


Praise for Douglas E. Noll's

DE-ESCALATE



When faced with someone's anger, we're inclined to react emotionally to the words hurled at us, responding with silence or more words hurled the other way. Neither tactic works to bring understanding or peace. Douglas Noll encourages us to ignore the words and work with the emotion to "de-escalate" the destructive passion in just a few minutes. This book is written so the reader can learn to work with understanding what's behind the anger by ignoring the words and focusing on the emotions and reflecting them back. I'll be recommending this book to clients with troublesome teens.

—**Dr. Georgina Cannon**, author of *The Third Circle Protocol*

The skills and techniques taught in this book and used by Douglas Noll and his colleague Laurel Kaufer have been instrumental in transforming the lives of hundreds of female inmates in California prisons. These skills have demonstrated that when utilized as they have been taught, they will help anyone de-escalate any argument, fight, or disagreement. I have observed the effects and benefits of using these skills within our programs. The end result was the ability to obtain resolution to many issues and bring about peace within the prisons in which they do this powerful work.

—**Velda Dobson-Davis**, retired chief deputy warden,
California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

De-Escalate: How to Calm an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less is based, in part, on the pioneering work in listening skills by Robert Bolton, the recent advances in understanding neuroscience, and the work that Doug Noll and I have been doing in California prisons since 2010. This book explains the skills we teach and why they work and provides concrete examples for de-escalating highly emotional people. We have seen these skills tested over and over again in many workshops, and they work! Whether you are dealing with an upset child or a politically polarized family member, using these skills can keep you centered and in control and help you move through conflict productively.

—**Laurel G. Kaufer, Esq.**, cofounder of Prison of Peace

Doug Noll is one of the foremost thinkers, teachers, and practitioners of conflict resolution and mediation. We've taught together for more than a decade, and I'm still learning as I watch him transform skeptical mediators, judges, and law students into conflict de-escalators. He quickly trains hard-boiled lawyers to affect label unsuspecting dinner waiters and Starbucks baristas to their amazement. They return the next day full of successful stories of developing deeper, empathic connections in seconds. In *De-Escalate*, Doug makes that research and practice-driven insight real through hopeful stories from the most hardened criminals. As usual, Doug spells it out so that you can de-escalate parents, supervisors, teachers, and other disputants immediately. Do yourself a favor—read the whole book. It will be another effective tool in resolving conflict.

—**Don Philbin**, mediator, adjunct professor, creator of
Picture It Settled, and curator of ADRtoolbox.com

De-Escalate: How to Calm an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less is a ground-breaking new book on truly effective listening. Doug Noll teaches us to ignore the words of an angry person and focus only on the emotions. Using techniques that have been shown by neuroscience to quiet the emotional centers of the brain, he can teach anyone how to manage strong, angry emotions while remaining calm. Anyone can benefit from this book and Noll's ideas. Strongly recommended.

—**Eric Galton**, professional mediator, Austin, TX

Doug Noll's latest book, *De-Escalate: How to Calm an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less*, is an extremely valuable addition to the conflict resolution and peacemaking literature. Doug builds on the current knowledge and literature in the field and adds to it by revealing skills developed through his years of experience as a mediator and peacemaker. His additions are grounded in neuroscience and refined in the Prison of Peace project. Just as he and his colleague Laurel Kaufer have trained hundreds of inmates in California prisons to be peacemakers and mediators, he now is making these valuable ideas and skills available to you, the reader. You can learn how to respond to any provocation calmly and compassionately. Follow his simple, elegant, counterintuitive steps and you will transform your life and the lives of those around you.

—**Ron Claassen, MDiv, DMin**, professor emeritus (peacemaking and conflict resolution) and coauthor of *Discipline That Restores* and *Making Things Right*

DE-ESCALATE



DE-ESCALATE



How to Calm
an **ANGRY** Person
in 90 Seconds or Less

Douglas E. Noll

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Aleya Dao.
I also dedicate this book to the inmates of Prison of Peace.
Each of you has been an inspiration to me.
I am so proud of you all.

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Foreword

Conflict. In today's world, it can feel as though we are being consumed by it. Discord exists in families, friendships, and the workplace. Turn on any news program or read any newspaper and you become witness to oppositional forces of governments, agencies, and individuals vying for power. That same news program will tell you about one human taking the life of another, domestic abuse, bullying, and a myriad of other unacceptable forms of aggression. Some form of conflict seems to permeate global society at every level, resulting in distrust and fear that ultimately erupts in an unproductive expression of anger.

What has brought us to the point where we accept disorder as a means of a resolution to a disagreement? What is conflict's cause, and how can we, as individuals and groups, alter the presumed consequence? Can we ever achieve peaceful conclusions to what may seem insurmountable disputes?

The answer to all of those questions can be found on the pages of *De-Escalate: How to Calm an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less*. This book provides us with an architectural blueprint needed to successfully navigate the smallest familial upset to the largest political conflict. And it all begins with emotional intelligence and the art of listening.

As co-founder of Prisons of Peace and through his work with the inmates of California's maximum-security prisons, Douglas E. Noll, JD, MA, has learned that the missing element of the equation is emotional intelligence, or "hearing" the emotions, not the words,

of others. Mastering this process presents possibilities most of us only hope for, even though each of us has experienced some form of conflict.

Doug flawlessly describes the steps that can neutralize discord and explains that by learning to ignore the powerful emotional trigger of verbiage, we shield ourselves from turmoil and open the door to identifying the emotional experience of another person. With that knowledge, we can reflect and validate what they are feeling and access a path for communication. The result of utilizing these simple tools can and does de-escalate tension.

Those are just the cornerstones of the process, but they create a solid foundation that presents possibilities and actions that are affirmative for both parties. The value of the skills outlined in *De-Escalate* are incalculable. These tools can be successfully utilized in any strained setting. Their application can achieve goals that previously seemed hopeless and unreachable. What's more is that the implementation of Doug's techniques affords each of us the opportunity to learn more about another person as well as ourselves.

De-Escalate is a self-help book as much as one of intervention with others. Both aspects are imperative if we choose to live together in neutral harmony.

Douglas's de-escalation process requires retraining our mental and physical being to be more receptive on an emotional level. We must set aside ego and the immediate response to reciprocate a contentious environment with equal rancor. That process might initially feel like capitulation, but, in fact, it's the basis of a position of perceptive awareness. With that understanding, the real problems behind escalated tension can be identified, and the solution begins to unfold.

Imagine having the ability to sit down with your child and engaging in a productive discussion that reveals the core of what is bothering him or her. What would it be like to approach a derisive coworker in a way that facilitates calm resolution? Envision a process that could

bring opposing civic leaders to a space where they might actually communicate. If politicians followed the path outlined in *De-Escalate*, we could all be the beneficiaries.

Doug developed this modality through years of experience as a trial attorney turned mediator turned peacemaker. The durability of his de-escalation process has proven itself time and time again. It affords anyone who reads this book the ability to enlist a method for more thorough understanding of and better communication with another human. In this day and age, *De-Escalate: How to Calm an Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less* is a primer for everyone.

—**Brit Elders**, author and
CEO at ShirleyMacLaine.com

Introduction

Dear Ms. Kaufer,

My name is Susan Russo and I am an inmate at Valley State Prison for Women. I am writing in hope that you might consider doing a workshop on the proper techniques of mediation for our Networking Group. This group of women not only want to better themselves but also help others in general population. I feel a mediation workshop would not only benefit the inmates but also the staff. You would do the workshop with the ladies in the Networking Group, and then we will take what we have learned and teach it throughout general population.

I am hoping that you might consider this and that I will hear from you soon. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,
Susan Russo, Valley State Prison for Women

Laurel Kaufer, my close friend and colleague, called me, read the letter she had just received from Susan, and asked, “What do you think?”

“I’m in,” I said without hesitation. If we could teach prisoners to be peacemakers, we could prove once and for all that anyone could become a peacemaker and stop violence anywhere. If it could be accomplished in a violent, maximum-security prison, where would it not work?

Getting permission to begin the project was no easy task. Even though Laurel and I are both accomplished lawyers, it was our first experience with a prison bureaucracy. Finally, however, we received the go-ahead. We started with our first group of women inmates in April 2010.

At that time, Valley State Prison for Women had the reputation of being the largest, most violent women’s prison in the world. The prison population was 3,480 in a facility designed to house 2,400 women. The fifteen women in our pilot group were all serving life or long-term prison sentences. They represented every walk of life, ethnicity, educational level, and socioeconomic background. They were tough, shut down, angry, and deeply wounded women. They were the forgotten untouchables of modern society. We had no idea whether our techniques would work with these hard cases, but these women wanted to end the fighting and arguing in their prison community and needed the skills to do it.

I cannot begin to describe the feeling of walking into a maximum-security prison on our first day. I am not easily intimidated, but walking through central control and hearing the multi-ton security door slide shut with a clang and loud click got my undivided attention—we were in the belly of the beast.

We were assigned to the D yard program office conference room. D yard was at least a quarter-mile walk through the outside main

yard. The morning was a typical crisp and clear April day in California's Central Valley. Laurel and I walked along silently, taking in the details of the prison environment: tall fences topped with razor-sharp wire, guard towers, large barren spaces with no vegetation—a bleak, depressing, and desolate place.

When we arrived at D program office, we immediately noticed the rectangular cages lining the wall and found out the cages were used to control angry inmates until the guards could deal with them. The yard sergeant showed us into the conference room. Dimly lit with fluorescent lighting and painted in institutional drab green, complete with concrete floor, this room was the definition of dingy. Half the chairs were broken and junked computers lay piled against the walls. It was cold and inhospitable. Laurel and I were used to teaching in bright graduate school classrooms or hotel conference centers. This was like nothing we'd ever experienced before.

Over the next fifteen minutes, our students made their way into the room. Black, white, Hispanic, young, middle-aged, old. All women. All long-termers or lifers. They were wearing prison blues with little or no makeup. A few wore dark glasses. Headwear ranged from baseball caps to do-rags.

I received some glares, suspicious looks, and skepticism; some of the women were meek and frightened. I could see the question in all their eyes: "What is this big, old, white guy lawyer doing here?"

And so it began.



In the fourth week of training, I realized that we had something powerful going on.

That day, we showed up at the prison early in the morning. I still had not gotten used to the heavy steel doors clanging shut behind me.

We began the quarter mile walk through D yard to the program offices and the shabby conference room that had become our classroom.

A tired fluorescent light flickered. One inmate, Sarah, had gotten there early. She was seated in a metal folding chair in a far corner. She was quietly sobbing. Laurel kneeled beside her. I stood at a discreet distance.

Laurel asked softly, "Sarah, what is going on?"

She was silent for a moment and then told us, "I've been in prison for years. I have a son who lives with my mother. I've written to him every week but haven't heard from him in three years. I only learn how he's doing through my mother.

"Two weeks ago, I decided to use the techniques you guys have been teaching me. I wrote him a different letter, using these new skills, describing how he must have been feeling all of these years. I basically affect labeled him in the letter, without ever talking about myself," she said, referencing one of the core listening skills we had taught a few weeks earlier.

Then she held up a piece of paper and a photograph. "Today, for the first time in three years, I received a letter from him. He's really angry with me but finally felt like I was listening to him. He's got a girlfriend, and he wants to come visit me," she said as she started to cry again. Obviously, they were tears of joy and happiness.

Laurel and I looked at each other. It dawned on us in that moment just how powerful these skills were turning out to be, how they were transforming these women's lives and the lives of their families. The power of listening and de-escalation skills had changed Sarah. That she could "listen" through a letter and get a response from her estranged son after years of silence was remarkable.

Since that day, we have witnessed hundreds of similar stories from inmates at both Valley State Prison and others. They have mediated disputes with parents, brothers, sisters, and children over the phone and during visits. One male inmate reconciled with his

ex-wife after fifteen years simply by listening to her in a new way. Families, friends, and even fellow inmates noticed profound changes as our peacemakers gained mastery over de-escalation and deep, empathic listening through our program.

From Valley State Prison, we expanded into two more women's prisons and a men's prison. Eventually, we trained a cadre of inmates in each prison to take up the training of other prisoners themselves. In 2017, our Prison of Peace Project conducted workshops and classes for any prisoner wanting to learn how to de-escalate violent situations quickly; so far, over fifteen thousand inmates have been touched by six hundred peacemakers and mediators. With grant funding, we have expanded to a total of eleven men's and women's prisons. Some of these prisons have Prison of Peace because our trainers were transferred and immediately started teaching their new communities the practices of peace. In addition, one of our colleagues has started Prison of Peace in Athens, Greece. There are plans for Prison of Peace projects in Italy and France.

This ripple effect of peacemakers all started with a letter from one woman, Susan Russo.



The Prison of Peace Project has been one of the most profound experiences in my career. I've been deeply moved, over and over again, by inmates who have learned and applied deep, empathic listening, leadership, and problem-solving skills to reduce violence in their prison communities. Their dedication to learning, improving, and serving their communities is what motivated me to expand the principles of Prison of Peace as much as possible so that every human wanting to learn the skills of peace may do so.

It is my intention to teach you how to de-escalate any situation and person quickly and efficiently. You will learn to do so without

losing control or composure. You will find a new competence and confidence in dealing with upset people in your family, at work, and in your community. You will be able to take insults, provocations, and disrespect from others without losing your cool. You will be able to stand in the presence of very strong emotions and say exactly the right thing in exactly the right way in exactly the right moment. In short, you will gain an immense amount of control over your emotional life. This will give you a power you never imagined possible.

As you learn and master these skills, you will experience five powerful transformations:

The *first transformation* will occur when you gain the insight that *we are emotional beings, not rational beings*. When you rid yourself of the idea that humans are rational, the actions and attitudes of those around you begin to make sense. You will be far less judgmental and critical while at the same time develop compassion and understanding.

The *second transformation* will occur when you learn about *emotional invalidation*. I call that the first deadly sin. It is pervasive and traumatizing. We are taught to invalidate the emotions of those around us as a way of managing our anxiety. When you become aware of emotional invalidation, you will be empowered to stop it.

The *third transformation* will occur when you understand and can begin the practice of *affect labeling*—the skill to listen to other's emotions. The first time you successfully affect label an angry child or emotional partner, your life will be changed forever. You will experience the enormous power of deep, empathic listening.

The *fourth transformation* will occur sometime after you have been practicing affect labeling on others. At some point, you will find yourself affect labeling your own emotional experiences. You will find that you can *calm yourself down, become centered, and be less reactive no matter the provocation*.

The *fifth transformation* will occur when you experience *egolessness* while affect labeling. When you affect label another person, your ego will dissolve, experiencing your essence as it is truly is. This is a profoundly grounding state of being.

This book is written so that you can learn these skills and immediately apply them to whatever challenging situation you might face. When you have the confidence and ability to listen to and reflect the emotional experiences of those around you, you will experience these five transformations. And your relationships with your children, partner, family, and community will be easier, deeper, and more rewarding.

Arguments will no longer be necessary. Conflict will no longer be something to avoid or fear. As you grow and shift, those around you will do the same. You will be giving people in your life a precious gift of emotional competency, and by doing so, you will become both a mentor and a master peacemaker in a crucial time when we most need it.

Civility is at a premium in a society that is ruled by bombastic hyperbole, alternative facts (more on this in chapter 10), and outright aggression. In the supermarket line, at school, at the dinner table, in a corporate office, or in politics, the skills needed to deal with strong emotions, to solve problems, and to de-escalate angry people are sorely needed.

I have witnessed a handful of dedicated inmates change the culture of their prison from one of violence to one of peace. It only takes your effort to effect transformative change on all of those around you. As more and more people learn and practice the skills taught in this book, we will see a slow and marked increase in civility and peace. As political scientist and author Robert Axelrod's computer simulations proved in the 1980s, the doves can push out the hawks.

Axelrod wrote: "A world of 'meanies' can resist invasion by anyone using any other strategy—provided that the newcomers arrive one at a time. The problem, of course, is that a single newcomer in such a mean world has no one who will reciprocate any cooperation. If the newcomers arrive in small clusters, however, they will have a chance to get cooperation started."¹ Axelrod found that peace and cooperation were more efficient ways of negotiating conflict than aggression and violence. When introduced into a hostile environment of hawks, even a small group of doves eventually forced violence out.

We saw this effect in the prisons. As peacemakers and mediators were introduced in small groups to an environment where peace and cooperation were unknown, changes began to occur. There was less violence and less brutish behavior. A small group of our trained peacemakers and mediators changed the violent culture of their prison. I have no reason to believe that the same cannot occur in your life, family, and community if you and a few others are willing to learn these skills and use them in your everyday lives.

In short, mastering and practicing these de-escalation skills will:

- Minimize arguments
- Increase understanding and empathy
- Transform important relationships
- Allow people to be heard in a profoundly deep way
- Create a new space for civility

- Provide a mechanism for talking about hard issues between people with radically different beliefs

What to Expect

As we move through life, our priorities and tasks naturally change. This book has been structured to follow an organic, typical life arc with examples of real-life situations that I created for you to practice and master. While you might be tempted to jump around, you will learn the most by reading the chapters in order the first time through.

There are valuable and universal lessons, insights, and tools in each of the chapters, beyond the specific life theme and situation, which may not pertain to your life at this time. For example, you may not be a parent or grandparent and have little need to de-escalate an angry child or teenager; however, those two particular chapters still offer potent training, tips, and scenarios you can easily role-play. You will quickly recognize that learning to calm an upset teen can be useful in calming any emotionally upset person, whatever age and situation. So, my advice is: to master the de-escalation process, read all the chapters, and then feel free to go back to those that resonate in the current stage in your life arc.

Chapter 1 establishes the foundational skills behind the process of de-escalation, as well as the understanding that we are emotional beings, which will begin to help you listen in a new and powerful way. Chapter 2 puts into action affect labeling and how we can become empathic listeners. Learning how to respond to our children's meltdowns, anger, and frustration without emotionally invalidating a child's experience is one of the most useful and powerful points in this book—and an excellent entry point for practicing the de-escalation process.

My students always ask me, "Okay, I've calmed the other person down. What do I do next?" Well, chapter 3 answers that question