

## Responding to Disruptive, Threatening or Violent Behavior

### What is Disruptive, Threatening or Violent Behavior?

**Disruptive behavior** disturbs, interferes with or prevents normal work functions or activities. Examples: Yelling, using profanity, waving arms or fists, verbally abusing others and refusing reasonable requests for identification.

**Threatening behavior** includes physical actions short of actual contact/injury such as moving closer aggressively, general, oral or written threats to people or property, (“You better watch your back” or “I’ll get you”) as well as implicit threats (“You’ll be sorry” or “This isn’t over”).

**Violent behavior** includes any physical assault, with or without weapons; behavior that a reasonable person would interpret as being potentially violent (e.g. throwing things, pounding on a desk or door, or destroying property) or specific threats to inflict physical harm (e.g. a threat to shoot a named individual).

### Indicators of Problem Behavior

If you observe a **pattern** or **change** in behaviors, attitudes or appearance that cause you concern, contact Student Health or Counseling immediately for a consultation.

#### Behavior:

- Upset over recent events(s) (work or personal crisis)
- Recently has withdrawn from normal activities, family, friends, co-workers
- Intimidating, verbally abusive, harasses or mistreats others
- Challenges/resists authority
- Blames others for problems in life or work; suspicious, holds grudges
- Use/abuse of drugs and/or alcohol
- Unwelcomed obsessive romantic attention
- Stalking
- Makes threatening references to other incidents of violence
- Makes threats to harm self, others or property
- Weapons – has or is fascinated with weapons
- Has a known history of violence
- Change in appearance (disheveled, sudden weight loss/gain)

#### Attitude:

- Is isolated or a loner
- Morally superior, self-righteous
- Feels entitled to special rights and that rules don’t apply to him/her
- Feels wronged, humiliated, degraded; wants revenge
- Believes to have no choices or options for action except violence

## Responding to disruptive, threatening or violent behavior

### STEP 1: General response to disruptive behavior (no threats or weapons)

- **Respond quietly and calmly.** Try to defuse the situation.
- **Do not take the behavior personally.** Usually, the behavior has little to do with you, but you are used as a target in the situation
- **Ask questions.** Respectful concern and interest may demonstrate that aggression is not necessary
- **Consider offering an apology.** Even if you've done nothing wrong, an apology may calm the individual and encourage cooperation. *"I'm sorry that happened. What can we do now that will solve the problem?"*
- **Summarize what you hear the individual saying.** Make sure you are communicating clearly. In a crisis, a person feels humiliated and wants respect and attention. Your summary of the individual's concerns reflects your attention. **Focus on areas of agreement to help resolve the concern.**
- If this approach does not stop the disruption, assess whether the individual seems dangerous. If, in your best judgment, he/she is upset but not a threat, set limits and seek assistance as necessary.

### STEP 2A: Step 1 response ineffective, individual **DOES NOT** seem dangerous

- **Calmly and firmly set limits.** *"Please lower your voice. There will be no disruptions in this office." "Please be patient so that I can understand what you need and try to help you."*
- **Ask the individual to stop the behavior** and warn that official action may be taken. *"Disruption is subject to District action. Stop or you may be reported."*
- **If the disruption continues** despite a warning, tell the individual that he/she may be disciplined or prosecuted, state that the discussion is over, and direct them to leave the office. *"Please leave now. If you do not leave, I will call the Police."*
- **If the individual refuses to leave** after being directed to do so, state that this refusal is also a violation subject to discipline, exclusion from work or arrest.

### STEP 2B: Step 1 response ineffective and the individual **SEEMS DANGEROUS**

- **If possible, find a quiet, safe place to talk** but do not isolate yourself with an individual you believe may be dangerous. Maintain a safe distance, do not turn your back and stay seated if possible. Leave the door open or open a closed door and sit near the door. Keep furniture between the two of you. Be sure a co-worker is near to help if needed.
- **Use a calm, non-confrontational approach** to defuse the situation. Indicate your desire to listen and understand the problem. Allow the person to describe the problem. *"I can see you are really upset."*
- **NEVER touch the individual yourself** to try to remove him/her from the area.
- Even a gentle push or holding the person's arm may be interpreted as an assault by an agitated individual who may respond with violence toward you or file a lawsuit later.

- **Set limits to indicate the behavior needed to deal with the concern.** *“You certainly have the right to be angry but breaking things is not OK.” “Please lower your voice.” “Please stop shouting (or using profanity) or I’ll have to ask you to leave.”*
- **Signal for assistance.** The individual may be antagonized if you call for assistance so use a prearranged ‘distress’ signal to have another staff member check on you to determine how you are. Make a pre-determined request of the staff member. Staff member should tell you they are not familiar with “how” to act on the request and ask you to come and show them.
- **If you need help,** the co-worker should alert your supervisor and/or the police. Use a phone out of sight/hearing of the individual.
- Do not mention discipline or the police if you fear an angry or violent response.
- **If the situation escalates,** find a way to excuse yourself, leave the room/area and get help. *“You’ve raised some tough questions. I’ll consult my supervisor to see what we can do.”*

### IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

- **Do not attempt to intervene physically** or deal with the situation yourself. It is critical that police take charge of any incident that can or does involve physical harm.
- **Get yourself and others to safety as quickly as possible.**
- **If possible, keep a line open to police until they arrive.** The more information the police receive, the more likely they can bring a potentially violent situation to a safe conclusion.

### Authority:

1994 California Division of Occupational Safety and Health issued Guidelines on Workplace Security, which requires employers to include, as part of their safety program, measures designed to make the workplace more secure from acts of violence.

### References:

Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student, 2010-2011 West Valley College. Developed by Student Health Services