

Assisting the Emotionally Distressed Student

A Guide for Staff and Faculty

Counseling and Psychological Services
University Health Services
University of California, Berkeley

Acknowledgments

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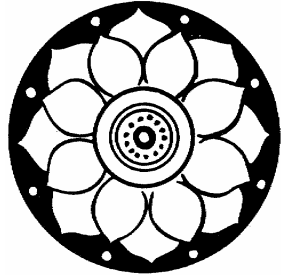
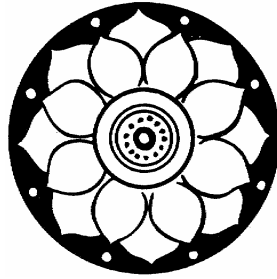


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Introduction

As a member of the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) campus community, you may be constantly interacting with students. At times, you will have contact with students whose problems or behaviors will cause you concern, discomfort, or may interfere with your work or the education of other students. These kinds of people or situations do not just disappear, and without intervention you may well be faced with that same situation and that same student again.

Certain signals that distressed students give out may go unnoticed for a variety of reasons. And even when we do notice them, it can be very difficult to intervene. We may feel we are “in over our heads,” or we may have competing concerns, such as other students waiting to see us. It is important to know that it is quite likely that the problem will not go away unless there is an intervention. Part of a good intervention requires knowing how to act during these incidents and what resources to call upon.

As a faculty or staff member interacting daily with students, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavior changes that characterize the emotionally troubled student. A student’s behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could well constitute a “cry for help.”

This “tool kit” was created to help you and your department when these difficult occasions arise. It offers straightforward advice, techniques and suggestions on how to cope with, intervene, and assist troubled and/or difficult students in or out of the classroom.

Consultation and Referral

Counseling & Psychological Services

University Health Services, Tang Center
3RD Floor, Room 3300
(510) 642-9494
<http://uhs.berkeley.edu/Students/Counseling/>

Consultation

If you are unsure of how to work with a specific student, we encourage you to consult with one of the counselors on our staff. A counselor is available to you immediately or very soon thereafter during the week, 8-5 Monday-Friday. Call us at 642-9494, inform the receptionist who you are and ask to speak with the crisis counselor available at that time. A brief consultation may help you sort out the relevant issues and explore alternative approaches. Conveying your concern and willingness to help (including referral) is probably the most important thing you can do. Your support, encouragement and reassurance will be particularly valuable.

Referral

When you discuss a referral to Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) with a student, it is helpful for that student to hear in a clear and concise manner, your concerns and why you think counseling would be helpful. To schedule an appointment, the student should call 642-9494 or come to the CPS reception desk on the third floor of The Tang Center and request to see a counselor. The student who requests an urgent appointment will be asked to wait and talk with the next available advice counselor. A student who does not request an urgent appointment will be offered a brief telephone appointment with a counselor in the next few days. Let us know when you refer a student who is in crisis. Call CPS to alert us regarding the student's concerns and when he or she will be coming to CPS for an appointment.

- Offer to walk the student to our office if you doubt he or she will follow through.
- If the student seems distressed and is not open to idea of counseling, call CPS to consult with a counselor.

Urgent concerns that require immediate intervention are:

- ❖ Suicide
- ❖ Fear of losing control and possibly harming/hurting oneself or someone else
- ❖ Sexual assault
- ❖ Physical assault
- ❖ Abuse
- ❖ Recent death of a friend or family member

Counseling is **confidential** except when the student presents a danger to him or herself or others, or when abuse of a child or elder is involved. Our individual counseling services are designed for students who can benefit from brief counseling. If longer-term therapy is indicated, the student will be referred to an appropriate off-campus resource.

Fees

CPS offers brief counseling and provides referrals to students who require longer-term psychotherapy. Services are available to all registered UC Berkeley students regardless of insurance coverage. There is no cost for a consultation or for brief counseling. Longer-term counseling and psychiatry appointments are charged, although SHIP will cover 80% of those costs.

The Depressed Student

Depression, and the variety of ways it manifests itself, is part of a natural emotional and physical response to life's ups and downs. With the busy and demanding life of a college student, it is safe to assume that most students will experience periods of reactive (or situational) depression in their college careers. **Major depression** however, is a "whole-body" concern, involving your body, mood, thoughts and behavior. It affects the way you eat and sleep, the way you feel about yourself, and the way you think about things. Major depression is **not** a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be wished or willed away. People with depression cannot merely "pull themselves together" and get better. It will interfere with a student's ability to function in school or a social environment. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help over 80% of those who suffer from depression.

Due to the opportunities for faculty and staff to observe and interact with students, they are often the first to recognize that a student is in distress. Look for a pattern of these indicators, but understand that not everyone who is depressed experiences every symptom. Some people experience a few symptoms, some many. Also, severity of symptoms varies with individuals.

Depression Symptoms

- Persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed, including sex and school
- Insomnia, early morning awakening or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain
- Inconsistent class attendance
- Decline in personal hygiene

Students experiencing depression often respond well to a small amount of attention for a short period of time. Early intervention increases the chances of the student's getting better, sooner.

It is helpful to:

- Let the student know you're aware she/he is feeling down and you would like to help.
- Reach out more than halfway and encourage the student to discuss how she/he is feeling.
- Offer options to further investigate/manage the symptoms of depression.
- Encourage them to seek help, possibly suggesting CPS.
- Do not ignore remarks about suicide. Always report them to a CPS counselor.

It is not helpful to:

- Minimize the student's feelings (everything will be better tomorrow).
- Bombard the student with "fix it" solutions or advice.
- Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you think she/he may be.

Violence and the Verbally Aggressive Student

Many campuses are concerned with the number of incidents regarding strong verbal aggression and violent behavior. It is helpful to know some indicators for this type of behavior and develop personal action plans should it occur.

Students who seem hostile, suspicious or threatening can be frightening. Always call for help if you or others are in imminent danger.

- If you feel in danger, call campus police (911 or 642-3333 by cell phone)
- If you don't feel comfortable calling the police (for whatever reason), call CPS at 642-9494 for help. CPS works closely with campus police and can help determine a course of action.

As you assess the situation, consider the following three levels of response. Be sure to trust your intuition and when a situation feels potentially violent, consider higher levels of intervention.

Level One: Attempt to defuse situation

- Be aware of your feelings.
- Stay as calm as you can.
- Show empathy and concern. (e.g., try saying something like: "I can see your frustration and I'm frustrated too. Unfortunately, the rules are...")
- Don't insist you are right or contradict the student. Instead, let the person know you see the situation differently.
- If someone is threatening or verbally abusive, tell them you would be able to help them better if they calmed down, lowered their voice and stopped attacking you.
- Be direct, set limits and don't tolerate abuse. (e.g., "Please stand back, you're too close" or "I can't listen to you when you are yelling.")

Level Two: Get assistance from others nearby

- Tell the student: "Let me see if I can find someone who can help."
- Talk about your concerns with your supervisor or with peers.
- Call CPS to devise an action plan.
- Have a plan in place for times when you feel threatened and need others in your office to assist (e.g., use a code phrase that indicates you need immediate assistance).

Level Three: Get to a safe location

- Call the police or ask someone else to do so.
- Retreat to a locked office or other safe place while waiting.

Helpful Tip: Plan how you and your staff will deal with a future interaction with a student who is predictably difficult or threatening. For example, you might decide that during meetings with the student, the door will be left open with someone standing nearby. Also, consider designating a person in the unit to deal with the student.

It is helpful to:

- Maintain a posture that is poised, ready to move quickly but not fearful.
- Avoid physical contact or use only in a defensive manner.
- Maintain a voice quality that is matter of fact, monotone.
- Use clear, assertive statements of consequences; repeat as necessary.
- Use eye contact sparingly - only to emphasize a point.
- Avoid gestures if possible as they may be interpreted as signs of weakness.
- Increase your advantage by placing yourself behind a table or chair near an exit.
- If possible, leave an unobstructed exit for the perpetrator.

It is not helpful to:

- Ignore warning signs (body language, clenched fists).
- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself.
- Press for explanations for their behavior.
- Make threats or dares.

Once the student/individual leaves your area, be sure to debrief with your immediate supervisor or department chair. The counselors (psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers) in CPS at 642-9494 are available for consultation; do not hesitate to contact them. Should you as faculty or staff, suffer adverse effects from an encounter with a distraught student, feel free to also seek consultation from CARE Services for Faculty and Staff at <http://uhs.berkeley.edu/Facstaff/CARE/> or 643-7754.

The campus police at 642-6760 (or 9-911) are a good resource and may be called at any time during the cycle. The level of police involvement is determined on a case-by-case basis. Finally, and for your own well-being, take these threats seriously and be prepared to act accordingly.

The Anxious Student

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one's well-being or self-esteem. For some students, the cause of their anxiety will be clear; but for others it may be difficult to determine. It is our experience that anxiety is very often a result of the intense academic competition among the students, or a fear of inadequacy regarding some academic challenge. Personal relationships may also be at the root of the concern. Regardless of the cause, one or more of the following symptoms may be experienced: rapid heartbeat, chest pain or discomfort, dizziness, sweating, trembling or shaking, and cold clammy hands. The student may also complain of difficulty concentrating, always being "on edge," having difficulty making decisions, sleeping problems or being too fearful to take action. In rare cases, a student may experience a panic attack in which physical symptoms occur spontaneously and intensely in such a way that the student may fear he or she is dying. The following guidelines are appropriate in most cases.

It is helpful to:

- Let them discuss their feelings and thoughts. Often this alone relieves some of the pressure.
- Provide reassurance.
- Talk slowly and remain calm.
- Be clear and directive.
- Provide a safe and quiet environment until the symptoms subside.

It is not helpful to:

- Minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting.
- Take responsibility for their emotional state.
- Overwhelm them with information or ideas to “fix” their condition.
- Become anxious or overwhelmed.

The Manic Student

These students are characterized by having persistently lofty or irritable moods. During these moods, they often see themselves in a grand light, sometimes believing that they are famous or that the work they are doing is awe-inspiring. They often are overly talkative, with racing thoughts. Typically, their high energy interferes with their sleep. They can be very irritable and overly involved in pleasurable activities, such as sex or spending money. Generally, these students are not dangerous, but caution should be taken, especially if alcohol or other drugs are involved. If they try to put their rapid thoughts and words into action, they may place themselves in unsafe situations.

It is helpful to:

- Sound calm and be direct
- Talk with them in a quiet but openly accessible physical space.
- Assess their safety (e.g., can they get home safely?)
- Connect them back to a supportive friend or family member.
- Discuss the student’s behavior with your supervisor or department chair.
- Contact CPS at 642-9494 and/or walk the student to CPS.

It is not helpful to:

- Enter their physical space or touch them.
- Try to out-talk them.
- Challenge their thinking.
- Be confrontative.
- Ignore them.

The Suspicious Student

Usually these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are tense, cautious, mistrustful and may have few friends. These students tend to interpret a minor oversight as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everyone's behavior, and everything that happens has special meaning. Usually they are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. They project blame on to others and will express anger. Many times they will feel worthless and inadequate.

It is helpful to:

- Send clear, consistent messages regarding what you are willing to do and what you expect.
- Express compassion without being overly friendly or familiar.
- Be aware of personal boundaries and space when interacting (keep a comfortable distance, both physically and emotionally).
- Be aware of your own anxiety about how the student is acting or communicating.
- Let them know that you are concerned.

It is not helpful to:

- Be overly warm or sympathetically close to the student.
- Flatter the student, laugh with them or be humorous.
- Assure the student that you are their friend or advocate.
- Assure them that you will be fair in your treatment of them.

The Student Under the Influence

We are all aware of the toll that abuse of alcohol and other drugs can take on individuals, families, friends and colleagues. In a recent survey of college presidents, alcohol abuse was identified as the campus life issue of greatest concern. The costs are staggering--in terms of academic failure, vandalism, sexual assault and other consequences.

Warning Signals of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse

There are many signs of alcohol and other drug usage, abuse and addiction. None of these signs alone are conclusive proof of an alcohol or other drug problem. Other conditions could be responsible for unusual behavior such as an illness or reaction to a legally prescribed drug. Any one, or a combination, of these could be cause for alarm and could signal problems in general as well as a substance abuse problem.

Impairment of Mental Alertness

Lack of concentration, short-term memory loss, memory loss of recent events, confusion, and inability to follow directions.

Impairment of Mood

Depression, extreme mood swings, flat or unresponsive behavior, hyperactivity, loss of interest in one's work/school results or objectiveness, nervousness.

Impairment of Motor Behavior

Hand tremors, loss of balance, loss of coordination, staggering, inability to work normally, slurred speech, passing out from alcohol or other drug use.

Impairment of Interpersonal Relationships

Detachment from or drastic change of social relationships, becoming a loner or becoming secretive, attempts to avoid friends or co-workers, loss of interest in appearance, change of friends, extreme change in interests or tendency to lose temper, be argumentative or borrow money and not repay.

Violation of University Rules or Impairment of Academic and Work Performance

Inability to perform work assignments at usual level of competence; missed deadlines; missed appointments, classes or meetings; increased absenteeism or lateness, frequent trips from assigned or expected work area; accidents in the lab; complaining or feeling ill as an excuse for poor performance; coming to class, practice or work intoxicated/high; legal or judicial problems associated with alcohol or other drug use; not scheduling morning classes, neglected school or work obligations for two or more days in a row. (Some individuals with substance abuse problems are still able to perform at a high academic level.)

Other Signs Include:

- Damaging property while under the influence
- Attempting to build up self-confidence through alcohol or other drug use
- Carelessness of friend's welfare while intoxicated or high
- Drinking "the morning after" to alleviate discomfort
- Planning day around drinking or using other drugs
- Changes in personality as a result of alcohol or drug use or blackouts
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Academic probation because of alcohol or drug use
- Uncomfortable in situations where there is no alcohol or other drugs
- Arrest for drunk and disorderly conduct
- Increase in alcohol or other drug tolerance
- Sexual situations while under the influence which are later regretted
- Accidents while under the influence
- Having received a lower grade on an assignment or in a class because of alcohol or other drug use
- Difficulty in limiting intake

Getting a person to seek help may be a challenge. Here are a few hints for getting the message across:

- Educate yourself about substance abuse.
- Confront the person when s/he is sober. One of the best times is after a binge when a person is sick.
- Give facts, based on personal experience, related to that individual's use.
- Show honest concern and patience. If angry at individual don't participate in intervention

It is helpful to:

- Accept and acknowledge feelings of student; give him/her a chance to air his/her feelings.
- Focus on drug issues; what has happened leading up to the situation.
- Permit the student to say how s/he regards his/her problems; what s/he thinks his/her alternatives are, what s/he tried, etc.
- Explore further with the student, then support by recapping the strengths and resources of the student.
- After listening and obtaining information, bring back to alcohol or other drug issues.
- Identify and clarify what the major issues are that s/he appears to have described.
- Repeat as simply as possible the main concern of the student regarding alcohol or other drug use.
- Be willing to admit limitation of your assistance and be ready to refer to specialists.
- Find out source of emotional support that the student trusts. Encourage the involvement from friends, family physician, minister and employer.

It is not helpful to:

- Convey judgment or criticism about the student's substance abuse.
- Make allowances for the student's irresponsible behavior.
- Ignore signs of intoxication in the classroom.

The Student in Poor Contact with Reality

These students have difficulty distinguishing “fantasy” from reality. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused or irrational (e.g., speech patterns that jump from one topic to another with no meaningful connection); their emotional responses may be incongruent or inappropriate; and their behavior may be bizarre and disturbing. This student may experience hallucinations, often auditory, and may report hearing voices (e.g., someone is/will harm or control them). **While this student may elicit alarm or fear from others, they generally are not dangerous or violent.** If you cannot make sense of their conversation, consult with or refer to Counseling and Psychological Services as soon as possible.

It is helpful to:

- Acknowledge their feelings or fears without supporting the misperceptions (e.g., “I understand you think someone is following you, and it must seem real to you, but I don’t see anyone and I believe you are safe.”).
- Remove extra stimulation from the environment, (turn off the radio, step outside of a noisy classroom).
- Acknowledge your concerns and verbalize that they need help.
- Acknowledge your difficulty in understanding them and ask for clarification.
- Respond with warmth and kindness. Use firm reasoning.
- Focus on the “here and now”.

It is not helpful to:

- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking as this commonly produces a stronger defense of the false perception.
- Play along (e.g., “Oh yes, I hear voices, devil, etc.”).
- Encourage further discussion of the delusional processes.
- Demand, command or order them to do something to change their perceptions.
- Expect customary emotional responses.

The Suicidal Student

It is not uncommon for students to engage in some degree of suicidal thinking. As a member of the faculty or staff you may be in contact with students who have expressed these thoughts to you. It is important that you not simply overlook these comments as the student may be reaching out to you.

Suicidal risk is based on a constellation of clues, not just observing any one clue. These clues fall into the following categories:

Situational Clues

- Overwhelming loss(es).
- Loss of highly valued entities
- Not always obvious; e.g., rejection from a highly desired graduate program or loss of status on the job.

Depressive Symptoms

(several symptoms present)

- Insomnia
- Decreased powers of concentration
- Anorexia
- Decreased energy
- Anhedonia
- Apathy
- Poor self care
- Crying spells
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Increased social isolation
- Low self-esteem
- Preoccupation with death
- Hopelessness about the future
- Irritability - mood swings

Verbal Clues

Something a person says, overtly or covertly, that communicates suicidal ideation and intent:

- "I'm going to kill myself"
- "I wish I were dead"
- "How do I donate my body to a medical school?"
- "I'm not the man I used to be"
- "My family would be better off without me"
- "The only way out is for me to die"
- "I just can't go on any longer"
- "You won't be seeing me around anymore"
- "You're going to regret how you've treated me"
- "Ever since I retired, I've felt like I was in the way all the time"
- "It's too much to put up with"
- "Life has lost its meaning for me"
- "Nobody needs me anymore"
- "If (such and such) happens, I'll kill myself"
- "If (such and such) doesn't happen, I'll kill myself"
- "I'm getting out"
- "I'm tired of life"

- "Here take this (valued possession). I won't be needing it anymore."

Behavioral Clues

Something the person does that communicates a self-destructive motive.

- A previous attempted suicide; particularly a recent or highly lethal attempt
- Giving away valued possessions
- Procuring means: buying a gun, asking for sedatives, etc.
- Composing a suicide note
- Putting personal affairs in order
- Poor adjustment to recent loss of loved one
- Sudden, unexplained recovery from a severe depression
- Resigning from social groups, extracurricular activities
- Crying spells without external triggers
- Becoming disorganized, loss of reality contact
- Any unexplained change in typical behavior (change in grades, increased aggression,
- drug use, mood changes, social withdrawal, acting out sexually)
- Visiting a physician for unexplained or vague symptoms (75% of successful suicides were
- preceded by just such a visit within one month of suicide)

The following are some of the areas that CPS counselors explore with students, which help us to determine the level of risk. *It is not recommended that you use these techniques, but only be aware that they are used in a professional counseling setting.*

Factual Information to Assess

1. Precipitant for the crisis

"What happened that led you to feel so badly?"

2. Evidence for suicidality

"You seem to be feeling very down. Do you ever feel like you want to end it all?"

"When did you begin to think about killing yourself?"

"Have you had these thoughts before?"

"Have you attempted suicide before? What led you to do it at that time? How did you try to kill yourself?"

3. Method

Someone with a specific plan and who has access to the means for suicide is a high suicide risk.

"Have you thought about how you'd kill yourself?"

"What would you do?"

"Do you have access to _____ (drugs, gun, knife, etc.)?"

"When do you plan to do it?"

4. Resources

"Who have you talked with about the things that are troubling you? Do you think they understand?" (e.g., family, friends, clergy, therapist, etc.)

Other Cues to Consider

- **Social Withdrawal**
Not attending classes, sitting alone at meals or not going to meals, staying isolated in dorm room.
- **Preparatory Behavior**
Giving away possessions, making plans to "be away."
- **Feelings Expressed**
Helplessness (exhaustion, failure); frustration (rage, anger); sadness (depression, confusion).
 "I'm tired of living."
 "Everyone would be better off without me."
 "This is the worst thing that could happen to me."
- **Depression**
Eating and sleeping much less or much more than usual; apathetic, unhappy.
- **Psychotic States**
Grossly bizarre or inappropriate behaviors; out of touch with reality; uncontrollable violence.
- **Substance Abuse**
Alcohol and/or other drugs, food, i.e. overeating or loss of appetite.

It is helpful to:

- Talk about suicide openly and directly.
- Emphasize the temporary nature of the person's problems. Explain how the crisis will pass in time and therefore suicide would be permanent resolution of a problem that is only temporary.
- Mention the person's family as a source of strength, but if s/he rejects the notion, back off quickly.
- Take charge and call or walk the student to Counseling and Psychological Services.
- Try to sound calm and understanding.
- Be confident, caring and know the resources available.

It is not helpful to:

- Sound shocked by anything the person tells you.
- Stress the shock and embarrassment that the suicide would be to the person's family, before you're certain that's not exactly what he/she hopes to accomplish.
- Ignore comments such as "The world would be better off without me."
- Engage in a philosophical debate on the moral aspects of suicide. You may not only lose the debate, but also the suicidal person.

A Word About Medications

An impressive amount of research over the last 40 years has been devoted to the discovery, development, and research of medication that can help with mood, behavior, and other emotional difficulties. Medications often are most helpful in combination with therapy and other efforts at self-help.

The vast majority of medication are not habit-forming, and students can always decide, with consultation, to stop taking them. It might be unwise not to consider medications that can make an enormous contribution to well-being, just as it would be unwise to consider medication the only or best option for everyone. The meaning of taking medication, and of taking a particular medication, is an important aspect to keep in mind.

Know that it is important for the caregiver to be selective when deciding who is an appropriate candidate for medication, as well as which medication and at which dosage. Sometimes medications take some day or weeks to start working. Many of the newer medications offer significant advances in effectiveness, often combined with fewer side-effects. The balance between desired effects and possible undesired effects ("side-effects") should be assessed by the student, in consultation with the prescribing clinician. Fortunately, many choices exist and can be discussed.

Medications are not "quick fixes" for longer-standing problems. They do not offer the opportunity to feel better without regard to the underlying psychological and social factors. They are not, for instance, a treatment for bad days or problems with intimacy. They do not change who someone is as a person. While there may be some disappointment as a result, this can often be reassuring for a student to know. A concern may be that if medications are helpful, they must be correcting some biochemical abnormality that is the sole cause of the problem.

As human beings, the interaction of our physical selves with our emotional and spiritual selves, along with our interactions with the environments, makes our reaction to medication much more complex. Thus, it is important for us to take into account the major aspects of our lives that contribute to our state of being.

Departmental Safety Plan

As a result of certain kinds of behavior from students, it may be necessary to set up a departmental safety plan. For example, if you think that a student has been threatening to you in the past and s/he shows up at your office, you may need help in dealing with the student. Quite often it is the people you work with and who are in the closest physical proximity who can provide the help you need. The following section will help you to define a security plan for your department.

Security Plan

First and foremost, call on the campus police department to help with setting up a plan. The following are the kinds of behavior you should be concerned with.

- Unwilling to leave the building
- Interrupting the business of the department
- Bizarre statements/actions
- Angry/ verbally abusive/ yelling
- Behaving suspiciously
- Threatening
- Violent

There are at least three types of responses open to you.

1. **Individual response:** Do what you can to get the person to stop the behavior; try to handle it yourself (if person is violent or potentially violent, call the police).

2. **Get assistance from others within your department** and elsewhere in the building.

- Have someone come and stand near you for support.
- Have someone come to help you deal with the person.
- Call or speed-dial a designated person for help.
- Have someone find a designated person to help.

3. **Get assistance from the campus police** (in cases of violent or potentially violent behaviors)

- Push the panic button* (if available in your office) or call 9-911.
- Have another person push the panic button or call 9-911.
- Retreat to a locked office or another safe space while waiting for the police.

* A panic button is a device in a critical area(s) of your work space that when pressed will alert a designated person or police that you need help.

Questions to Consider as You Develop Your Departmental Safety Plan

1. What specific areas do you need to prepare in your department?
 - Reception
 - Individual offices
2. How can we in the department help each other when faced with difficult situations?
 - What will the procedures be for getting help from others within your area?
 - What do you expect of the person when s/he comes to a colleague's assistance?
3. When you need another level of assistance - more than can be provided from within your department
 - Who will be your designated "helpers," and are they readily available?
 - How will you reach them?
4. What should someone do while waiting for help?
5. What should be the protocol if someone observes an individual disturbing other people by yelling, acting bizarrely, etc.?
6. How will you coordinate planning and support with nearby departments?
7. What does your department need to carry out these plans? Specifically, what kinds of training do you think would help?

An Example of a Possible Scenario

You are a receptionist at a window in the financial aid office. One week ago, a student waiting in line began speaking very loudly and abusively about how the financial aid office "screwed up," and now he has to pay for it. By the time the student reached your window he was quite agitated. As you tried to explain to the student what he needed to do, he said "the next time I'm here, I'm gonna blow up the place." Today he is at your window again.

- How could you have prepared for this?
- What do you do?

This scenario (or one that may be more appropriate for your specific department) discussed in your group setting can help you prepare and implement a safety plan.