

How to Support Students Who Are Behaving Disruptively in Class

Faculty may encounter situations where students are exhibiting disruptive behaviour in class. The key to dealing with these situations is to **diffuse the situation** and connect students to support, if needed.

ESTABLISH NORMS/CLASS EXPECTATIONS



Have an open and honest conversation about the norms of student behaviour during the first class. Involve the class in setting those norms. It will give them ownership over the situation and establish a common understanding of what is expected not only by you and of you, but also the expectations classmates have of each other.

UNDERSTAND THE EMOTIONS BEHIND THE BEHAVIOUR

Even before the pandemic, the level of stress and anxiety felt by students was on the rise. Students presenting as angry or disruptive may be exhibiting these behaviours because of stress or anxiety.



This does not excuse the behaviour, however being empathetic is key to diffusing the situation. Similarly, try not to take the situation personally. While it may be occurring in your class, the key is to remain neutral, steady, and objective.

BEING CALM IS PARAMOUNT

Take a deep breath, count to ten, or have a sip of water. You need to remain calm and in control of the situation. If you become angry, upset, or flustered, this will only make the situation worse. Be aware of your own body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. Remain polite and do not fall into the trap of arguing: this will not solve the issue.



ADDRESS THE DISRUPTION INDIVIDUALLY AND DIRECTLY



It is important that disruptions are dealt with directly and quickly, without anger. Be specific about the behaviour you take issue with and set limits. Always, it is very important that you respond to the student in a respectful way. Fellow classmates will notice how you respond to a disruptive student, especially if they feel your reaction is punitive. More intense situations may require that you speak to the student privately after class.

LISTEN AND CLARIFY

Do not jump to conclusions. Students are looking to you as a possible source of support. Allow the student to explain themselves and finish their thoughts. Again, empathy is vital. Do not be afraid to ask for clarification to ensure you understand the situation and where the student is coming from. Often, an individual will grow angrier if they feel they are not being heard.



MAKE A PLAN AND TAKE THE TIME TO EXPLAIN IT TO THE STUDENT

Try to make a plan that is win-win, while ensuring you take the rest of the class into account. Make sure to explain your plan to the student. Part of the plan may include connecting the student to other supports on campus.



FOLLOW THROUGH - YOU MUST DO WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD DO!

Do not make statements that you are not prepared to follow through on. For example, asking a student to leave the class should only be used as a last resort, and keep in mind the student may not leave. How would you handle that situation? Your goal should be to de-escalate a situation and moreover to keep that student safe. Be prepared: ensure that you know your institution's Mental Health Crisis Policy.



REFLECT ON THE INTERACTION

Having supported a student, it is also important to take a moment to reflect upon what happened and how you handled the situation. These situations can take a toll on your emotions, and it is important to ensure you are also practicing self-care. Consulting with colleagues can be a positive way of diffusing stress, sharing lessons learned, and continuing to learn new ways of supporting yourself and students. As always, respect the boundaries of confidentiality when sharing information about students.



DOCUMENT YOUR DECISIONS

Regardless of the outcome, it is important to document the situation. Documentation can be helpful not only in establishing patterns, but in learning new approaches as well.



RECOMMENDED FREE COURSE

www.morefeetontheground.ca: this course prepares you to support students on your campus who may be living with mental health concerns.

REFERENCES

Stanford University. (n.d.). *Dealing with disruptive student behavior*. Dealing with Disruptive Student Behavior | Tomorrow's Professor Postings. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1353>

University of Washington. (2022). *Best practices for managing disruptive behavior*. Office of the VP for Student Life. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://dsl.uw.edu/faculty/disruptive-behavior-in-the-classroom/best-practices/>

<https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1353>

[Best practices for managing disruptive behaviour | Office of the VP for Student Life \(uw.edu\)](https://dsl.uw.edu/faculty/disruptive-behavior-in-the-classroom/best-practices/)