

CUSTOMER VIOLENCE & AGGRESSION FACTSHEET

Incidents of customer violence and aggression are on the rise, and the likelihood of you or your employees having an unsafe experience with a customer is higher than ever – but with just a bit of knowledge, planning, and training, you can prepare your team to safely handle any customer that might come your way!

What does customer violence and aggression look like?

Customer violence and aggression can include a range of actions and behaviours that can put the health and safety of you and your employees at risk of **physical and psychological** harm, including:

- physical assaults (e.g. hitting, kicking, pushing, grabbing, or throwing objects);
- verbal assaults (e.g. yelling insults, name-calling, or harassment);
- intentionally coughing, spitting, or sneezing on someone (especially since the COVID-19 Pandemic);
- sexual assault or other indecent physical contact;
- behaviour that causes a fear of violence or harm, like stalking;
- discriminatory behaviour, where the target of the violence and the nature of the violence occurs because of an attribute like race, gender, sexual identity, or religion.

Keep an open mind, as customer aggression can occur in unexpected ways, for example:

- Customers targeting employees online via their personal social media accounts.
- The customer could be a partner or family member of your employee in cases of domestic and family violence.

Why is it important to prevent and manage customer violence?

Preventing this behaviour can result in:

- happier, healthier, and more productive employees; and
- decreased disruption and fewer costs resulting from staff turnover & absenteeism.

In addition to these benefits, there are legal duties and obligations that employers must fulfil under Work Health and Safety (WHS) Law in every Australian state and territory, underpinned by a 'primary duty of care'.

The primary duty of care requires a 'person conducting a business or undertaking' (PCBU) to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their workers whilst they are engaged in work. PCBUs must also, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- provide and maintain a work environment without risks to health and safety;
- provide any information, training, instruction, or supervision needed to protect all persons from health and safety risks arising from their work; and
- monitor the health of workers and workplace conditions to prevent illness or injury arising from their work.

Important Notes

- These duties extend beyond just the risk of physical harm or injury, and employers should also manage the risks to psychological health and safety.
- Regardless of whether physical or psychological harm occurs, you may still be liable for on-the-spot fines, and criminal offences & penalties if you fail to meet your obligations under WHS Law.

How should employers manage the risk of customer violence?

There are four main steps to take when managing WHS risks, which we will step through in the context of customer violence. The steps are as follows.

1. Identify hazards

- Hazards are anything that can cause harm. We've already identified our hazard as 'customer violence and aggression'.

2. Assess risks

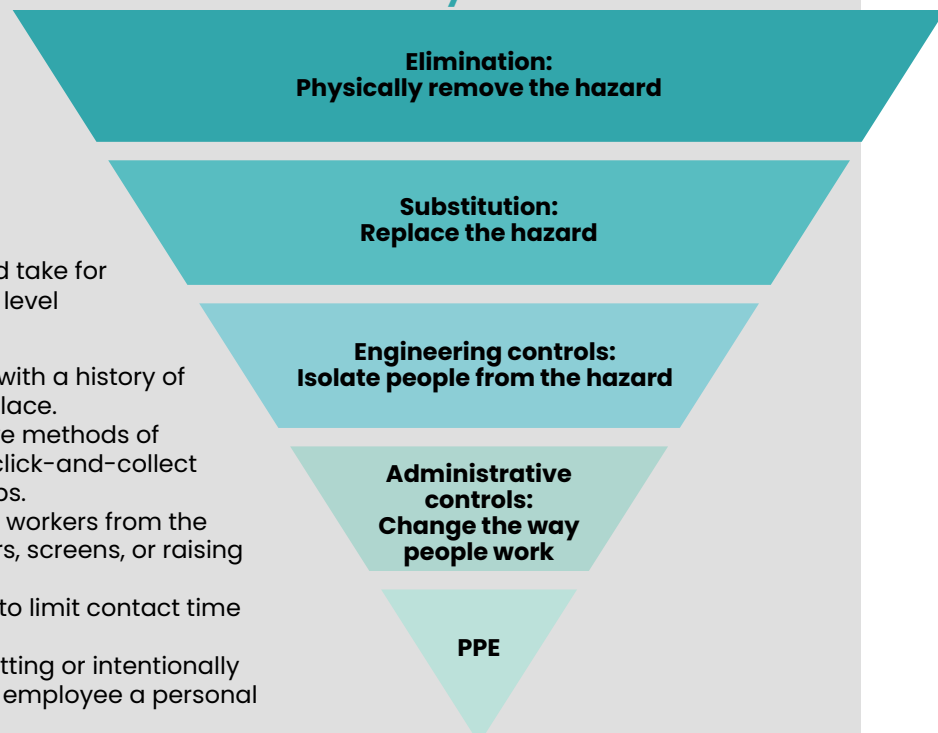
- We need to assess the risk associated with the hazard in consultation with your workers. To do this, you should work out:
 - a) how hazards cause harm;
 - Understanding how the harm could be caused allows us to tailor our efforts to control it.
 - b) how severe the harm could be; and
 - Do certain tasks or situations affect the severity of harm that can come from customer violence?
 - c) the likelihood of harm occurring;
 - Are there certain contexts, locations, or times of day which present a higher likelihood of customer violence occurring?
 - Has customer violence happened before, and if so, how often?
 - Would repeated exposure to the hazard increase the likelihood of harm occurring?

For example, customer violence can cause harm by either resulting in physical injury, or by acting as a source of psycho-social stress. If there is too much stress or it is unmanaged, this can result in psychological injury. The severity and likelihood of harm may be higher if a customer is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

3. Control risks

- The Hierarchy of Controls is a system used to identify the most reliable or effective way of controlling a WHS risk; with the first and highest level of control offering the most reliable protection from risk and the lowest level of the hierarchy offering the least reliable protection (i.e. Personal Protective Equipment or PPE for short).
- Examples of control measures you could take for customer violence with respect to each level include:
 - i. Elimination: banning customers with a history of violence from entering the workplace.
 - ii. Substitution: providing alternative methods of customer contact, e.g. online or click-and-collect services, no contact delivery drops.
 - iii. Engineering controls: separating workers from the public, e.g. with protective barriers, screens, or raising the height of counters.
 - iv. Administrative: rotating workers to limit contact time with customers.
 - v. PPE: using face shields where spitting or intentionally coughing is a risk, or giving each employee a personal distress alarm.

Hierarchy of Controls



4. Review control measures

- Once you have implemented these controls, you must maintain, monitor and review them to make sure they remain effective. Reviews should occur:
 - after instances of customer violence;
 - when concerns are raised around the effectiveness of risk control measures;
 - when there's a significant change in the workplace that could impact previous risk assessments; and
 - at a regular interval (i.e. yearly).

How to de-escalate a situation with an aggressive customer?

Under WHS Laws, we all have a role to play in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace. This is why it's so important to:

- educate employees on your policies and procedures in relation to customer violence; and
- provide training to your employees on customer violence, the procedures to follow, and skills they can use to identify, manage, and de-escalate aggressive customer behaviour.

The first step in de-escalating aggressive behaviour is identifying the signs of it. The following list is not exhaustive, but they are a helpful start in learning how to spot an aggressive customer.

Verbal Indicators:

- Raised voice or shouting
- Threatening language
- Use of profanity
- Insults or derogatory remarks

Non-Verbal Indicators:

- Intense eye contact
- Clenched fists or tense body language
- Invasion of personal space
- Aggressive posturing

Environmental Awareness:

- Identify potential triggers (long lines, out-of-stock items, etc.)
- Monitor overall store atmosphere
- Recognize group dynamics that may contribute to tension

Importantly, if the signs of aggression cause you or your employees to fear for your safety, then you should:

- seek assistance from colleagues, security, or management in lower-risk situations; or
- contact the police by calling 000 if you are in immediate danger.

If the signs of aggression are of a lower intensity, then you should proceed to attempt de-escalation of the situation. We use a range of verbal and non-verbal techniques to communicate, and de-escalation is no different. Here is a list of some the techniques you might use tend to de-escalate customer aggression:

Verbal

Active Listening:

- Allow the customer to express their concerns.
- Demonstrate empathy by acknowledging their feelings.
- Repeat their concerns to show understanding.

Stay Calm and Professional:

- Maintain a composed demeanor.
- Speak in a calm and measured tone.
- Avoid becoming defensive or argumentative.

Use Positive Language:

- Frame responses in a positive manner.
- Focus on solutions rather than problems.
- Offer alternatives when addressing issues.

Non-Verbal

Body Language:

- Maintain open and non-threatening body posture.
- Avoid crossing arms or displaying aggressive gestures.
- Make eye contact without staring.

Proximity and Personal Space:

- Be aware of personal space boundaries.
- Maintain a respectful distance.
- Allow the customer space if needed.

Use of Physical Environment:

- Ensure there is an exit route for both the employee and the customer.
- Avoid cornering the customer.
- Position yourself in a way that allows for a quick exit if necessary.



De-escalating aggressive behaviour is a skill that we can train and improve, so you should seek out opportunities for you and your employees to practice and improve, you could:

- conduct role-playing scenarios to practice de-escalation techniques; and
- encourage open discussions on challenges and successes.

By investing in comprehensive de-escalation training, your retail staff will be better prepared to handle challenging situations, fostering a safer and more pleasant shopping experience for everyone involved

What to do if an incident of customer violence or aggression occurs?

Unfortunately, despite your best efforts, it is still possible for an incident of customer violence to occur. If anyone at your workplace is in immediate danger, call 000.

You should have a procedure in place covering what to do at the time of an incident and after an incident. Immediately after an incident occurs at the workplace, you should:

- address immediate safety issues and ensure that everyone is safe.
- provide first aid or urgent medical attention where necessary.
- provide individual support where required, including psychological support to the victim and other workers.
- report criminal acts such as physical assault, sexual assault and threats to harm someone to Police on 131 444.
- record what happened, who was affected, and who was involved.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

The information provided in this document is of general nature and should not be regarded as legal advice. The National Retail Association Limited accepts no responsibility or liability for any damage, loss, or expense incurred as a result of reliance on information contained within this factsheet. Seek independent professional advice in relation to your own circumstances.

Looking for support and training for you or your employees on how to manage customer violence and aggression? The National Retail Association has a dedicated course facilitated by our team of experienced HR practitioners on managing customer violence and de-escalation skills. For more information, phone our team on **1800 RETAIL (738 245)** or enquire by email [here](#).

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