

# Dealing with the Volatile Student

*This guide is an addendum to “Assisting Students in Distress.” It focuses more specifically on dealing with students who trigger concerns of safety—students who seem to have the potential of acting aggressively toward themselves or others. Early warning signs and imminent warning signs for potentially violent behavior will be discussed. Suggestions for effective ways to respond to the potentially volatile student and the potentially dangerous situation will also be addressed.*

**Oxford College  
Counseling and Career Services**

## **The Limitations of Profiling**

Student profiling is a term used to refer to a process in which checklists of behaviors and personal characteristics associated with youth who have perpetrated violence are used to gauge an individual student's potential for acting out in a violent manner in the near or immediate future. If a large number of items on the list appear to be true for a particular student, the assumption is that the student is at higher risk for committing violence.

The use of profiling by faculty and staff of educational institutions to identify potentially violent students is strongly discouraged by the National Academies (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine) and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). It is difficult to predict behavior and the task of making predictions regarding a student's propensity for future violence is an elusive task for even the trained and seasoned mental health professional. Richard Riley, the U.S. Education Secretary, contends a better way to enhance school safety is for faculty and staff to promote a caring environment that encourages a sense of connection among students and between students, faculty, and staff (Cooper, 2000). Elias and colleagues contend that schools play a major role in preventing violence by choosing to invest in social and emotional learning as well as academic learning. They believe the mission of schools must include teaching students "to engage in thoughtful decision making, understand signs of one's own and others' feelings, listen accurately, remember what we hear and learn, communicate effectively, [and] respect differences." Assisting students to develop competence in such social and emotional skills will not only reduce interpersonal violence but will also foster a caring and cooperative environment that supports academic learning (Elias et al., 1999).

## **Early Warning Signs**

It is inappropriate, then, and potentially harmful to use early warning signs as a checklist against which to measure the violence potential of individual students. These warning signs are offered, then, as an aid in identifying and referring students who may need the help of a trained mental health care provider. None of these signs alone is sufficient for predicting aggression and violence. These warning signs, however, when presented in combination, reflect a problem worthy of further exploration and concern.

The following warning signs are presented with the qualification that they are not equally significant and are not presented in order of seriousness:

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Excessive feelings of rejection
- Being a victim of violence
- Feelings of being persecuted
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors
- History of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes

- Use of drugs and alcohol
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to firearms
- Serious threats of violence

### **Responding to Early Warning Signs**

Because you come in frequent contact with many students, you are in an excellent position to observe students, identify those students who are troubled, and offer assistance. A few guidelines for responding to the troubled and, perhaps, volatile student are summarized below:

**Observe:** The first important step in assisting troubled students is to be familiar with the symptoms of distress and attend to their occurrence. An attentive observer will pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings.

**Initiate Contact:** It is important not to ignore strange, inappropriate or unusual behavior. If the student of concern is one with whom you feel safe and comfortable, talk to the student privately, in a space and time protected from unexpected distractions and demands. Present your concerns in a caring, direct, calm manner and state, with objectivity and specificity, the observations fueling your concerns.

If you feel unsafe in the presence of the student of concern, you can elect not to approach the student. If such is the case, express your concerns to a colleague. Perhaps there is another faculty member or staff member who feels comfortable approaching the student and can do so with the same level of familiarity and exposure to the student's problematic behaviors. Or you can request that you and your colleague(s) meet jointly with the student to gently and firmly present your concerns as a dyad or group.

Whether or not you expect the student to react to your words with volatility, it is always wise to take the position in the room which affords you easy, unobstructed access to the door. Also, it is wise to have posted within easy reach or visibility the phone numbers to call in case of emergency. Stickers listing emergency phone numbers designed to be placed on the receivers of your telephones have been printed and distributed to all faculty and staff. If you do not have such a sticker affixed to your phone, please request one from the Office of Academic Affairs.

**Whether or not you decide to initiate contact with the student demonstrating disturbing behavior, the College does request that you report the occurrence of any such behavior to a college administrator. Faculty is requested to report problematic behaviors to Karen Martucci, Ph.D., Director of Academic Services and staff is requested to report problematic behaviors to Joe Moon, Ph.D., Dean of Campus Life.**

**Offer Support and Assistance:** Among the most important helping tools are interest, concern, and attentive listening. To communicate to the student that you indeed do care and want to understand the student's point of view, paraphrase the essence of what the student is telling you in a way that summarizes the situation. Ask the student, as well, to summarize the

feedback you are providing. This will assure you that the student is accurately hearing your message. It may also help momentarily distract the student from his/her own feelings/thoughts promoting or perpetuating the unusual or volatile behavior. In the event that the student responds to your concerns with hostility or agitation, acknowledge the behavior and its impact on you. You may say, "I really do want to understand what is going on with you and I do want to help, but I am not at my best when I feel unsafe or attacked. If you would like us to continue our conversation, I will need you to lower your voice, sit down, calm down, etc. If you feel like you can't get a handle on your emotions, let's stop this discussion now and convene later today or tomorrow."

In the event that the discussion continues, proceed by encouraging positive action. Help define the problem, identify options, and generate coping strategies. This will likely entail suggesting resources the student can utilize to help promote behavioral change –family, friends, clergy, and counselors.

***Refer Directly to A Professional:*** Because many students initially resist the idea of counseling, the approach you assume in making such a referral is important. Be caring and firm in your judgment that counseling will be useful. Be clear about the reasons you are concerned. And be familiar with the procedures and services of the Counseling and Career Services or other help-giving agencies on campus. Suggest that the student call or make an appointment in person. Provide the Counseling and Career Services phone number (4-8394) and location (East Village Residential Complex, Beta Hall, first floor, in the same suite as Student Health Services). Remind the student that counseling services are free and confidential. Sometimes it is useful or necessary to assist the student directly in the appointment-setting process. In these instances, you can offer the use of your phone or call the receptionist yourself while the student is in your office. Or, you may think it wise to accompany the student to Counseling and Career Services.

The student may deny a problem, become angry, or refuse treatment in response to the recommendation that he/she seek help. Except in cases of emergency (the student is in imminent danger of hurting self or other), it is important to allow the student to either accept or refuse counseling. To help you with your feelings of helplessness, anger, or frustration in response to a student denying a problem or rejecting help, you might say the following. "I know you can refuse to go for help, but that will not stop me from worrying about you or caring about you. I may bring this up again to you later, and maybe we can talk more about it then." Or, "I know you can refuse to go for help. You have that right. But I hope you do know that the way you are behaving in my class is unacceptable and if you want to be successful in my class or elsewhere, you will need to learn new ways of dealing with your anger, frustration, disappointment, etc. Counseling is a resource for you to help you better understand your behaviors and help you change those behaviors that get in the way of you reaching your goals. If you choose not to go to counseling, I hope you find other ways to learn to deal with your anger more effectively. Bottom line, though, is that these behaviors (and you can be specific) need to stop."

***Consult with a Counseling and Career Services Staff Member:*** At any point in this process you may want input from a professional. A counseling center staff member could: offer suggestions on possible approaches you can take with a student; intervene directly with the student (if the student is willing); and/or provide you support and guidance. It is very likely that, in the course of your consultation, you will be asked to report, if you have yet to do so,

the identity of the troubled student to a college administrator—either Dean Moon or Dr. Karen Martucci. Administrators can set into motion a process whereby the identified student is discreetly monitored in multiple settings. Should the reports gathered from direct observation indicate that the student is clearly at risk of harming self or other, action may be taken to either notify the parents and/or mandate a professional evaluation of the student's mental status and functioning.

### **Imminent Warning Signs**

No single warning sign can predict that a dangerous act will occur. Rather, imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, faculty, staff, or other individuals. When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken immediately. Imminent warning signs may include:

- Serious physical fighting with peers or others
- Severe destruction of property
- Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons
- Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide
- Threats of lethal violence
- A detailed plan (time, place, and method) to harm or kill others, particularly if the student has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past
- Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons
- Concurrent intoxication

### **Responding to Imminent Warning Signs**

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self or other. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response.

In the event of an emergency situation, please follow these guidelines:

- Stay calm, as this will help you respond more effectively and help reduce the student's agitation or anxiety.
- Address the student in a clear, straightforward manner.
- State specifically your desire to understand student's needs, wants, point of view.
- Do not interrupt or challenge. Reflect, summarize and communicate concern.
- If possible, provide a quiet, private place for the student to rest while further steps are taken.
- Do not leave the student unattended.
- Contact Emory Police at Oxford (4- 8377) if the student appears to be dangerous to self or other. Or request that a colleague assist you in contacting the appropriate authorities. Tell the student "I will get \_\_\_\_\_ to help me understand better what you want.
- Create and use a code word for calling Campus Police if you feel seriously threatened. "Please call \_\_\_\_\_ to help me understand what I can do for this student."

- Contact the RLC on call by calling Emory Police at Oxford (4-8377).
- Be assured that the authorities you have contacted will handle the emergency.
- Prioritize your own safety at all times.

This document was designed to help you feel effective in: identifying the volatile student; intervening with the volatile student; and responding to emergencies related to dangerousness to self and other. Hopefully, equipped with information and guidance, you will feel more prepared to intervene and less fearful of the possible occurrence of violence on campus.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the **Counseling and Career Services at 4-8394**.

### **References**

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