



Keys to Handling Classroom Disruptions

by Steven R. Van Hook, PhD

Practical Means for Controlling
Disruptive Attitudes & Behaviors

Presentation Take-Aways

- Effective strategies to limit distractions
- Tips to turn classroom distractions into learning tools
- Ways to deal with disruptive students



Students Snap Judge Instructors

Students evaluated an unknown instructor based on three silent ten-second clips; then three five-second clips; then three two-second clips.



In each case, the evaluations were “essentially the same” as by students who had take the instructor for a full semester.



Study by Nalini Ambady
Harvard University

Civility in the Classroom

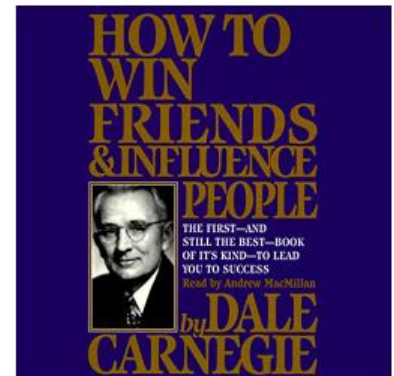
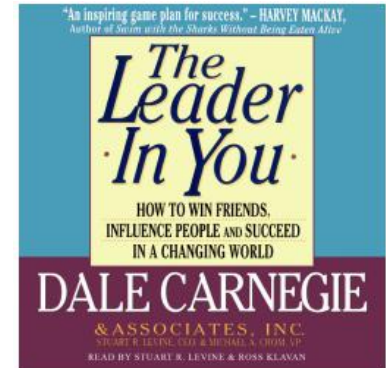


Syllabus Sample:

Civility is an expectation in all classroom settings, whether online, hybrid, or onsite. As a diverse community we must seek to come together in a spirit of intellectual inquiry, dignity, and respect. Freedom of expression is essential in a healthy society, especially among students and educators. To help ensure this, we abide by a common code of conduct: Conflicting opinions are to be respected and responded to scholastically rather than personally; disruptive side conversations or other distracting behaviors are not acceptable during class activities; and there are to be no offensive expressions that upset classroom collegiality.

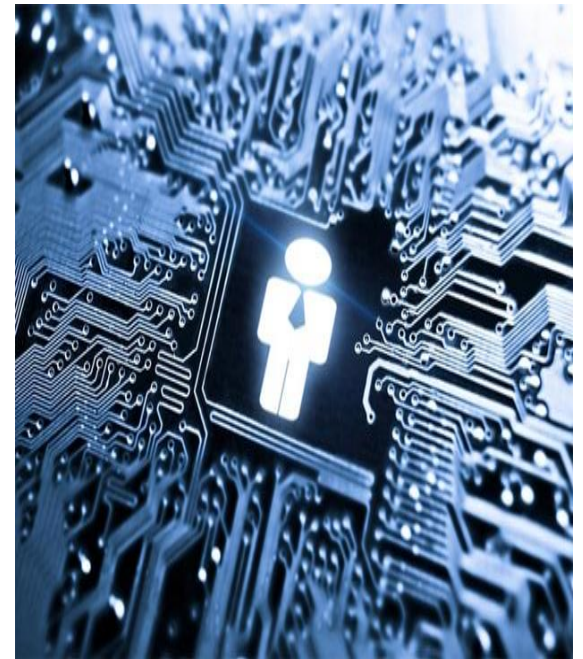
Be a Classroom Leader ...

- Treat people as if they already had the virtues you wished they possessed.
- Change 'but' into 'and.'
- Ask questions rather than give orders.
- Preserve others' dignity.
- Emphasize areas of agreement.
- People crave recognition: praise every success and improvement however small.



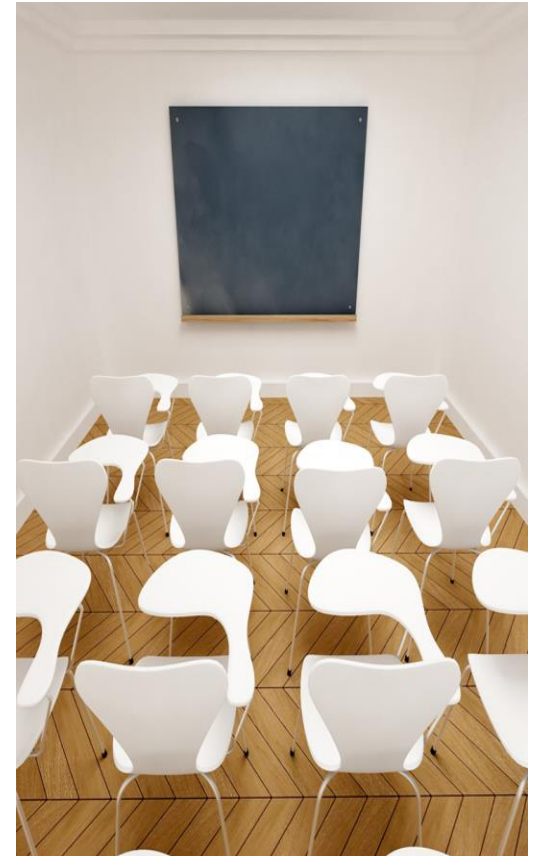
Classroom Tech

- Ubiquitous cell phones, pads, laptops, texting
- Students can access entire world of immediate information
- Instructors are challenged to stay relevant and current
- Instructors are arbitrators rather than directors of content



Disruptive Technologies & Students

- A matter of control and psychology versus surrender and technology
- Befriend, don't battle technologies:
- Assign students a quick search; ask a student to text you a source link
- Pause during tech disruptions; let silence remonstrate
- Disrupt the disruptions



Positive Framing of Tech Policies

- **Purpose:** We will use appropriate technologies to expand learning opportunities
- **Usage:** All classroom technologies and activities should serve the educational growth of students in the class
- **Responsibilities:** All students will use their classroom technologies in a supportive and non-disruptive manner
- **Consequences:** Any disruptions to individual or class learning may result in technology prohibitions or other penalties





Brain's Negative Bias

Our Brain's Negative Bias

- Brain built more attentive and sensitive to unpleasant news, keeping us out of harm's way
- Negative bias exploited by news, politics, interpersonal relations
- Small positive acts to counter negative in life spheres:
'Magic' ratio of 5-to-1

From ***Psychology Today***
by Hara Estroff Marano

Don't Be So Hard on Yourself

- Negative bias self-criticism harms self, interfering with productivity

Negative bias hacks:

1. Practice self-compassion
2. Meet your self-criticism with same kindness offered others
3. Reduce ratio to x and y:
Make immediate contrast between *feelings of self-criticism* and *letting it go*. Brain will choose the less painful.

From ***New York Times***
by Charolette Lieberman

Dangerous Messages

Dissonant Themes Across Cultures & Subcultures

- Humor
- Sex
- Religion
- Politics



Resonant Themes & Images

- Babies & Children
- Pets & Animals
- Sports
- Love, Marriage, Relationship Conflicts
- Self-image
- The Birth-Life-Death Cycle
- Water



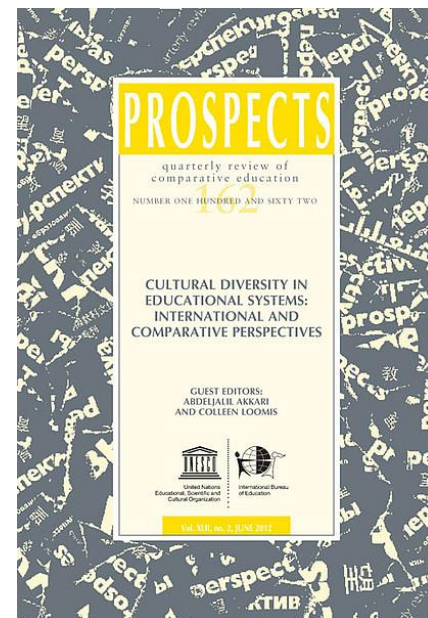
Articles on Transcultural Learning

UNESCO Journal “Prospects”

Van Hook, S.R. (2012, June).

Hopes and hazards of transculturalism.

Article available at <http://wwmr.us>



Journal of Research in International Education

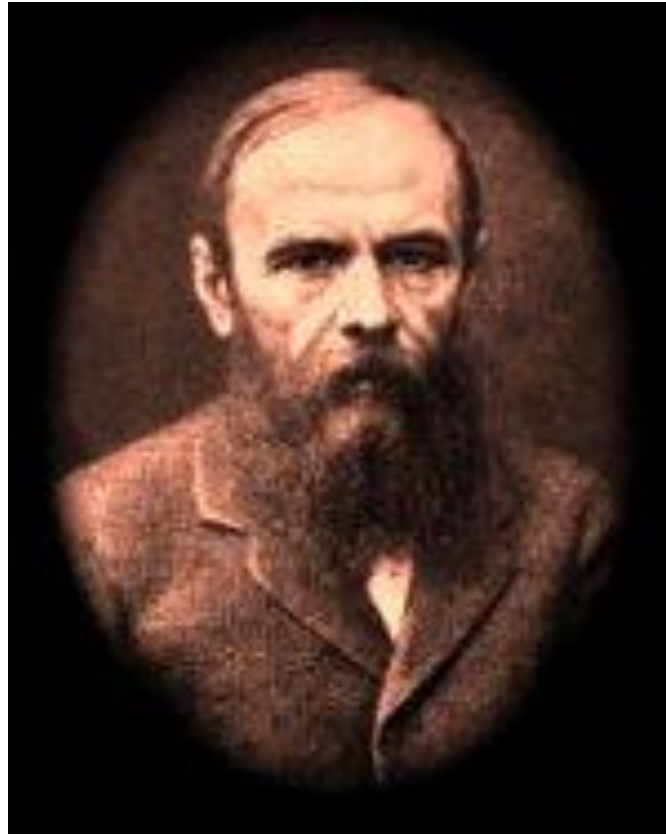
Van Hook, S.R. (2011, April).

Modes and models for transcending cultural differences in international classrooms.

Article available at <http://wwmr.us>



Fyodor Dostoevsky



“If people around you will not hear you, fall down before them and beg their forgiveness, for in truth you are to blame.”

Disruptive Assets

“They stir things up.
They question.
They irritate.
They move things out of
balance and
out of the center” ...

“And remember where
creativity happens:
on the edges.”



Bob Lutz, GM VP
Product Development

Prolific Disruptors



Prime Directive:

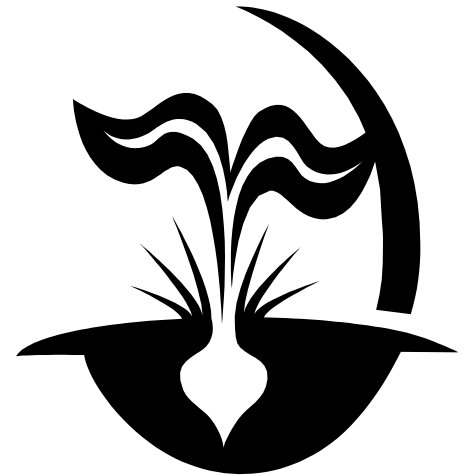
Disruptive people should be kept from harming themselves and others.

20/80 Rule:

20% of students will take up 80% of our time & energy.

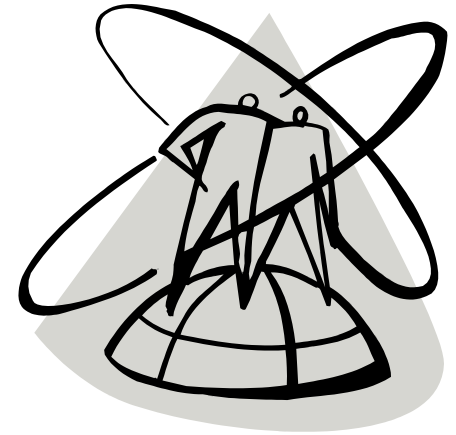
Roots of Student Disruption

- Lack of engagement with class.
- Student insecure, self-doubtful.
- Student fearful – dread of being humiliated.
- Student abused / defensive.
- Student just plain bad.



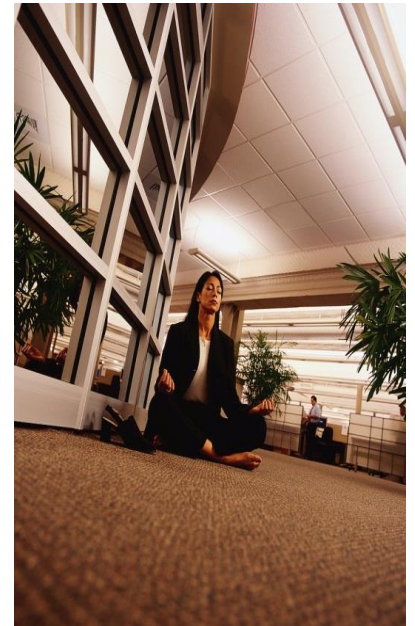
Control Critical Events

- Work as a control rod:
absorb the radioactivity
to control the reaction before
meltdown.
- Deal with a problem
while it's small.
- Watch for incremental
escalation.

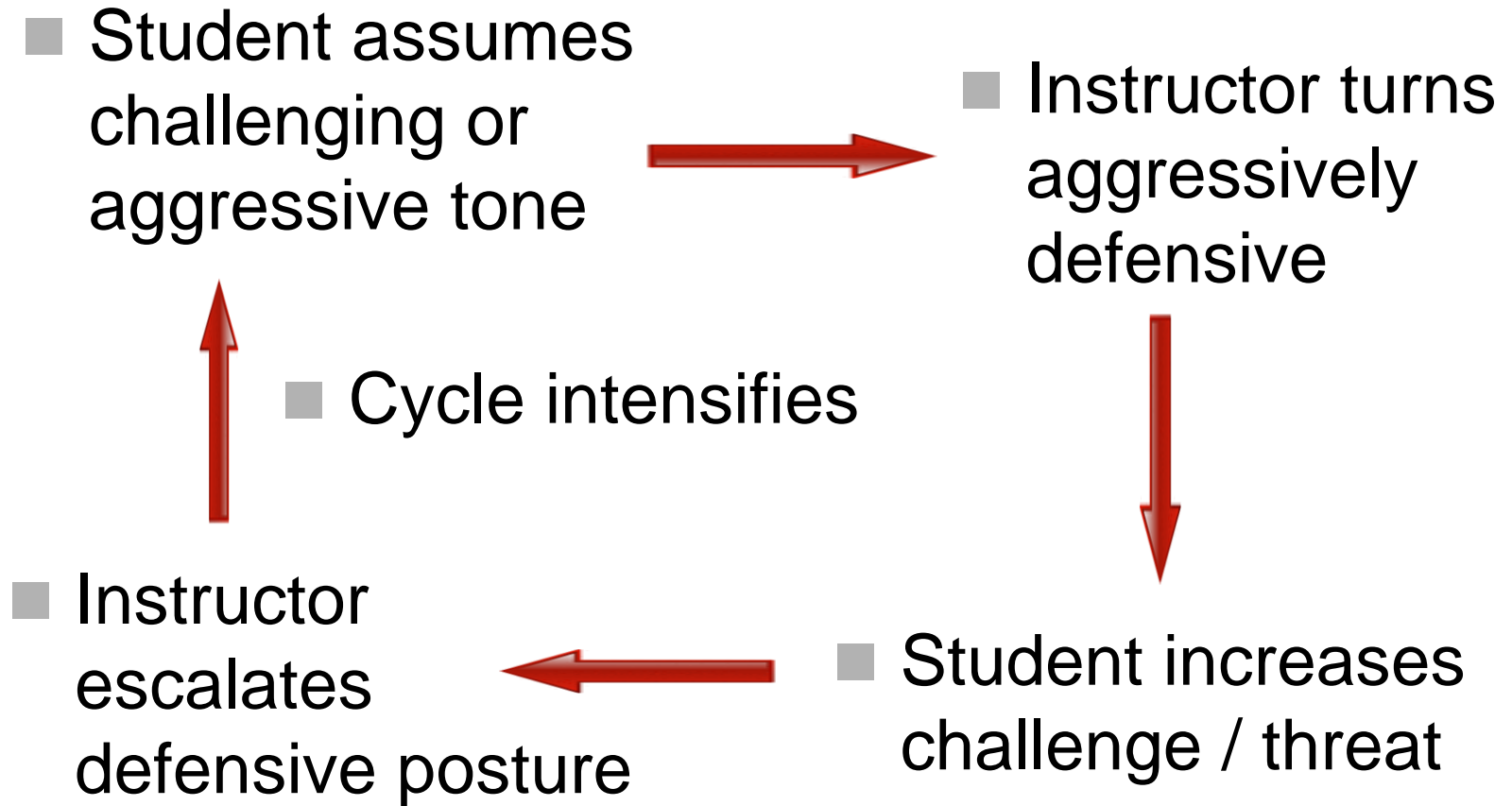


Right Instructor Mindset

- Create classroom culture of respect and mutual support upfront
- Affirmations:
 - I can handle this
 - I am prepared
 - If someone bugs me I won't take it personally
 - I care about people and they care about me
 - I will just stay calm, count, and breathe
 - I deny anyone, anything, or any thought the power to adversely affect me

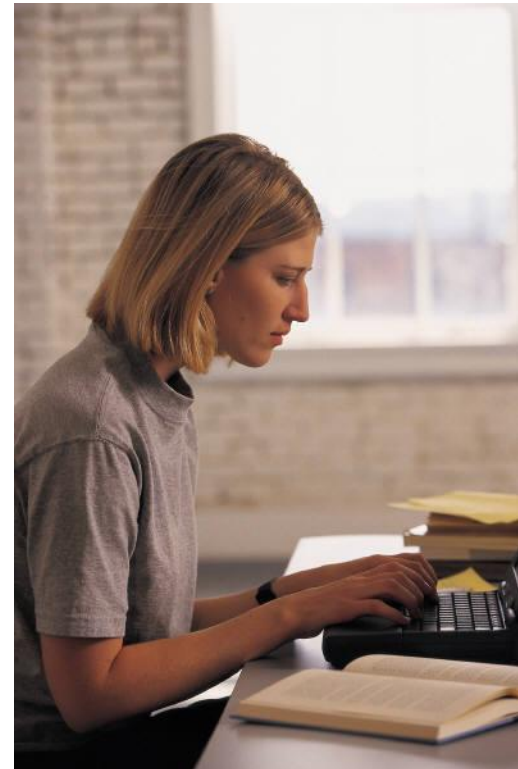


Aggression Cycle



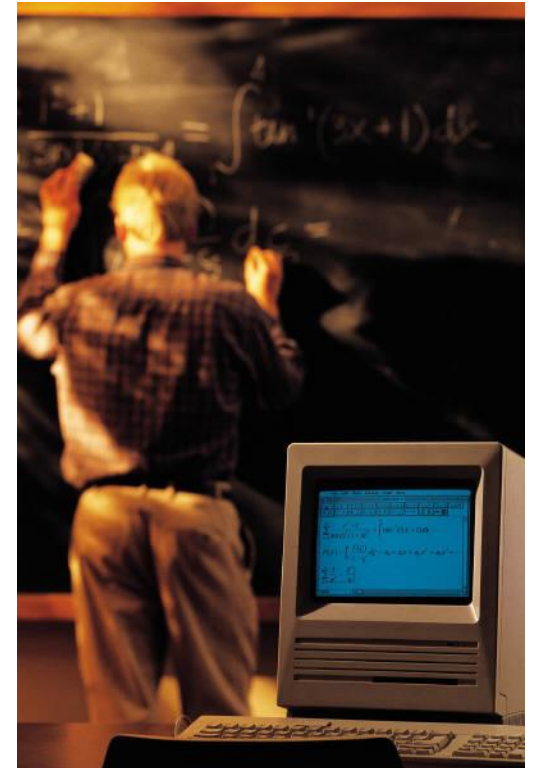
Modes of Intervention

- Educator Mode
- Counselor Mode
- Corrections Mode



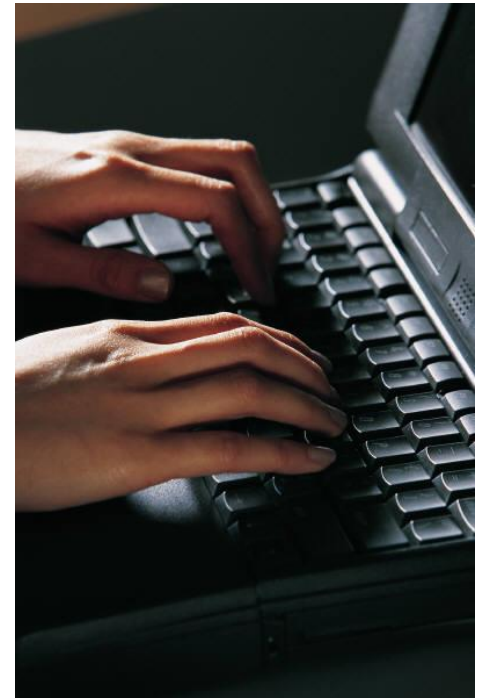
Educator Mode

- Ask for clarification or restatements on sloppy posts or classroom comments
- Deflect the discord into other avenues (e.g., argue the other side's case)
- Assign them a related task



Heated Exchanges

- **Student 1:** *There were Nazi Germans who were saddened by Hitler's suicide ...*
- **Student 2:** *Most of my family died at the hand of Hitler and the Nazis. I don't really need a lecture on that ...*
- **Instructor:** *Perhaps you could write an op-ed for your local paper.*



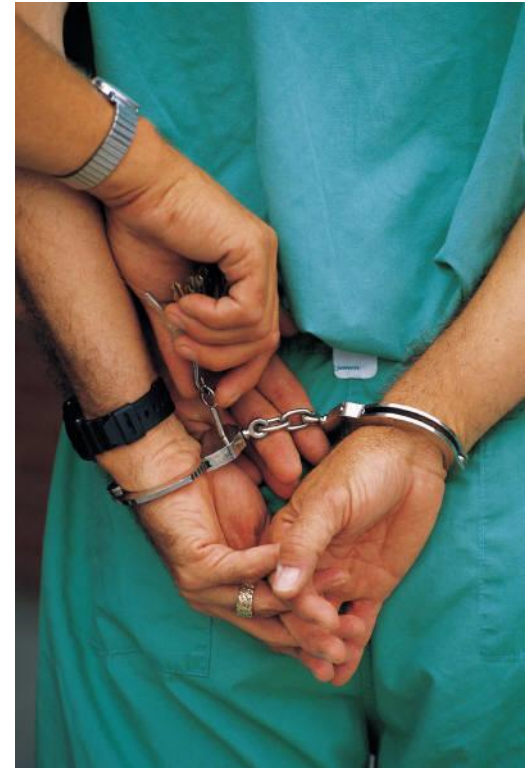
Counselor Mode

- Offer a sympathetic ear
- Let the student vent
- Share your own example
- Refer the student to advisors for additional support



Corrections Mode

- Define the limits and enforce them
- Temper mercy with justice
- Balance the interests of the one with the interests of the group
- Call for back-up when needed



Angry Student Syndrome

Students unhappy with grades or feedback blame the instructor, course materials, classmates.



Useful Classroom Defusing Phrases

- “You may have a point ... let’s talk about it at the break / after class.”
- “I’m sorry it’s made you angry ... I’d really like to understand why. Let’s talk about it after class.”
- Students will respect you more for diffusing anger, rather than escalating it with a posturing challenge. They may even chime in and help.



PEP Formula for Interaction

- **Privacy:** protect student's dignity and need to perform
- **Eye-contact:** non-confrontational, supportive expression; sensitive to cultural differences
- **Proximity:** Stay close to student in non-threatening pose, with sensitivity to personal space comfort



One-on-One Conversation

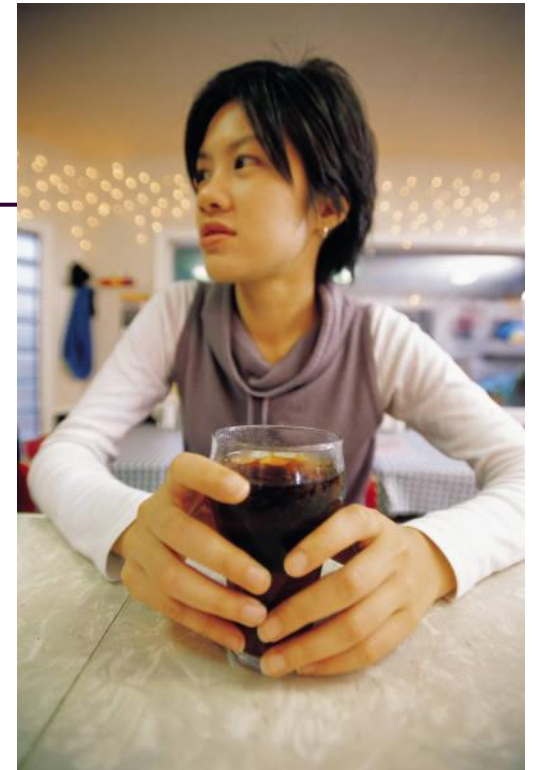


Let student vent, relieve pressure, defuse with practiced sentiments:

- “I really want to understand what I did to bother you ...”
- “I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me how you feel, and I’m concerned.”
- “When did you start feeling this way?”
- “That’s an interesting opinion ... tell me more.”

A Simple Fix ...

- Day program students often immersed in campus life
- Evening students more mature, less time and energy to spend on campus dynamics and dramatics
- Switch problem students from day to evening class for a trial



Self-Destructive Students

- Suicidal
- Inviting personal injury
- Similar characteristics as disruptive people, directed at self
- Referrals to dean, counselors, trained professionals



Threat Prevention Teams

UCSF System:

- UCSF PD
- Medical Center
- Faculty & Staff Assistance Program
- Legal Affairs
- Labor & Employee Relations



Final Two Best Tips

- Use students' names. Address them as people, not problems or challenges. A student and a student's behavior are not the same thing.
- Praise them, give them attention and points for positive behavior; not just attention for misbehavior. We get what we reward.



To Summarize ...

- Disrupt the disruptions
- Recognize critical issues while they're small
- Absorb radioactivity
- Assume proper tone & mindset
- Turn conflict into learning
- Help disruptive students feel heard
- Protect the learning environment
- Call for back-up
- Prepare emergency systems & tactics



Thank You!



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**Questions
and Other
Ideas?**