Dealing with Disruptive or Troubled Students

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Adapted from presentations by Florida International University and Responding to Distressed Students by CAPS at FGCU.
Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Recognize disruptive or troubled behaviors
- Explore proactive interventions
- Identify strategies for responding to such behaviors
- Become familiar with available campus resources
Disruptive Conduct Violation in the Student Code of Conduct

Disruptive, disorderly or reckless conduct including, but not limited to, indecent exposure, threats, harassment, fighting or physically assaulting another person, recklessly causing physical harm, obstructing or disrupting teaching, research, administrative and public service functions (includes falsely reporting a fire, explosion or an explosive device, breach of the peace, causing a disturbance or being unruly.)
Disruptive Behavior

- What do you consider to be a disruption?
- What are some examples of disruptive behavior?
Inappropriate/Disruptive Behavior

- Cell phones and text messages
- Talking in class
- Yelling and screaming
- Persistent and unreasonable demands of attention
- Words and/or actions that have the effect of intimidating or causing fear for your safety
- Use of Profanity or fighting words
What is NOT Disruptive Behavior

- Culturally normative behavior (i.e., style of communication)
- Expression of differing opinions or disagreements
- Questioning authority (i.e., asking for justification for a grade, or wanting to speak to the chair/dean)
- Situational frustration with appropriate expression
- Individuals who need more time or special accommodations for special reasons and who have appropriate documentation
Possible Reasons Associated with Disruptive/Inappropriate Behavior

- Perceived insult
- Anger
- Anxiety or other related emotional state
- Other mental health issues (i.e., depression, loss of a relationship, family problems)
Troubled Behavior

- How would you describe a troubled student?
- What are some examples of behavior exhibited by a troubled student?
Identifying Distressed Students

- Be aware that anxiety, depression, and other mood states can come from many sources, from genetics to substance use (from caffeine to cocaine), family situations, relationships, stress... Don’t assume that you know where it comes from – stick to making observations and referrals.
Signs Associated with Troubled Students

- Noticeable change in mood or behavior (i.e., going from involved to apathetic or from being attentive to sleeping/not participating in class)
- Decrease in academic performance
- Deterioration in personal hygiene
- Consistently sad or lethargic mood
- Anxious, irritable or angry
- Sudden hyperactivity or rapid speech
- Dramatic weight gain or loss
- Strange or bizarre behavior
- References to suicide
- References to homicide
The Depressed Student

- Most students will experience periods of reactive (or situational) depression in their college careers. However, Major depression is a “whole-person” concern, involving your body, mood, thoughts and behavior. People with depression cannot merely “pull themselves together” and get better.
- The following are statements you may hear from a depressed student:
  - I’m sad / depressed / blue.
  - There’s no point in going on.
  - I wish I could go to bed and never wake up.
  - No one will notice if I don’t get to class/work/gym.
  - I’m not worth it.
  - Nobody likes me.
  - I don’t belong.
  - Nothing is going right.
  - I’m tired of all this.
  - I can’t get motivated.
  - I can’t focus.
  - Nothing is fun anymore.
  - I don’t care about anything.
The Depressed Student

HELPFUL

• Let the student know you’re aware he/she is feeling down and you would like to help.
• Encourage them to seek help, possibly suggesting CAPS.
• Never ignore remarks about suicide. **Always** report the student’s remarks to a CAPS counselor.

NOT HELPFUL

• Do **not** minimize the student’s feelings (e.g. everything will be better tomorrow).
• Do **not** bombard the student with “fix it” solutions or advice.
• Do **not** be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think he/she may be.
Anxious Students

- Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one’s well-being or self-esteem; however, some students experience an exaggerated response. One or more of the following symptoms may be experienced: rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing, chest pain, dizziness, sweating, trembling, and cold clammy hands. The student may also complain of difficulty concentrating, always being “on edge,” have difficulty making decisions, sleep problems, excessive worrying, or being fearful to take action. You may observe the student fidgeting, tapping fingers, or talking excessively.
- The following are statements you may hear from a anxious student:
  - I’m so stressed out / anxious / nervous / overwhelmed.
  - I can’t sleep at night.
  - I haven’t been eating like I usually do.
  - I have been going off on people a lot lately.
  - I feel like I’m crawling out of my skin.
  - I can’t relax.
  - I get so worked up I can’t breathe.
  - I feel so wired and edgy.
  - I can’t focus or concentrate.
  - I can’t stop thinking about things.
Anxious Students

HELPFUL
- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts, as this alone often relieves some of the pressure.
- Provide reassurance.
- Talk slowly and remain calm.

NOT HELPFUL
- Do not minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting.
- Do not take responsibility for his/her emotional state.
- Do not overwhelm them with information or ideas to “fix” their problem.
The Violent & Verbally Aggressive Student

- Frequently, assaultive behavior is predicted on the basis of observing hostile, suspicious, and agitated behavior. In the absence of the above symptoms the presence of hyper-vigilance (e.g., looking around a lot), extreme dependency, or delusions and hallucinations. Other signs and symptoms that may indicate a loss of control are fearfulness or anger. Verbal communication may be loud and pressured.

- The following are statements you may hear from a violent and verbally aggressive student:
  - Just you wait and see.
  - I’m so mad I could...
  - I hate everyone!
  - You better watch out!
  - You’re going to pay!
The Violent & Verbally Aggressive Student

HELPFUL

- Maintain a posture that is poised and ready to move quickly but not fearful.
- Avoid physical contact (only in a defensive manner).
- Maintain a voice quality that is matter of fact and monotone.

NOT HELPFUL

- Do not ignore warning signs (body language, clenched fists).
- Do not get into an argument or shouting match.
- Do not become hostile or punitive yourself.
Suspicious, Paranoid, or Poor Reality Contact

• Suspicious students are tense, cautious, mistrustful, and may have few friends. These students tend to interpret a minor oversight as a significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. Usually they are overly concerned with fairness and with being treated equally. They project blame on to others and will express anger.

• Paranoid students or those with poor reality contact have difficulty distinguishing “fantasy” from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused or irrational. Their emotional responses and their behavior may be bizarre and disturbing.

• The following are statements you may hear from a suspicious or paranoid student:
  - I know that you (they) are out to get me.
  - I feel people spying on me.
  - If I’m good in class then God will love me.
  - If I get an A then my mom will get a job.
  - The others are sabotaging me.
Suspicious, Paranoid, or Poor Reality Contact

HELPFUL

- Send clear, consistent messages regarding what you are willing to do and what you expect.
- Express compassion without being overly friendly or familiar.
- Be aware of personal boundaries and space when interacting (keep a comfortable distance, both physically and emotionally).
- Acknowledge the student’s feelings or fears without supporting his/her misperceptions.
- Acknowledge your concern and verbalize that he/she needs help.
- Respond with warmth and kindness.

NOT HELPFUL

- Do not be overly warm or sympathetically close to the student.
- Do not flatter the student, laugh with him/her or be humorous.
- Do not assure him/her that you are a friend or advocate.
- Do not argue or try to convince the student of the irrationality of his/her thinking, as this commonly produces a stronger defense of false perception.
- Do not play along (e.g. “Oh yes, I hear voices, devil, etc.”).
- Do not expect customary emotional responses.
Student Under the Influence

- Preoccupation with drugs, alcohol and an inability to participate in activities, deteriorating performance in class, periods of memory loss (blackouts), comments overheard about alcohol or drug use, risky behavior under the influence (i.e. risky driving, risky sex), may be signs of substance abuse.

- The following are statements you may hear from a substance abusing student:
  - I missed class today because I was too hung over to get up.
  - I can’t remember what happened at the party last night.
  - I can’t believe we had unprotected sex.
  - I don’t remember how I got home.
  - I don’t know how I got so banged up.
Assistant:## Student Under the Influence

**HELPFUL**

- Accept and acknowledge feelings of student; give him/her chance to air his/her feelings.
- Indicate your concern for the student regarding alcohol or other drug use.
- Be willing to admit the limitation of your assistance and be ready to refer to CAPS.

**NOT HELPFUL**

- Do *not* convey judgment or criticism about the student’s substance abuse.
- Do *not* make allowances for the student’s irresponsible behavior.
- Do *not* ignore signs of intoxication in the classroom.
Students with Eating / Weight Concerns

- Many college students are concerned with appearances. It may be a problem if the student loses (or gains) a noticeable amount of weight in a short time; usually wears baggy or excessive clothes; reports distinctive change in eating habits; talks about fear of fat or weight gain, seems preoccupied with food or weight; reports behavior including restricting intake, vomiting, using laxatives or diuretics, binge eating, or excessive exercise.

- The following are statements you may hear from a student with eating/weight concerns:
  - I am so fat I need to stop eating.
  - I can’t stop exercising.
  - I’m not going to eat until I weigh 103 lbs.
Students with Eating / Weight Concerns

HELPFUL

• Voice concerns in a caring way.
• Encourage the student to seek help, possibly suggesting CAPS.

NOT HELPFUL

• Do not minimize student’s concern about his/her weight.
• Do not fight with student about what he/she is or is not eating.
When to Refer

- Refer when...
  - The student asks for info you are unable to provide.
  - You have helped as much as you can and further assistance is needed.
  - Student admits there is a problem, but doesn’t want to talk about it with you.
  - Problem is more serious than you are comfortable or qualified to handle.
  - Your personal feelings about student will interfere with your objectivity.
Signs That a Student Needs Immediate Assistance

- Makes statements of a serious or imminent suicidal or homicidal nature.

- Appears to be out of contact with reality.

- Student is impaired by substances and unable to care for self.

- Bizarre, irrational, or highly disruptive behavior.
Disruptive and Troubled Behavior

- Disruptive behavior may warrant disciplinary action by the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution and referral to Counseling and Psychological Services.
- Troubled behavior may warrant referral and disciplinary action by the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution.
- These behaviors are not mutually exclusive but often involve both offices.
How to Deal with Disruptive and Troubled Students
What to Avoid

• Becoming defensive and/or hostile
• Taking things personally
• Discrediting warning signs
• Touching the person or invading personal space
• Minimizing the person’s feelings
• Kicking student out of class for rest of term
• Changing classrooms
• Denying student the opportunity to go to the chair or dean of dept.
• Making promises you can’t keep (grades, confidentiality)
What to Do

- Remain calm, lower your voice and speak slowly
- Be objective
- Use empathy/active listening
- Assess the situation for safety
- Acknowledge that there is an issue/concern and set up a time to meet with the student (use discretion)
- Meet with the student out of the classroom to allow both parties to express concerns; set clear expectations for future behavior
What to Do.....Cont’d......

- Be nonjudgmental
- Listen to content and feelings
- Help explore options
- Maintain clear boundaries
- Document discussion and follow-up in writing to student
- Make distinction between disruptive or troubled behavior – when in doubt, consult!
Proactive Measures

- Include the Student Code of Conduct in your syllabus and review behavioral expectations
- Address cell phone and other technology concerns in the syllabus
- Develop a safety plan the first day of class:
  - Locations of exits, phones
  - Identify students to volunteer to get assistance
  - Prearrange codes in depts.
  - Know University Police #s: provide to students
    - 590-1900 or 590-1911
- Be aware of cultural differences
- Be aware of warning signs
- Know your limitations
Documentation

Document situations and observations to put together patterns of behavior and to provide necessary information to write reports – include details, date, time, location, behavior, quotes, etc.

- Keep log of interactions
- Keep accurate records of observations of behavior – paper trail
- Keep copies of emails, messages, letters, etc.
- Follow up conversations with student in writing and keep copy in file
- Be factual and detailed, use concrete terms
- Keep out editorial language, suppositions
- Do not keep as part of an academic record
FERPA – Family Educational Right to Privacy Act

- Also known as the Buckley Amendment
- Law requires us to balance rights of student and university (academic freedom)
- Due process must be followed
- Students cannot be denied and education without a hearing first
- Faculty can refer students to Dean of Students’ Office and Counseling and Psychological Services but we cannot discuss details with you.
Crisis Situations

• What are examples of crisis situations?
Crisis Situations - Immediate Response

- Remain calm
- Assess Safety – yours, student’s
- If necessary, call University Police or 911
  - 239-590-1911
- Document incident immediately after
- Invite a professional in to debrief students and faculty if experience was confusing, scary (contact Counseling or Office of Employee Assistance)
- Provide student with a list of resources, including Counseling Center.
Counseling and Psychological Services

- CAPS provides the following: individual counseling (both personal and career), group counseling (determined by student needs), crisis intervention, consultation, referrals, psychiatric consultation, workshops and presentations.
- Fully staffed with Licensed psychologists.
- Can’t mandate counseling.
- Refer directly to us; you can call for an appt. or walk the student over.
- Confidentiality, student health fee.
Dean of Students’ Office and Judicial Affairs

- Adjudicate student conduct cases – Student Code of Conduct
- Admissions Clearance Process
- Dean Certifications
- Service indicators – holds
- Training and workshops
- Student Conduct records are private and confidential – not able to share outcome
- Faculty’s role as witnesses in process
Consultation and Campus Resources

- Contact us if you have any questions, each situation is unique and we will work with you to figure out a course of action.
- Faculty/Staff Emergency Guide – Green Folder
- BCAT- meets weekly, can refer a name to anyone serving on the committee to be discussed.

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): 590-7950
- University Police: 590-1900 or 1-911 for emergencies
- Student Health Services: 590-7966
- Prevention & Wellness: 590-7733
- Dean of Students: 590-7900
- Judicial Affairs: 590-7904
Questions?