Workplace Violence Prevention and Safety

Introduction: It's likely you'll sometimes encounter aggressive or violent situations in psychiatric emergency rooms and inpatient units. They're part and parcel of the job, but that doesn't mean you're left without tools to handle them. Several training programs, like AVADE and Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI), are designed to teach employees how to stay safe in high-risk environments. Surprisingly, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) doesn't mandate these trainings, but several states do. Regardless of the mandate, sign up for trainings if your hospital offers them and make an effort to engage in regular refresher sessions. You can learn surprisingly effective self-defense techniques in the trainings' role-playing scenarios. Here are some key points.

Awareness
- Be aware of patients' histories, including triggers, and previous aggressive incidents.
- Pay attention to patients' body language. Agitation, pacing, clenching fists, or a tense posture can be precursors to aggression.
- Listen for changes in tone or volume that might indicate rising stress or aggression.

Avoidance
- Employ de-escalation strategies to de-escalate potential conflicts (*see FS on verbal de-escalation techniques*).
- Ensure there is enough space in consultation areas to prevent patients from feeling trapped.
- Minimize exposure to stimuli like loud noises or bright lights for agitated patients.

Defense
- Learn techniques to protect yourself without harming the aggressor.
- Techniques include:
    - Blocking: Learn how to block an incoming hit without engaging in a counterattack.
    - Release Techniques: If grabbed, know how to break free using minimal force.
    - Positioning: Keep yourself in a stance that allows for mobility and balance, ready to move away quickly if needed.
    - Containment: Learn techniques to contain a patient if they pose an immediate risk.

Escape
- Familiarize yourself with the unit layout, including exits and safe zones.
- Position yourself nearer to exits than patients during consultations.
- Avoid places where you could be trapped.
- Understand protocols for discreetly signaling emergencies, like panic buttons, alarms, or coded messages. Wearable emergency alert buttons provide a fast way to signal for help.

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