

**DEALING WITH
DISRUPTIVE AND
THREATENING PEOPLE
IN THE *W*ORKPLACE**



The University of Utah is committed to ensuring a safe and secure academic and work environment for employees, faculty, students, and participants in University programs and services. Unfortunately, national statistics regarding aggression in the workplace and academic settings show a steady increase. Therefore, there is always the possibility that University faculty, staff, and students may be faced with individuals who are exhibiting difficult or threatening behavior. It is important that all members of the campus community familiarize themselves with the information and guidelines in this brochure and be prepared to respond promptly.

It may be helpful to discuss concerns regarding distressing or disruptive behavior in the workplace with your supervisor or a Human Resources professional. Both can assist you in clarifying issues and concerns, offering options, and assisting with problem solving. Frequently, just talking with another professional will clarify issues and help you in your problem-solving. Other University resources are available and identified in this guide for your information.

When dealing with student issues, professionals in the Office of the Dean of Students and the University Counseling Center, as well as Department Chairs and Program Coordinators are available to assist you. Additional information is at www.counselingcenter.utah.edu.

In this guide, we are making a distinction between behaviors that are disruptive as opposed to behaviors that are threatening. This guide provides examples of disruptive and threatening behavior, as well as strategies for addressing each. The contact grid at the end of this document will assist you in identifying the appropriate University resource to contact in the event you must deal with a difficult or threatening individual. Finally, this guide includes applicable University policies and resources related to workplace conduct.

In the workplace, we sometimes encounter employees who exhibit behavior that is distressing to themselves and/or others. Such behavior can take many forms, for example, an employee who:

Policies that prohibit threatening behaviors in the workplace include:

FACULTY:
Policy 6-316: Code of Faculty Rights and Responsibilities

STAFF:
Policy 5-111: Corrective Action and Termination Policy for Staff Employees

ALL:
Policy 1-004: Violence in the Workplace and Academic Environment

- becomes excessively emotional or withdrawn.
- exhibits patterns of unexplained absenteeism or conflict with others.
- is going through a difficult time in his/her personal life.

IDENTIFYING DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

Disruptive behavior is inappropriate behavior that interferes with the functioning and flow of the workplace. It hinders or prevents faculty and staff member from carrying out their professional responsibilities. It is important that faculty, managers, and supervisors address disruptive behavior promptly. If left unaddressed, disruptive behavior typically continues to escalate, resulting in negative consequences for the individual as well as others.

Some specific examples of disruptive behavior include:

- Numerous conflicts, verbal abuse, or poor relationships with customers, coworkers, supervisors, or others.
- Substance abuse.
- Inappropriate reaction to criticism of conduct or job performance.
- Persistent complaining about being treated unfairly.
- Increased, non-typical, or inappropriate tardiness and/or absenteeism.
- Behavior related to obsession with another person at the University.
- Inability to control feelings, outbursts of anger, swearing, slamming doors, etc.
- Interrupting meetings or trainings with inappropriate comments; hijacking the agenda.

DEALING WITH DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

The University of Utah is committed to maintaining an environment free from disruptive behavior. University Policy 1-004: Violence in the Workplace and Academic Environment prohibits acts of violent behavior, including, but not limited to, verbal and/or physical aggression, attacks, threats, harassment, intimidation, or other disruptive behavior in any form. It's very important that incidents of disruptive behavior are addressed in a timely manner.

The following strategies may be helpful when addressing disruptive behavior:

- Move the individual to a less public area
- Speak slowly and confidently
- Encourage the person to talk; listen closely and patiently
- Arrange yourself as your access to an exit is not blocked
- Acknowledge the individual's feelings
- Point out alternatives, break big problems into smaller problems
- Have a means of notifying coworkers or the police if disruptive behavior becomes threatening (panic button, code word)

When distressing behavior is observed in the workplace, the following resources are available to assist (also see grid at the end of this guide):

- Your Supervisor/Manager/Administration
- Employee Assistance Program (801) 587-9319
- HR Consultants (801) 581-2169
- Employee Relations (801) 581-5469
- Counseling Center (801) 581-6826
- Dean of Students Office (801) 581-7066
- University Police (801) 585-COPS (2677)

IDENTIFYING THREATENING BEHAVIOR

How do we identify potentially violent individuals? While certain types of behavior do not always indicate a tendency for violence, workplace violence experts identify similar signals. If you have any concerns about immediate safety, call the University Police at (801) 581-COPS.

In order to intervene before a violent episode occurs, it's important that supervisors, managers, and coworkers know the signals of potential workplace violence. Your help identifying and reporting individuals who exhibit high-risk behaviors is critical in preventing and dealing with workplace violence. These signals are sometimes easy to miss. Yet, after an incident of workplace violence, coworkers often realize they saw signs and changes in behavior prior to the event. People are often reluctant to report suspicious individuals or circumstances, and there will inevitably be some "false positives," but that is better than overlooking a situation that could explode into violent behavior. The more detailed and specific an individual is about potential acts of violence and/or the person they believe is responsible, the closer they may be to taking action.

Following are some indicators that can signal a risk potential for violent episodes:

- Numerous conflicts with or a fear reaction by supervisors, coworkers, other faculty members, employees, or others.
- Intimidating, belligerent, harassing, bullying, or other inappropriate and aggressive behavior.
- Deterioration in self-care; paranoid behavior or extreme change of behavior.
- Sudden deterioration in job performance; sudden increase in absenteeism or tardiness.
- Statements showing fascination or identification with incidents of violence in the workplace, and indicating approval of the use of violence to resolve a problem.
- Obsessing about another faculty member, coworker, classmate, or other person; sending unwanted gifts, notes, unwanted calling, or stalking.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.
- Statements indicating desperation over personal problems to the point of contemplating suicide.
- Social isolation, quiet seething, sullenness; poor relationships with coworkers, another faculty member or management.
- History of violent behavior.
- Direct or veiled threats of harm – previous or current.
- Displaying a weapon at the University.
- Refusal to accept criticism about academic or job performance.
- Sudden mood swings, depression.
- Sudden refusal to comply with rules or refusal to perform duties or assignments.
- Violence toward inanimate objects, sabotaging computer programs or equipment.
- Moral righteousness – believing the organization is not following its own rules.
- Inability to control feelings, outbursts of rage, swearing, slamming doors, etc.

Finally, there are three things to remember:

1. Trust your instincts; when in doubt, report your concerns.
2. In the majority of cases where violence in the workplace occurs, a disciplinary action (termination, suspension, reassignment, lack of raise) acts as the trigger, whatever the actual cause of the behavior may be.
3. The more specific the threats, the sooner violent behavior may occur.

DEALING WITH THREATENING BEHAVIOR

It is seldom (if ever) advisable to rely solely on “profiles” or “early warning signs” to predict violent behavior.

If a faculty member or employee begins demonstrating any behavior that appears threatening, it is important that faculty and management take timely and appropriate action. Some behaviors may indicate the need for a referral to the Employee Assistance Program (employees) or, as a backup, the Counseling Center. Others may require immediate police or security involvement. It is also possible that these behaviors may constitute misconduct and require disciplinary action. Contact the Human Resources team for guidance regarding workplace issues.

It is important to have a way of alerting others that there is a need to contact the police by choosing a code word or action. Many offices also have a button to immediately alert the police that there is a problem.

While police do their best to respond to a crime “in progress,” it is up to the individual to decide how best to protect themselves and others during the interim. Hopefully, the choices made will either diffuse the threat, resolve the confrontation in their favor, allow for escape or “buy time” until law enforcement authorities can arrive.

In cases where workplace violence seems imminent or has occurred:

Securing a safe environment for yourself and others is always the top priority. If you have any questions about immediate safety, call the University Police at **585-COPS (5-2677)**.

In any self-defense situation, your goal is to stay alive, and survive a desperate confrontation. **If flight is possible, escape by any means. If you are trapped, be prepared to fight.**

If you become a target of the assault, and cannot flee, consider:

- Doing precisely as you are told, and no more.
- Avoiding eye contact with the suspect.
- Speaking only when spoken to.
- Telling the suspect exactly what you are doing.
- Making no sudden movements.
- Waiting to activate alarms unless it is safe to do so.
- Trying to remain calm and control your emotions.

Other suggestions:

- If possible, take no action which calls attention to yourself.
- If you hear a danger (gunshots, for example) but don't immediately see a suspect, move immediately away from the sound towards an exit, or lock and blockade yourself into a room if that is more reasonable.
- Keep moving away from the danger.
- Alert the police, giving as much information as possible.
- If you believe a violent attack is imminent, or has begun, and you cannot escape or hide, **FIGHT BACK!**

REMEMBER:
Your safety and the safety of others is the top priority.

Faculty, Managers, Supervisors, and Staff:

- In an emergency, or if you suspect criminal conduct, call the University Police at **585-COPS (5-2677)**.
- **When in doubt, call!**
- **Follow your department emergency procedures plan.**

If not an emergency, contact the following University resources as appropriate and take measures necessary to ensure the employee makes contact:

- Your Supervisor/Manager/Administration
- Employee Assistance Program (801) 587-9319
- HR Consultants (801) 581-2169
- Employee Relations (801) 581-5469
- Counseling Center (801) 581-6826
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