

# How to respond to an erratic person on the subway



On May 1, Jordan Neely desperately ranted on an F train traveling through Manhattan. A fellow passenger placed the 30-year-old homeless man in a chokehold, killing him and setting off protests throughout the city.

The incident has served as a flashpoint for long-simmering public safety concerns and has left subway riders wondering what they would have done.

“The subway overall is the place where we ... see all of society’s crises playing out very vividly in public, in particular around housing and mental illness,” said Danny Pearlstein, policy and communications director at the Riders Alliance.

Whether a person is experiencing a mental health crisis or emotional distress, experts and mass

transit officials offered some core guidance when evaluating how to respond.

## Give people space

Matt Kudish, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City, said if you feel threatened, create some distance. “I think leaving the [train] car would be a really good first step,” Kudish said. “If you are seeing someone having a mental health crisis, and you are concerned, you should make sure that you do what you can to get out of that situation.”

If you can’t leave—say you’re stuck on a train in a tunnel—try to stay calm and avoid confrontation. Don’t make eye contact or use body language that could be perceived as hostile. Shelly Nortz, deputy executive director of policy at Coalition for

the Homeless, who has worked as a mental health counselor, said try not to make assumptions or act rashly.

“Homeless people and people with psychiatric disabilities are more likely to be the victims of violence and crime than they are to be the perpetrators,” Nortz said. “Even though there may be an instinct of fear when seeing behavior that may be troubling, it’s important to have a reality check about the fact that most people in the situation are not dangerous. They may be in distress and they may be expressing it vociferously.”

## Ask for help

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority advises customers to inform a transit worker, locate police officers in a station, or call 911 if a person appears to be at risk of harming others or themselves.

But Nortz cautions riders to think carefully before asking police to intervene, because it could escalate the situation and introduce the use of deadly force.

Instead, she suggested, look out for homeless outreach team members, who typically wear Department of Homeless Services garb, or emergency medical technicians, who have some training in de-escalation. If you do decide to call 911 or 311, say that you are calling about someone who appears to be experiencing a mental health crisis and ask for a social worker or intervention team to respond if they are available.

On train platforms there are also Help Points where riders can request aid, and some newer train cars are equipped with call buttons that connect to the conductor, the MTA said.

If you don’t believe you are in danger but want to help, you can dial 988 for the national crisis prevention hotline. That will connect you directly to 888-NYC-WELL, the city’s mental health helpline, where you can speak with mental health professionals.

Jordyn Rosenthal, advocacy coordinator at Community Access, a social services and supportive housing provider, said the hotline is a resource New Yorkers are alarmingly ill-informed

about and pressed for more public education.

“If people don’t know that these resources exist, how can we connect our community members in need?” Rosenthal said. “I want to see stuff about 988 all across the city.”

## De-escalate

Unless a rider is trained in de-escalation techniques, Kudish doesn’t recommend intervening directly. But you may find yourself in a situation you cannot exit. If that’s the case, consider some simple ways you might calm things down.

People with psychiatric disabilities who are visibly agitated could be overstimulated. If someone is in distress nearby, Nortz said, it could be a good idea to show some empathy and ask other passengers to turn off loud music or lower their voices.

Take cues from what the person in distress may be saying, Nortz said. A straightforward example is if a person shouts, “Get away from me!” Step back, Nortz said.

“People should follow their instinct: If a person is in distress because they’re hungry or they’re thirsty, offer them food, offer them a drink,” Nortz said. “And again, use your judgment. It’s not a good idea to mix it up with somebody.”

If you do have to speak with a person in distress, be very clear and calm and keep your voice low, Nortz added.

“Overstimulation is a problem I’ve seen, and people can really get wound up because there’s too much coming at them,” she said. “It’s one of the reasons that some people don’t do well in the congregate shelters because there’s too much stimulation. There’s too much noise. There’s too much light. There’s too much talking. And they just want some peace.”