leaders can help reduce the risk by checking how work is being done, listening to staff concerns, making expectations clear, improving communication, ensuring staff are working within their capability and making sure escalation support is available. Prevention is the key. The earlier we recognise the warning signs and fix the contributing factors, the safer our people, volunteers and the people we assist will be.

Link to policies that the learner can download

Listen for tips on how to help your team Assist without the risk

Podcast script: Assist without the risk

Podcaster:

At the heart of charity work is assisting people. But sometimes, support work can come with risks. Today I'm speaking with a People Leader about how policies and procedures help staff support people safely, without creating unnecessary risk.

People Leader:

That's right. Every day, our teams support people who may be experiencing stress,

hardship, grief, trauma or uncertainty. We want to do that with care and dignity, but we also need to make sure our staff, members and volunteers are safe.

Podcaster:

So when we talk about policies and procedures, they're not about creating barriers?

People Leader:

Not at all. They're there to help us plan ahead and reduce risk. Before contact with a person we assist, staff may need to check known risks, review safety alerts, use a risk assessment, or understand any triggers or concerns that have been recorded.

Podcaster:

What might that look like in practice?

People Leader:

It might mean meeting in a public or controlled space, using a buddy system for higher-risk interactions, or following lone worker, outreach and home visit procedures. For staff working alone or offsite, it's important they can communicate, check in and out, call for help and leave safely if they feel unsafe.

Podcaster:

And what role does training play?

People Leader:

Training is a big part of prevention. Staff need to recognise early warning signs, use calm and trauma-informed communication, understand triggers and know when to step away. As People Leaders, we also need to provide supervision, keep oversight of higher-risk cases, encourage staff to escalate concerns and take threats seriously.

Podcaster:

So the goal is to keep helping, but safely?

People Leader:

Exactly. We never want safety controls to feel like they get in the way of care. They are part of care. When we plan ahead, follow our procedures and support each other, we reduce risk and create a safer environment for everyone.

Knowledge check: Test your knowledge of where you think risks are more likely to happen.

Select the areas you think could pose a risk to your team member.

Interaction type:

Visual: 360 equirectangular view of a retail shop with sorting facility out the back]

Learners select the areas they think may lead to a risk.

Inclusions in the image:

- poor visibility
- blocked exits
- isolated work areas
- lack of security measures ie CCTV, access control
- overcrowding
- poor lighting
- no escape routes
- inaccessible duress alarms
- furniture placement that traps staff

MODULE 3 — Right People, Right Skills, Right Support

Watch

Visual direction:

Show a team member dressing a charity shop dummy for display. She has put a fabulous dress on the dummy.

Text on screen: Clearly the right person for this role

Narration: When we think about preventing workplace aggression, we often think about procedures, duress alarms, risk assessments and reporting systems. These are all important. But one of the most important controls is making sure the right person has the right skills and the right support for the work they are doing.

Visual: Same team member placing a necklace around the dummy

Text on screen: Armed with the accessory of great training

Narration: Not every staff member has the same experience, confidence or tolerance for high-conflict situations. Some people may be new to the role. Some may not know the local client or customer base. Others may be feeling overwhelmed or may need more practice with de-escalation.

Visual: Same team seen through the shop window adjusting the dummy

Text on screen: They know she is they know they are seen and supported

Narration: As People Leaders, we have a responsibility to notice this early. We need to ask: Is this person ready for this task, in this location, with this level of risk? Do they understand the service, the process and the people they are supporting? Do they know when and how to ask for help?

Visual: Same team seen through the shop window waving at the viewer through the window (possibly the people leader)

Text on screen: Making it easier for them to do their best work in any circumstance.

Narration: When people are well matched to their role, trained properly and supported by their leader, they are more likely to make calm decisions, respond safely and protect themselves, their team, people we assist and customers.

Listen to how why its important to mentor staff before risk escalates

Podcast script: Mentoring staff before risk escalates

Visual direction:

A podcast microphone sits on the counter of a charity store. A People Leader is leaning gently on the counter, speaking in a calm and practical way. The store feels warm, busy and real, with donated items, clothing racks and staff moving quietly in the background.

Podcaster:

When we talk about reducing workplace aggression, we often focus on what staff should do in the moment. But what can People Leaders do before things reach that point?

People Leader:

One of the most helpful things we can do is mentor our staff before they are put into situations that may carry more risk. The people we support may be distressed, angry, confused, afraid or unwell. At times, staff may also be working in busy services, alone, after hours, offsite or in people's homes. These situations can increase the risk of aggression, especially when staff do not have the right training, confidence or support.

Before allocating work, I try to pause and think about three things: the person, the task and the environment. Is this team member suited to this work, in this location, with this client or customer group, and this level of risk? What is their experience? Do they feel confident? Do they need extra support?

A staff member might understand the service, but that does not always mean they feel ready to manage aggression on their own. They may have completed the training, but still need coaching, shadowing or a buddy for certain visits. Or they may usually cope really well, but after a difficult incident, they may need extra support for a while.

Podcaster:

So capability is more than just completing a course?

People Leader:

Exactly. Capability is about being able to use the right skills in the right moment, especially when there is pressure. That means we need to observe how staff are going, check their confidence, offer coaching and reinforce safe ways of working.

Sometimes mentoring is as simple as asking, “How are you feeling about this visit?” or “Do you know what to do if things escalate?” or “Would it help to have someone with you?” These small check-ins can make a big difference.

Podcaster:

And when should a leader step in?

People Leader:

Early. If someone seems unsure, overwhelmed or exposed to unnecessary risk, we should not wait for an incident to happen. We can adjust the task, add support, arrange a buddy, provide coaching or talk through the escalation plan. That is good leadership. It helps staff feel safer, more confident and better supported to do the work with care.

Read about the key capabilities to build in your team

Visual: A care package being packed

Capabilities are built over time, not through training alone. Staff need clear information about our services, processes and expectations so they can give consistent messages and make safe decisions. They also need practical learning on trauma awareness, recognising triggers, calm communication, de-escalation, conflict management and knowing when to disengage or escalate. This can be supported through induction, refresher training, short scenario activities, shadowing experienced staff, buddy systems and guided practice in real situations.

People Leaders play a key role in helping these skills become everyday practice. They can observe how staff are going, check confidence before higher-risk work, coach people through difficult situations, reinforce safe behaviours and provide extra support when someone is new, overwhelmed or recovering from an incident. After difficult interactions, leaders should debrief with care, offer psychological support, review what happened and make sure any learnings are used to reduce future risk. Capability grows when people feel prepared, supported and safe to ask for help early.

Knowledge check

Interaction type: Scenario decision activity

Image of a person on the doorstep of a person home awkwardly holding a hamper while trying to press a doorbell.

Scenario:

A staff member is scheduled to attend a home visit with a person we assist who has a history of becoming verbally aggressive when distressed. The staff member is new to the team and has completed induction but has not yet managed a high-risk visit alone. They tell you, "I think I'll be okay, but I'm not sure what to do if they become angry."

Question:

What is the best response from the People Leader?

Option A:

Let them attend alone because they have completed induction.

Feedback:

Not the best response. Completing induction does not always mean someone is ready to manage a higher-risk situation on their own.

Option B:

Cancel the service completely because there is a risk.

Feedback:

Not always the best response. The goal is to manage the risk where possible, not automatically stop support.

Option C:

Review the risk assessment, talk through the plan, arrange a buddy or supervisor support, confirm check-in steps and make sure the staff member knows how to disengage or escalate.

Feedback:

Correct. This response supports both safety and service delivery. It checks the risk, matches the right support to the situation and helps the staff member feel prepared.

Option D:

Tell the staff member to be more confident and handle it professionally.

Feedback:

Not the best response. Confidence should be built through training, coaching and support, not pressure.

Key message:

Capability is a control. When People Leaders match the right person, skills and support to the task, they help prevent workplace aggression and keep everyone safer.

MODULE 4 — Your Response

Watch for the signs of escalation video

Scenario

A customer attempts to return a used item without proof of purchase. The team member explains the refund policy. The customer becomes increasingly agitated, raises their voice, and begins swearing at staff while other customers are nearby.

As a People Leader, your role is to help your team respond early, safely and consistently when aggression starts to build.

[voice over]

Most aggression does not come out of nowhere. It often begins when someone feels frustrated, disappointed, unheard or unable to get the outcome they expected. This might be about a service, a refund, a decision, a delay or the level of support available.

One of the most helpful things we can do is manage expectations early. This means being clear, calm and honest about what is possible, what is not possible, and what will happen next.

Escalation usually happens in stages. A person may move from frustration, to irritation, to anger, and then to aggressive behaviour. The earlier we notice the signs, the better chance we have of reducing the risk before things become unsafe.

[Freeze on a frame and the signs come on a customer/person you are helping pointers come up on each sign]

[Vo and pointers]

Early warning signs may include:

- a change in tone or volume
- pacing, agitation or restlessness
- repeating the same concern or becoming fixated
- personal insults or blaming language
- threatening comments
- tense posture, clenched fists or other physical cues

[close up on the customers head and you see the amygdala firing]

When someone is highly emotional, they may not be able to think clearly or take in detailed information. In that moment, the goal is not to win an argument or explain every policy. The goal is to lower the emotional intensity and help the person feel heard, safe and clear about the next step.

[The people leader step in next to the team member]

People Leaders can support their teams by encouraging early intervention, checking in with staff, using dynamic risk assessment, and making sure no one feels they have to manage aggression alone.

Once someone reaches full anger, it's much harder to bring them back down.

So we're not just reacting, we're watching for early signs and stepping in early.

When someone is highly emotional, they're not thinking logically.

So the goal of de-escalation is not to win an argument or explain policy. it's to lower their emotional state.

Once emotions come down, thinking comes back online.

So what we're really doing is helping the person move from reacting emotionally to thinking more clearly again.

Read the steps you and your team member can take to de-escalate

- **Remain calm** and keep voice neutral and use non-confrontational language
- **Alert** someone nearby, if safe to do so
- **Attempt to de-escalate** the situation - avoid arguing about policy
- Acknowledge frustration without agreeing
- Repeat options available
- Maintain safe physical distance
- If behaviour escalates, advise them that the behaviour is not acceptable using examples below
- If the person becomes aggressive while in store, **activate duress device or call 000** if safe to do so
- Maintain safe distance

- **Remove yourself from the situation** and take refuge in a secure area of the store. Call 000

What might this sound like?

Podcast Script: De-escalating a Difficult Return

Podcaster:

I noticed you handled that situation really well. A customer was trying to return a used item without proof of purchase, and things started to get tense. Can you tell our listeners what helped you manage it so calmly?

Shop Assistant:

Thank you. The biggest thing was staying calm and not matching their energy. I kept my voice neutral and tried not to sound defensive. I knew that arguing about the refund policy would probably make things worse, so I focused on what I could do.

Podcaster:

What did you notice first? Were there any early warning signs?

Shop Assistant:

Yes. At first, the customer sounded frustrated. Then their voice got louder, their tone became sharper, and they started repeating the same demand for a refund. They also seemed embarrassed because other customers were nearby, which can sometimes make people more reactive.

Podcaster:

So what did you do in that moment?

Shop Assistant:

I acknowledged their frustration without agreeing to something I couldn't do. I said, "I understand you're frustrated." Then I calmly repeated the options available. For example, we could check for a store record of the purchase, or they could come back with proof of purchase.

Podcaster:

And when the customer started yelling?

Shop Assistant:

That's when I set a clear boundary. I said, "I want to help, but I need the conversation to stay respectful." When the yelling continued, I said, "I understand you're frustrated, however yelling at staff is not acceptable."

Podcaster:

That sounds firm, but still respectful.

Shop Assistant:

Exactly. You can be kind and still set limits. When they started swearing, I said, “I need you to stop swearing so we can work through this.” I also made sure I kept a safe physical distance and didn’t block myself in behind the counter.

Podcaster:

Did you alert anyone else?

Shop Assistant:

Yes, when it was safe, I quietly signalled to another team member nearby. That way, I wasn’t managing the situation alone, and we had support if it escalated.

Podcaster:

What if the behaviour kept getting worse?

Shop Assistant:

If the yelling continued, I would say, “I want to help, but if the yelling continues, I’ll need to end the conversation.” If the customer made threats, I would say, “Threatening behaviour is not acceptable.” At that point, I would remove myself from the situation, activate the duress device if safe, or call 000 if there was an immediate risk.

Podcaster:

What if the person seems intoxicated, impaired or is experiencing a mental health episode?

Shop Assistant:

That changes how I respond. If someone is affected by drugs, alcohol or is very distressed, they may not be able to think clearly or take in detailed information. So I would stop trying to explain the policy in detail and focus more on safety.

Podcaster:

What would that sound like?

Shop Assistant:

I would use short, calm sentences and give clear direction. For example, “I can see you’re upset. I need you to step back.” Or, “I can help when it is safe to talk.” I would avoid arguing, avoid too much detail and avoid trying to reason with them if they are not able to process it.

Podcaster:

So the goal changes?

Shop Assistant:

Yes. The goal becomes safety first, not solving the refund issue right there and then. I would keep distance, alert another team member, and remove myself if the behaviour escalated. If there was any immediate risk to staff, customers or the

person themselves, I would activate the duress process or call 000 if it was safe to do so.

Podcaster:

What's your main tip for other staff?

Shop Assistant:

Don't try to win the argument. Stay calm, keep your language simple, repeat the safe options, set respectful boundaries, and get support early. Your safety matters.

Knowledge check your de escalation skills

Scenario: When Someone Is Told They Are Not Eligible

Visual: Image of a row of chairs in a waiting room.

Setting

You work in welfare services for a not-for-profit charity.

Justin has come in asking for support through one of your services. After reviewing the eligibility requirements, you explain that Justin does not currently meet the criteria for that specific service.

Justin becomes visibly upset. Their voice gets louder. They swear under their breath, then say:

"This is ridiculous. You people never help anyone. What am I supposed to do now?"

You notice Justin is standing close to the counter, their voice is rising, and other people nearby are starting to look over.

Your role is to respond early, calmly, and safely.

Type your response here:

Free text response box

Need Help? Use a De-escalation Prompt

You can build your response using one of these phrases:

"I can see this is really frustrating."

"I want to help, but I need the conversation to stay respectful."

"I understand you're upset. I can talk through what options are still available."

"I'm happy to keep speaking with you, but I need the yelling to stop."

“I can’t change the eligibility criteria, but I can help you look at what else may be possible.”

“I need you to stop swearing so we can work through this safely.”

“If the yelling continues, I’ll need to pause this conversation and get support.”

Example Strong Response

“Justin, I can see this is really frustrating, and I want to help you work out what options are still available. I can’t change the eligibility criteria, but I can explain what we can do next. I do need the swearing to stop so we can keep talking safely.”

Feedback for Learner

That response helps because it:

Acknowledges the disappointment without blaming Justin.

Does not get pulled into an argument about the criteria.

Keeps the focus on what can still be done.

Sets a respectful and clear boundary.

Supports staff safety while still showing care.

If the Situation Continues to Escalate

If Justin continues yelling, swearing, moving closer, making threats, or refusing to follow directions, your priority changes from problem-solving to safety.

You may need to say:

“Justin, I want to help, but I can’t continue while you are yelling and swearing. I’m going to pause this conversation now and get support.”

Then follow your workplace procedure.

This may include:

Alerting a nearby colleague or supervisor, if safe.

Creating physical distance.

Moving to a safer area.

Activating a duress device.

Calling 000 if there is immediate danger.

Leaving the situation and taking refuge in a secure area.

Reflection Questions

What might have triggered Justin's escalation?

How could expectations have been managed earlier?

When a service cannot be provided, what other supports or options could still be offered?

What signs would tell you that de-escalation is no longer working?

At what point should staff stop trying to resolve the issue and focus only on safety?

Download emergency response protocol:

Attach the emergency response document

MODULE 5 — Supporting your Team

Watch how to Support Your Team After an Aggression Incident

Duration: 2 minutes

Visual: Calm footage of a charity workplace. A People Leader checks in with a team member in a quiet space. The people leader reaches across the table to touch her shoulder.

Narrator:

After an incident of aggression or work-related violence, your first role as a People Leader is simple but important.

Make sure people are safe.

That may mean calling Triple Zero if anyone is in immediate danger, arranging first aid or medical support, helping staff move to a safe area, or contacting police where appropriate.

Once the immediate danger has passed, the way you respond matters.

Visual: the team member is getting up to go back to work. The people leader gestures for her to stay.

Narrator:

Your team member may be shaken, angry, numb, tearful, embarrassed, or wanting to "just get back to work".

These can all be normal trauma reactions.

Try not to minimise what happened.

Visuals: Freeze frame of people leader with words coming out of her mouth then they drop to the ground

Narrator:

Avoid saying things like:

“At least no one was hurt.”

“You probably should have handled it differently.”

“They are always like that.”

Visuals: Freeze frame of people leader with words coming out of her mouth then they drop to the ground and they float around the team member

Narrator:

Instead, use calm, supportive language.

On-screen text: Supportive language

People Leader:

“Are you safe right now?”

“I’m sorry that happened.”

“You did the right thing by letting me know.”

“We’ll work through the next steps together.”

Visual: The people leader is writing a report and offering the team member a EAP flyer

Narrator:

Post-incident support is not about blame.

It is about care, safety, learning, and prevention.

Check whether the affected person can continue working, or whether they need a break, to go home, change duties, or have someone stay with them.

Offer support options such as EAP, counselling, medical care, or help reporting the matter to police.

Make sure the incident is reported through the correct risk management system within required timeframes.

A report should include what happened, what led up to it, who was affected or witnessed it, and what immediate support was provided.

For serious incidents or threats, contact the relevant Safety, Security or Emergency Management lead as soon as reasonably possible.

They can help with a threat assessment.

A threat assessment helps identify whether there is ongoing risk to staff, volunteers, people we assist, customers, or the site.

It may consider questions like:

Who was involved?

Has this happened before?

Were threats made?

Could the person return?

Do we need extra controls, such as altered appointments, working in pairs, duress support, security, a refuge area, or changes to service access?

Visual: Leader reviewing notes with safety partner.

Narrator:

Finally, hold a short, respectful debrief with affected staff.

Focus on what support is needed, what can be learned, and what controls may reduce future risk.

The message to your team should be clear:

You are not alone.

You are not to blame.

Your safety matters.

And we will take what happened seriously.

Read a post incident report

Scenario 2: Altercation Between People We Assist on Site

Report Field	Completed Response
2. Hazard Category	Work-related violence and aggression

4. Risk Description	There is a risk that conflict between people we assist may escalate into physical violence on site, creating a safety risk for staff, volunteers, other people we assist, customers and visitors.
6. Causes	Ongoing conflict between Matthew and Peter had not been resolved or actively managed. Matthew was allowed to make repeated comments towards Peter across the room, which increased tension. Staff may not have intervened early enough to separate the parties or reduce the audience. The physical environment may have allowed easy access to other people, staff and potential weapons such as cups, plates or other objects. Staff may have placed themselves too close to the altercation while trying to stop the fight.
7. Consequences	A person we assist, staff member, volunteer, customer or visitor could be physically injured. Staff may experience fear, distress, trauma or reduced confidence at work. The centre may need to temporarily close or restrict access. Police, ambulance or emergency services may be required. There may be damage to property, reporting obligations, complaints, or increased risk of future aggression if the behaviour is not addressed.
8A. Likelihood	Likely
8B. Consequence	Major
8C. Rating	High
1. Current Controls	Staff are expected to maintain safe positioning, keep physical distance and avoid getting between people who are fighting. Staff can alert a colleague or supervisor, activate a duress device or call 000 if safe to do so. Staff use calm verbal and non-verbal communication and de-escalation techniques. Staff can ask the person to leave if behaviour becomes threatening or unsafe. Staff can retreat to a safe area or refuge point. Incidents are reported through the workplace risk management system. Managers provide post-incident support and arrange debriefing after serious incidents.
4. Expected Implementation Date	Immediate for existing controls. Any new controls should be implemented within 2 to 4 weeks, or sooner if risk remains high.

5. Frequency of Monitoring	Monitor daily while Matthew and Peter continue accessing the site. Review after every incident, near miss or concerning behaviour. Formal review monthly, or sooner if further aggression occurs.
6. Key Risk Indicators	Are staff intervening early when verbal conflict begins? Are known conflicts between people we assist recorded and communicated to relevant staff? Are staff keeping safe distance and avoiding physical intervention? Are plates, cups and other potential weapons being managed safely? Are duress alarms and communication systems working? Are staff confident about when to call 000? Are incidents and near misses being reported within required timeframes? Are behaviour support or access plans in place for people with repeated aggression?
3. Control Effectiveness	Partially effective. Some controls exist, but they were not fully effective in preventing escalation. Earlier intervention, safer positioning, environmental controls and clearer behaviour management planning are needed.
4A. Residual Likelihood	Possible
4B. Residual Consequence	Major
4C. Residual Rating	Medium to High
1. Risk Acceptance	Not accepted in its current state. The risk requires additional treatment actions before it can be accepted.
2. Additional Treatment Actions	Complete a post-incident debrief with affected staff. Support staff to report the matter to Police where appropriate. Complete an incident report through the risk management system within required timeframes. Conduct a threat assessment for Matthew and Peter before they return to the site. Review whether either person requires a behaviour support plan, service access plan, temporary exclusion or appointment-only access. Separate Matthew and Peter where possible and avoid having them on site at the same time. Review the physical environment to remove or limit access to items that could be used as weapons. Reinforce to staff not to physically intervene or place themselves between people fighting. Refresh staff training on early

intervention, duress use, safe positioning, de-escalation and when to call 000. Consider working in pairs, increased supervision or security support during higher-risk periods.

Example Manager Notes

This incident shows how repeated low-level behaviour can build into a serious safety risk if it is not addressed early. Matthew's comments towards Peter were an early warning sign. Staff should be supported to step in early, calmly and safely before the behaviour escalates.

The staff member's intention in trying to stop the fight was understandable, but moving between people during a physical altercation can increase the risk of harm. The safer response is to create distance, alert others, use clear verbal directions, activate duress or call 000 if needed, and move to a safe area.

After the incident, the focus should be on care, safety and learning. Staff should not be blamed. Managers should check on the wellbeing of affected staff, offer EAP or counselling support, assist with Police reporting where appropriate, and make sure the incident is formally reported.

A threat assessment should be completed before Matthew or Peter return to the site. This should consider the history of conflict, the seriousness of the threats, whether objects were used or held as weapons, the likelihood of either person returning, and what controls are needed to keep everyone safe.

Listen to how the manager learnt from the incident and what measures were put in place post incident

1-Minute Podcast Script: What We Learnt After the Incident

Host:

After the incident between Matthew and Peter, you led the post-incident review. What was your first priority?

Manager:

The first priority was care. We checked that everyone was physically safe, supported the staff member who had been threatened, and made sure they did not feel blamed or embarrassed. They were trying to help, but we needed to gently unpack what happened and what could be safer next time.

Host:

What did the review help you understand?

Manager:

It showed us that the incident did not come from nowhere. There had been conflict between Matthew and Peter for some time, and on the day, Matthew's comments across the room were an early warning sign. We also looked at the environment. Were there clear exit paths? Were staff able to keep distance? Were objects like plates and cups easy to grab? Those things matter.

Host:

So the review was not about blaming one person?

Manager:

Exactly. We avoided language like, "The team member should have..." Instead, we asked better questions. What systems failed? Did staff have the training and confidence to intervene early? Was the site layout helping or hindering safety? Did we have enough people on the floor? Was the known history between Matthew and Peter shared clearly?

Host:

What changed after the review?

Manager:

We improved our process. We reinforced safe positioning and not getting between people fighting. We reviewed duress procedures, incident reporting, and when to call 000. We also looked at behaviour support plans, separating people where needed, and completing a threat assessment before anyone returned.

Host:

What would you say to other leaders?

Manager:

Post-incident reviews matter because they prevent recurrence, improve controls, identify trends and, most importantly, show staff they are cared for. The goal is learning, not blame.

Welfare Services Scenario 2 — Client in Crisis in Reception Area

Situation

A visibly distressed person comes into the reception area and begins yelling and screaming about having all their belongings stolen. They are pacing, shouting, and striking furniture in a waiting room, demanding immediate assistance.

Check your incident reporting skills

Fill in a report from this scenario:

Report Field	Fill in
2. Hazard Category	Fill in
4. Risk Description	Fill in
6. Causes	Fill in
7. Consequences	Fill in
8A. Likelihood	Fill in
8B. Consequence	Fill in
8C. Rating	Fill in
1. Current Controls	Fill in
4. Expected Implementation Date	Fill in
5. Frequency of Monitoring	Fill in
6. Key Risk Indicators	Fill in
3. Control Effectiveness	Fill in
4A. Residual Likelihood	Fill in
4B. Residual Consequence	Fill in
4C. Residual Rating	Fill in
1. Risk Acceptance	Fill in
2. Additional Treatment Actions	Fill in
Manager Notes	

[Base this form on WRV risk rating excel spreadsheet]

MODULE 6 — Taking the Lead

Watch lead with heart

On-screen text: Leadership is a key risk control

Narrator:

Leadership is one of the strongest controls against workplace aggression and violence.

This does not mean leaders are expected to prevent every difficult interaction.

It means leaders create the conditions where risks are identified early, staff know what to do, and the organisation learns from what happens.

Visual: Leader walking through a service area, noticing exits, visibility, busy zones and potential hazards.

Narrator:

This includes identifying work-related violence hazards.

Looking at the layout of the site.

Checking whether staff can see each other.

Making sure there are safe exit paths.

Testing duress alarms and communication systems.

Reviewing whether staff are working alone, offsite, after hours, or with people who may have a known history of aggression.

Visual: Team briefing.

People Leader:

“Let’s talk through today’s risks. Who are we expecting? Is there anyone we need a plan for? Are we clear on when to step back, call for support, or activate duress?”

Narrator:

Good leadership also means making sure staff have the training, supervision and confidence to respond safely.

That includes using calm communication, keeping distance, setting boundaries, calling for help, reporting incidents, and knowing when to stop trying to resolve the issue and move to safety.

Visual: Post-incident check-in in a quiet room.

Narrator:

After an incident, leadership matters even more.

Staff need care, not blame.

A strong leader asks:

“Are you safe?”

“What support do you need?”

“What happened before the incident?”

“What can we change to reduce the risk next time?”

On-screen text: Care. Report. Review. Improve.

Narrator:

People Leaders also make sure incidents are reported, reviewed and investigated where required.

They support affected staff to access EAP, counselling, medical care, or police reporting where appropriate.

They work with safety teams to assess risk, strengthen controls and implement corrective actions.

Visual: Leader updating a risk plan with team input.

Narrator:

Reducing workplace aggression is not about asking staff to simply cope better.

It is about building safer systems around them.

When leaders listen, act early, follow procedures and support their people, they send a clear message:

Your safety matters.

Your concerns matter.

And aggression is not just part of the job.

Read and reflect on these questions

Strong Leadership Reflection Question

Questions to ask:

Are incidents occurring at certain times?

Are certain tasks creating repeated conflict?

Are the same clients/customers involved?

Are controls failing repeatedly?

“What behaviours from leaders make team members feel safe to speak up?”

Listen to what Makes a Good Leader?

Podcaster:

Today I'm speaking with a People Leader from the charity who is deeply passionate about keeping staff, volunteers, customers and people we assist safe. When we talk about reducing workplace aggression, what do you think makes a good leader?

People Leader:

For me, a good leader sets the tone early. Our teams do really caring work, often with people who are distressed, overwhelmed or facing really hard situations. So when pressure rises, leaders need to model calm behaviour. If I stay steady, my team has something steady to lean on.

Podcaster:

What does that look like in practice?

People Leader:

It means being visible. Checking in before a shift. Asking, "Are there any risks we need to know about today?" It also means supporting staff publicly. If something happens, I do not want my team thinking, "I'm going to be blamed for this." I want them thinking, "My leader will back me, help me report it, and help us learn from it."

Podcaster:

That feels really important in charity work, where people often want to keep helping no matter what.

People Leader:

Absolutely. Our work is about compassion, but safety has to come first. A good leader reinforces that safety comes before service. We can care deeply and still set boundaries. We can be kind and still say, "Aggression is not okay here."

Podcaster:

How do you build that confidence in your team?

People Leader:

By coaching, not criticising. We talk about near misses. We practise de-escalation language. We encourage reporting, even when no one was hurt. And we challenge the idea that aggression is "just part of the job." It is not. It is a risk we need to notice, report and reduce.

Podcaster:

So what makes a good leader?

People Leader:

- A good leader creates a culture where people feel safe, supported, prepared and never alone. We do this by offering support such as:
- Team Talks for scenario-based learning with team
- Risk Assessment templates
- Post incident review template
- Threat Assessment processes and panels
- Safety partners

Reflection questions to answer:

Reflection Questions for People Leaders

- What behaviours do I role model during stressful situations?
- Do team members feel safe raising concerns with me?
- What aggression risks may have become normalised?
- How do I respond when team members report incidents?
- What messages do my actions send about safety priorities?
- Am I reinforcing safety or unintentionally reinforcing “just cope”?

Learning summary

Across this course:

- You have explored how work-related aggression can affect individuals,
- teams,
- service delivery and workplace culture.
- Why it must never be accepted as “just part of the job”.
- You have learnt how to recognise different types of aggression,
- identify risk factors in the environment,
- the people involved and the way work is organised, and reduce risk through clear expectations, safe systems, training, supervision and support.

You have also practised:

- responding early to escalation,
- using calm and respectful de-escalation strategies,
- following Personal Threat Response processes,
- supporting team members after incidents,

- reporting and reviewing events, and
- using leadership as a key control to create safer, more confident teams.

Congratulations on completing this course, and thank you for the care, commitment and leadership you bring to keeping yourself, your team, volunteers, customers and the people we assist safe.