

How to Deal with a Verbally Aggressive Student

Students faced with problems or conflict may not be fully equipped to express how they feel in a non-threatening way. Verbal aggression may be a way of trying to ask for help. Students who engage in verbal aggression are generally displacing frustration and anger about the situation onto another person such as the teacher. In some cases, verbal aggression can be intended to intimidate or bully another person. Generally though, verbally aggressive behaviour is not meant as a personal attack but may be a sign that the person is feeling powerless.

Scenario:

Chris is a 17-year old, 6'3 male. During class, he receives his midterm exam which he has failed. He is very upset. He believes that he was well prepared for the test and the teacher's grading was unfair and does not warrant a failure. At the end of class when the other students have left, he confronts the teacher. He is visibly angry and is yelling in an aggressive, loud tone. He is impinging on the teacher's personal space and pointing in an intimidating fashion. He repeatedly expresses that he is frustrated since he is working hard and not obtaining satisfactory results.

Problem: Chris is angry and frustrated and is expressing his feelings in a verbally abusive manner. It is very difficult to know how to diffuse aggression while maintaining professional composure and ensuring your own safety.

What to do:

- If there is an imminent risk and you feel that you are in danger, get help. Call security immediately (210).
- Indicate that you will be happy to discuss the situation with the student during your office hours later that day or the next day. Taking some time away from the situation will likely help the student to calm down.
- Set limits. Position yourself closest to the door in case you need to exit promptly.
- Change locations if you need to feel more comfortable. Move to another area where there are other people close by.
- Diffuse the situation by letting them know that you want to help however you will not accept their verbally aggressive behaviour and impingement on your personal space. Set clear boundaries. "When you scream at me in that way, I find it hard (impossible) to listen. Please stand back. You're too close."
- Stay calm and respond in an empathic manner. Let them know that you care about their well-being and want to help them.
- Acknowledge their feelings (what you are seeing and hearing). "I see that you are very frustrated."
- Reflect back what they are expressing. "I see that you are angry because you studied hard for the midterm and did not get the results that you had hoped for."
- Identify the source of frustration or anger. Help the student to express their feelings, vent and tell you what is upsetting them.
- Let the student know that you can work together and problem solve ways to deal with the situation as they become calmer.
- After the fact, you should document everything that happened and speak to an Academic Dean.

What to avoid:

- Responding in an aggressive, hostile manner and engaging in a yelling match.
- Pressing for an explanation or reasons for their behaviour. "Now I would like you to tell me exactly why you are so obnoxious."
- Dismissing their reaction.
- Relinquishing your own rights as a person.

