Dealing with individuals who are upset, angry, or determined to get their way can be a frustrating or even frightening experience. Such behavior may disrupt normal work activities and cause those responding to feel defensive or threatened. Consultation, intervention, and referral can defuse a tense situation and prevent it from escalating. The following information will help you respond to such incidents.

WHAT IS DISRUPTIVE, HARASSING, OR THREATENING BEHAVIOR?

UC Davis policies prohibit disruption and obstruction of University functions and activities, verbal threats, and behavior endangering the health or safety of any individual.

**Disruptive behavior** disturbs, interferes with, or prevents normal work functions or activities. Examples: yelling, using profanity, waving arms or fists, or verbally abusing others; making inordinate or inappropriate demands for time and attention; making unreasonable demands for action (demanding an immediate appointment or a response to a complaint on the spot); and refusing reasonable requests for identification.

**Threatening behavior** includes physical actions short of actual contact/injury (e.g., moving closer aggressively), general threats to people or property, oral or written [“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 specific threats to inflict physical harm where the individual has the means to carry out the threat [e.g., a threat to shoot a named victim if the threatener is believed to have a gun], any physical assault, with or without weapons; or behavior that a reasonable person would interpret as being potentially violent [e.g., throwing things, pounding on a desk or door, or destroying property].

HOW TO RESPOND TO DISRUPTIVE OR THREATENING BEHAVIOR

1. **Respond quietly and calmly.** Try to defuse the situation.
2. **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.
3. **Ask questions.** Respectful concern and interest may show that aggression is not necessary or appropriate.
4. **Summarize what you hear the individual saying.** Make sure you are both communicating clearly. In crisis, a person feels humiliated and wants respect and attention. Your summary of the individual’s concerns reflects your understanding.
5. **Consider offering an apology.** Even if you have done nothing wrong, an apology may encourage the individual to calm down and work toward resolving the matter. “I’m sorry that happened. What can we do now that will solve the problem?”
6. **Focus on areas of agreement** between you to help resolve the concern.

IF THE 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 University action. Stop now or you may be reported.”
- **If the disruption continues despite a warning**, notify the individual that he/she may be disciplined or prosecuted, inform them that discussion is ended, and direct them to leave the office.
  “Please leave now. If you do not leave, you will be referred to Student Judicial Affairs/Personnel/the Police.”
- **If the individual refuses to leave after being directed to do so**, state that this refusal is a separate violation subject to discipline, exclusion from class/work, or arrest.
- **If you believe the behavior creates a safety risk or prevents the conduct of University functions**, call the UCD police and end the discussion/activity/class session.
IF THE INDIVIDUAL SEEMS DANGEROUS

- Maintain a safe distance, and do not turn your back.
- Leave the door open or open a closed door, and sit near the door.
- Stay seated if possible.
- Leave the room or leave the area if situation escalates.
- Call for help. Have a ‘distress signal’ so another can get help for you.
- Unless you are under physical attack, do not touch the individual.

- If possible, find a quiet, safe place to talk. Be sure a co-worker is near to help you 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.
- Never touch the individual yourself to try to remove him/her from the area. Even a soft push or grabbing an arm may be seen as an assault by an agitated individual who may respond with violence now or a lawsuit later.
- Set limits to indicate the behavior needed to deal with the concern.
  - “Please lower your voice.” “Please stop (shouting/using profanity) or I’ll have to ask you to leave.”
- Signal for help. The individual may be antagonized if you call for assistance so use a pre-arranged signal to have another staff member check to determine how you are. If you need help, the co-worker should notify your supervisor and/or alert the police.
- Do not mention disciplinary action or police intervention if you fear an angry or violent response.
- Find a way to excuse yourself and get assistance.
  - “You’ve raised some difficult questions; let me check, and I will be right back.”

THEN, LEAVE AND GET HELP.

CAMPUS RESOURCES

Call the UCD Police (2-1230) if an individual

- makes threats of physical harm toward you, others, or him/herself;
- has a weapon; or
- behaves in a manner that causes you to fear for your own or another’s safety.

In these circumstances, immediately contact the UCD Police or have someone call for you. Use a phone out of the sight/hearing of the individual. The Police will investigate, warn any intended victim, and determine whether the individual is dangerous, has committed a crime, or needs medical treatment.

FOR CRIMES IN PROGRESS OR ANY VIOLENT INCIDENT OR SPECIFIC THREAT OF IMMINENT VIOLENCE, CALL 9-1-1.

- Do Not attempt to intervene physically or deal with the situation yourself. It is critical that the 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 the police until they arrive. If you cannot stay on the line, call 911 and the dispatcher will direct the police to you. The more information the police receive, the more likely they can bring a potentially violent situation to a safe conclusion.

Call the Counseling Center (2-0871) for students or the Academic and Staff Assistance Program (ASAP) (2-2727) for staff if an individual appears to threaten harm to him/herself. Counseling or ASAP staff will arrange for appropriate intervention. For other individuals, or after hours, call the UCD Police or Suicide Prevention (756-5000).

Referral for disciplinary action

- Students: To refer students for suspected misconduct, contact Student Judicial Affairs (2-1128).
  Students who violate University or campus policies may be disciplined, including temporary or permanent exclusion from class. In an emergency, students can be suspended immediately or excluded from campus if there is cause to believe that their participation in activities or presence on campus will lead to violence or threats of violence, their conduct threatens the health or safety of others, or their disruption is incompatible with the orderly operation of the campus. An enrolled student cannot be removed permanently from a class for disruption without a formal process, either through a disciplinary hearing or through review by the department and dean’s office. Non-students and students not currently enrolled have no right to attend class without the instructor’s permission and can be removed permanently without a hearing.
- Employees: To refer employees for suspected misconduct, contact Labor Relations and Personnel (2-6660).
  Employees may be placed on immediate leave or suspension for serious misconduct which endangers others. Employees cannot be removed from their positions without formal process.

UC Davis Campus Response Team, Updated September 1997