

Introduction

As National Park Service employees, volunteers, and partners—we often find ourselves engaged in meaningful conversations and dialogue with visitors throughout our parks. Through these experiences we tend to see the best of humanity. However, periodically we find ourselves in a situation that requires practiced skills in de-escalation. Whether we are reminding visitors of guidelines, approaching an unknown situation or being approached by a visitor that is upset, how we handle ourselves and our emotional presence can make all the difference in the world.

At any moment you may find yourself in a situation of conflict that requires quick calm, safe actions, and a professional response. Awareness of the potential conflict and how you will respond is critical in de-escalating any situation in a professional and safe manner.

Two areas of potential conflict are of particular concern for front line employees

1. Guidelines related to social distancing and face covering have proven to cause conflict between people sharing the same space. NPS employees need to be aware of how visitors may respond to the public health guidelines being implemented in our sites. Responses may be predicted based on societal clues—be prepared for visitor responses and know exactly what your park is asking of visitors based on [National Park Service \(NPS\)](#), [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), as well as state and local guidance. **REMINDER:** Front line employees are not to “enforce” the public health guidelines, such as social distance and face covering. We will only be posting signs, floor stickers, and provide reminders as needed.
2. Racism and xenophobia are actively being practiced throughout the country, and it is possible that these extreme attitudes and behaviors will show up in our parks. As employees, you must prepare for these attitudes and how you will respond. This behavior is not acceptable in any situation. Take the appropriate actions as laid out by any park protocols that have been designed in partnership with your law enforcement staff or community law enforcement partners.

De-escalation through Conversation

SLOW:

As staff, much of our time is spent preparing for positive and informative conversations with visitors, but preparing ourselves for difficult and emotional conversations is just as valuable. Sometimes when confronted by a visitor who is angry or upset, it can feel like everything is happening all at once. If we could **SLOW** things down and understand what is happening, we may be able to de-escalate a tense conversation or encounter. “SLOW” stands for “stay cool,” “listen,” offer validation,” and walk away.”

Note: SLOW is not intended to be followed in sequence, but rather as a framework for approaching tense or emotionally charged interactions.

STAY COOL

Remember, the visitor does not know you personally, so try not to take their comments or actions personally. It is hard to do, but allowing a visitor’s words or actions to get under your skin will only escalate the situation. When people are feeling hurt, vulnerable, ignored, or unsafe, emotions tend to dictate their behavior. Keep a composed tone of voice and body language.

LISTEN

When a visitor is upset, often hearing them out will help. Allow them to express what is upsetting them. To show that you are listening, try restating, reflecting, or summarizing what you have heard. When someone feels like they are being listened to, they feel valued and important. This can often lead to a calmer conversation.

OFFER VALIDATION

We’ve all been there. Upset, angry, or frustrated with a situation or request that is beyond our control. Sometimes we just want someone to tell us that the way we are feeling is valid. You don’t have to agree with a visitor’s beliefs, values or interpretation of a situation, but a simple, “that sounds frustrating” goes a long way. Listen and acknowledge you hear the concern.

WALK AWAY

Sometimes, unfortunately, nothing you can do or say will calm a situation. Know when to leave and trust your judgement and pre-planning. Pay attention to body language, reactions from others nearby and other factors that point to the need to walk away. Don’t let anyone else take control of you and your emotions. If the interaction is turning into an unsafe situation, walk away and get some help. A supervisor or law enforcement should step in at that point.

Scenarios:

Take the time to practice. It is with practice and experience that we can assess and respond to difficult and potentially explosive situations. Use the scenarios below or make some of your own. Practice **SLOW** and experience how each instance feels different based upon each situation.

Discuss each scenario as a group. Have individuals, who are willing, role play it. Use the designed scenarios below or modify them for your own situation. Practice using various visitor responses to the situation. Use the questions to debrief each scenario:

Scenario 1: Social Distancing

You are walking in the park when a visitor approaches you to ask a question and gets within 4 feet.

Part 2: They refuse to comply.

Scenario 2: Face Covering

You are walking on a quiet trail with no one else around when a visitor approaches you without a face covering on and gets within 4 feet.

Scenario 3: Limited Services and Closures

You are working the information desk when a visitor approaches inquiring about what services are available. Upon finding them limited, they become agitated and a bit irritated and state they do not believe the virus is that deadly, and that it is a conspiracy.

Scenario 4: Xenophobia

A visitor approaches you and says, "I sure hope that you are not letting busloads of Chinese people into the park."

Scenario 5: Racism

As an employee of Asian descent, or working beside an employee of Asian descent, a visitor refuses to speak to you or your Asian co-worker. They state; "I don't care if you (they) are wearing a mask, I do not want to engage with you (them) because they carry the virus and I want to protect myself from you (them)."

Scenario 6: Conflict between Parties

As you are roving near an outlook or point of interest, and you observe two visitors who are shouting. They both want the other to move back from the viewing area so their family can take a photo at a safe social distance.

Scenario 7: Conflicts between Visitors

Visitor approaches you and states; "They aren't distancing!" or "This person got close to me!" or "Their group is too big." What is your response to their concerns?

Scenario 8: Wildlife

On the way to your office, you see a visitor feeding wildlife.

Scenario 9: Crowded Spaces

Visitors are not complying with social distancing recommendations and a visitor demands that you do something about it. They state, "If someone gets me sick, I will come back to you."

Scenario 10: Disabled Visitor

A visitor that is hard of hearing asks you to remove your mask because they need to read lips to understand what you are saying. What are your options to keep this situation from turning negative?

Scenario 11: Limited or no Indoor Access – Potential Health Concerns

On a hot summer day, visitors normally like to go indoors to cool down. With those facilities closed or limited, people will be over-heating potentially. How do we manage angry people who cannot cool down?

Scenario 12: Marked Spacing Violations

A line of people is waiting to speak to you, but the visitors are not maintaining their distance per the ground markings. You make an announcement for folks to "please be patient and maintain six feet apart." You hear someone say, in a loud and aggressive voice; "If you would get back to work, we could all get through here and go see the park!"

Scenario 13: Face Covering Deniers

A group of visitors approach you to ask a question and make fun of you for wearing a face covering. They say, “You do not look professional—that stuff doesn’t work anyway.”

Scenario 14: Jr. Ranger

A visitor insists that you give their child special attention, because they just completed their Jr. Ranger requirements. A picture and handshake are demanded. You respond that you will need to keep your distance. They respond, “That is ridiculous! Kids don’t carry the virus, and you are just being over cautious at my child’s expense.”

Scenario 15: Depleted Resources

It's inevitable that restrooms will run out of soap, and hand sanitizer won't be available. So, how do we address someone who is upset about that (and additionally, in a situation where we don't have any to share with them)?

Scenario 16: Personal Attack

A visitor approaches you and begins to insult you personally, saying, “Its people like you that are the problem.”

Scenario 17: NPS Policy

“I would like to know why you are still enforcing this absurdity when the rest of the nation is open for business”

Scenario 18: I have the RIGHT

This is the, “These are my public lands and you are blocking off my access,” mentality. The visitor disregards what you say and will commit closure violations.

Scenario 19: Park Specific

[Design your own park specific scenarios.]

Scenario 20: Personal Experience

[Design your own park specific scenarios.]

Debrief:

Each scenario will be unique, and each of us have unique experiences. What may feel like an easy situation to one of us, might feel more complicated to another. It's important that your team understands what each other's strengths are. This will make your team stronger.

Gut check every scenario with GREEN, YELLOW, or RED. As you read each scenario, ask the students to hold up a **GREEN** card if they feel confident addressing this scenario, **YELLOW** if they feel a bit nervous, or **RED** if they feel like they would feel unsafe. Follow up with some exploratory questions.

1. For **GREEN** folks: Why do you feel comfortable with this situation?
2. For **YELLOW** and **RED**: What is challenging about this situation for you? What would make it feel less challenging?
3. What do you think this person is going through right now? Are they feeling challenged, threatened, unsafe?
4. How can you relate to this person?
5. What do you think this person wants from you?
6. How can we respond to this specific person?

Defusing Language:

To help stay calm and control your reactions, remember to focus on the professional goal—to keep people safe. No “magic word or phrase” will deescalate a situation, but some defusing phrases may help mitigate a potential volatile situation. Practice these or come up with some of your own to use in a high stress situation.

I am sorry you feel that way.

We are glad you are here.

I understand that you are frustrated.

You can help us.

For the safety of our staff and visitors.

I respect your opinion.

Let me share with you some alternatives.

Please respect others.

I am sorry you feel that way.

What is your biggest concern?

I appreciate your patience.

I am happy to help you with any questions about the park.

Want to learn more?

Professional development training is available. More information to come.