Managing Potentially Violent Students

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Objectives:

• To recognize signs of emotional distress in students
• To list three or more ways to help students in emotional distress
• To recognize high risk factors corresponding to potentially violent students
• To verbalize appropriate action when confronted with a violent student
Role of Faculty or Staff:

- Recognize behavior changes
  - Inconsistency may be a “cry for help”
- Express your concern to student (first step in successful problem resolution)
- Help them explore alternatives
- Respect cultural differences
- Refer them to counseling and psychological services, if needed
What counseling services are available in your school?
Signs of Emotional Distress:

- Inability to concentrate
- Confusion
- Persistent worrying
- Social isolation
- Increased irritability
- Bizarre behavior
- Missed class/assignments
- Procrastination
- Dangerous behavior
- Restlessness
- Disheveled appearance
- Mood swings
- Indecisiveness
- Depression/Anxiety
Guidelines for Interaction:

• See the student in private to minimize embarrassment/defensiveness
• Acknowledge your observations/perceptions
  – Comment on strange or inappropriate behavior
• Listen carefully to student’s perspective
• Identify your concerns and student’s concerns
• Explore alternatives
• Be as flexible with the student as possible
• Keep your involvement within realistic limits of your time and skill
Goals:

- To maximize communication
- To mobilize resources
- To optimize learning
- To prevent escalation to violence
High Risk Factors for Violence:

- Violent drawings or writings
- Threats of violence toward others
- Past violence or aggressive history
- Animal torturing
- Recent relationship break
- Isolation
- Perceptions of being teased
- Inappropriate use or access to firearms
Risk Factors for Violence (continued):

- Social withdrawal
- Substance abuse
- Family stressors
- Being noted by peers as being “different”
- Low school interest
Understanding Verbally Aggressive Students:

- Anger and frustration with situation becomes displaced to faculty.
- Verbal abuse may follow when frustrating situation seems beyond the student’s control.
- Students may feel they will be rejected, and want to reject you first.
- They often realize the impact of the drama and intimidation behind their anger.
Managing a Verbally Aggressive Student:

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration
- Allow them to vent and identify what is upsetting them
- Reduce stimulation by going to a quiet place to talk
- Consider keeping your office door open or invite another faculty or staff member to join the conversation
- Tell them “When you yell and scream at me that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen”
Managing a Verbally Aggressive Student (Continued):

- If the student is in your personal space, tell them, “Please stand back; you are too close”
- Keep your voice calm and refrain from shouting or becoming punitive
- Deal with the situation (rather than looking away or ignoring it)
- Help the person problem solve and deal with the real issues when they become calmer
Violent or Physically Destructive Students:

- Violence may result from emotional distress
- Violent behavior is rare
- May occur when the student is totally frustrated and feels there are no other options
Managing Violent Students:

- Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging intensity
  - “I can see you are really upset and mean business. You must have some serious concerns on your mind”

- Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable
  - “You certainly have the right to be angry, but screaming, hitting (breaking things) is not O.K.”

- Stay in an open area
Managing Violent Students (Continued):

- Take warning signs seriously
  - Yelling, screaming, clenched fists
  - Statements like “You leave me no choice”
- Divert attention
- Consider saying “If you hit me, I can’t be of help”
- Refrain from touching, threatening, daring, taunting, or cornering student
- Get help of other staff, University Police, or counseling services
What would you do if an agitated student came into your office? She was saying you have been totally wrong in her grading, and she began to throw books...
Conclusion:

- Student violence is a very real danger
- Knowledge of risk factors and development of policies provide reasonable safety
- Assessment and early intervention are needed
- Help students in emotional distress
- Prevent violent behavior

Enhancing Communication is the Key!
References:


This presentation was created in 2004.