DE-ESCALATING DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS
DE-ESCALATING DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS
A Two-Hour Workshop

AGENDA

2:00 pm – 2:20 pm  Introductions -Experiences
2:20 pm – 2:50 pm  Presentation – Three (3) Steps to De-Escalating Students
2:50 pm – 3:20 pm  Role Play Scenarios – Calming and/or Referring Students
3:20 pm – 3:50 pm  Questions/Discussion
3:50 pm – 4:00 pm  Evaluations

DE-ESCALATING DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

The word “escalate” literally means to “go up the scale” or intensify. To “de-escalate” is to reduce the intensity of an interpersonal situation, or “bring it down a few notches.” When a student is “escalated” it means that he or she is intensely emotionally upset; generally very angry or anxious or behaving in a bizarre way.

It is difficult for most people, without training, to be comfortable in the presence of a person expressing a high level of emotional intensity.

“AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION”:

Establish positive relationships with your students ahead of time. You might consider making a short announcement at the beginning of the semester, something like: “At our College, “students come first.” While I am here to teach you (subject of your class) I care about each of you as a person. If there is anything happening in your life which is making it difficult for you to do your work in class, please let me know. We have many student services on campus to help students.” You could pass out brochures from your mental health services site.

Here is where having established positive relations with your students ahead of time* will be of invaluable help to you. They can carry on reading
aloud to each other, continuing the discussion, seeing the film, etc., if possible, while you go outside with the student, escort the student to the mental health service site on campus or wait for the sheriff.

**THREE STEPS TO TAKE WHEN DEALING WITH AN OVERWROUGHT STUDENT:**

**STEP 1: LEARN AND PRACTICE THE CALM RESPONSE**

Practice the skill of calming and relaxing yourself so that you can remain calm in the face of another’s emotional turmoil.

One good method is diaphragmatic breathing or deep breathing. Let’s practice that now:

- Close your eyes.
- Get very comfortable in your chair.
- Begin deep, diaphragmatic breaths.
- Counting can help (1 on in-breath, 2 on out-breath, 3 on in-breath, 4 on out-breath; repeat.)

Practice this as often as you can. At least once a day. It’s a great stress-reliever and will prepare you to have a spontaneous Calm Response in the face of an unexpected outburst by a student. Your calm, measured response will help the student become calmer.

**STEP 2: PRACTICE EMPATHIC RESPONSES - SPEAK TO THE STUDENT IN A CALM, MEASURED TONE, USING OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS OF FEELINGS. RESPONDING IN ANGER OR ESCALATING YOURSELF WILL ONLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE ESCALATED SITUATION. AVOID THIS.**

If you perceive the student to be troubled, but not dangerous, attempt to talk to him/her ideally, privately or outside of the classroom.

Open-ended questions are the beneficial since they require more than a yes or no answer.

**Sample questions include:**

- Can you tell me what’s going on with you?

*Bonnie Burstein, PhD – Training Director – L.A. College Consortium, bursteb@lahc.edu – (310)233-4586*
- What’s bothering you?
- Can you describe a little but more about your feelings so that I can really understand?

Reflections-of-Feeling can also be very helpful:

Remember Dr. Spock from “Star Trek”? That’s the tone you want to strive for. Try not to be defensive. Make some gentle, assertive yet matter-of-fact comments to the student that reflect the emotion you are picking up from him/her:

“You seem very upset/anxious…I’m sorry you’re so upset…I’d like to help you…we have counselors on campus who can help you with this…” (Then refer them to your campus mental health services or escort them there, depending upon what is possible at the moment.)

“You seem very angry…I can discuss this with you after class/during office hours. Do you want to take a break and come back and discuss it with me further?” The student could be angry at you or angry about some other situation in their life. To de-escalate anger at you, you can say: “I am not your enemy…We can discuss this calmly and come to an understanding between us.”

“When I see you crying/sleeping/biting yourself (or exhibiting any other behavior that seems bizarre to you) it makes me feel that you’re not OK. I’d like to help you. …we have counselors on campus who might be able to help you with this…” (Then refer them to the campus student mental health services or escort them there, depending upon what is possible at the moment.)

If your whole class has witnessed some disturbing episode, you may want to address it generally by saying something like: “I can imagine that that was difficult to watch/see. I’d like to return to our class material now. If any of you are still feeling upset in any way, we have counselors on campus you can talk with at the mental health services site.”

STEP 3: KNOW YOUR LIMITS – KEEP YOUR CELL PHONE NEARBY TO CALL THE ON-CAMPUS SHERIFF (Phone number(s) here) IF THE SITUATION SEEMS LIKE IT IS GETTING OUT OF HAND – DISMISS THE REST OF YOUR CLASS TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THE OTHER STUDENTS.

Bonnie Burstein, PhD – Training Director – L.A. College Consortium, bursteb@lahc.edu – (310)233-4586
Subsequently, after the crisis is averted, contact the Chair of your department/Vice President of Student Services to uphold the Standards of Student Conduct through disciplinary action, if appropriate.

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ROLE-PLAYING SCENARIOS TO PRACTICE TOGETHER

(1) You notice a normally alert, focused student sleeping through your class.

- Do you approach the student?
- What do you say?
- What do you do?

(2) You see a student with tears streaming down his/her face throughout your class.

- Do you approach the student?
- What do you say?
- What do you do?

(3) A student seems to be talking to her/himself. S/he seems bizarre. There is no one there…but the student is ranting, clearly disturbing the other students.

- Do you approach the student?
- What do you say?
- What do you do?

(4) Seemingly, without provocation, a student leaps from his/her seat and storms, very loudly, out of the class.

- Do you approach the student?
- What do you say?
- What do you do?

(5) A very large, tall student whom you know to be a war veteran, stands up and begins arguing with you very loudly, waving an umbrella
around in what, to you, seems like a threatening way. The other students seem frightened at this outburst.

- Do you approach the student?
- What do you say?
- What do you do?

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Workshop Evaluation

We thank you for attending this Workshop. Please let us know how we did. Your comments will assist us in preparing future materials and improving future Workshops. Thank you!

Presentation: Steps toward De-Escalating Students

1. Quality of the Presentation:
   
   Excellent  Very Good  Good  Fair  Poor  No Opinion

2. Usefulness of the Information:
   
   Excellent  Very Good  Good  Fair  Poor  No Opinion

3. Comments:
   
   Role-Playing Exercise in De-Escalating Students

1. Quality of the Experience:
   
   Excellent  Very Good  Good  Fair  Poor  No Opinion

2. Usefulness of the Information:
   
   Excellent  Very Good  Good  Fair  Poor  No Opinion

3. Comments:
   
   Thank you

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Additional Resources:

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office:

RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT OR DISTRESSED ONLINE STUDENTS: MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT AND REFERRALS

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Departments Guide to:

SURVIVING AN ACTIVE SHOOTER

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?