Recent events at universities around the country have made faculty, staff and students more aware of college student mental health, including issues involving student suicides and violence. Although these tragic occurrences are relatively uncommon, the heightened awareness of those few events has led many members of university communities to ask what they can do to help ensure the safety of everyone on campus. Unfortunately, there is no way to be 100% sure whether individual students have the potential to act violently toward themselves or others. These judgments are difficult and depend on many factors, and all such situations must be handled sensitively. Still, faculty members and GSIs can act in such a way that the rights of everyone involved are respected and supported.

Faculty and instructional staff are often the first to have access to students’ ways of thinking and acting. If a student’s writing seems disturbing, it’s natural for an instructor to want to respond. But an immediate or impulsive reaction may exacerbate the problem by isolating and alienating the student. Many students who hand in disturbing material would never act on the thoughts that they have put on paper. Conversely, many students act violently with no prior indication.

While faculty and instructional staff often detect early indications of students who (by words or action) show a propensity toward violence, most faculty and staff are not trained mental health professionals. Moreover, faculty and/or GSIs sometimes do not have opportunities for one-on-one personal contact with their students, making it difficult for them to approach a student who has submitted disturbing writing.

This instructional brochure is designed to assist faculty and instructional staff from many disciplines to identify and respond appropriately to disturbing writing from a student. However, the brochure is meant to serve only as a general guideline and should be used in accordance with policies and procedures from the department involved and the University of Michigan as a whole.

CAPS would like to acknowledge the faculty and staff who provided input and feedback in creating this document.
Identifying Disturbing Writing

If an instructor becomes initially alarmed by student work, considering the following questions may be helpful in assessing risk factors. If you answer ‘yes’ to many of these questions, see the section “What To Do.” If you answer ‘no’ to many of these questions, then keep in touch with the student per usual.

• Does the violence occur appropriately within the context of the subject matter or the purpose of the assignment? Or does it seem to come out of left field?

• Does the violence fit in with expected questions and issues? Or is it in some way gratuitous, purposeless or nihilistic?

• Does the violence seem to be intentional (i.e., the writer is intentionally trying to create violent characters), or does the disturbing nature of the material seem to be leaking out around the edges in a way that seems to have escaped the author’s control?

• Are there indications of impulse control in how the character approaches situations and interactions, or does the character demonstrate a lack of self-awareness and moral consciousness? Is the violence glorified or admired? Or does some moral redemption take precedence over the violence?

• Is the violence general (for example, rampaging aliens are tearing to bits everyone in New York) or is the violence directed at a particular person (who is named in the writing) and/or at a particular group? Is the violence situated on campus or in the local community, or is the violence directed at a generic,

• Is the violence a piece of writing attributable to the thoughts and actions of one or more characters (or the narrator of the piece), or does the violence seem to come from the author?

• Suddenly deteriorating academic performance: A student who has been particularly conscientious about his or her academic work and is now missing classes, neglecting assignments, etc.

• A fixation on death and violence, such as a morbid fascination with and exposure to violent movies, games, music or other artwork.

• Dramatic changes in the way a student relates to others: Is an outgoing student suddenly more withdrawn and quiet in the classroom? Is he or she no longer friendly with students with whom he or she once seemed quite comfortable? Or is the student suddenly much more outgoing, talkative, or even intrusive or aggressive with classmates? Is the student dropping hints about disturbing, destructive or abusive relationships?

• Suddenly or dramatic changes in a student’s level of activity in class: Is he or she suddenly more hyperactive, unable to sit in one place, having difficulty keeping appropriate boundaries with others? Is he or she writing or drawing obsessively or with great volume?

• Is the student discussing thoughts of suicide? If so, does the student include specifics about how he or she might commit suicide?
• Volatile mood swings, a sudden change in personality or sudden lack of awareness of social norms.

• Depression: Does a student seem much more negative, irritable or sad than usual? Is he or she crying in the classroom or needing to leave the room suddenly because of difficulty controlling emotions? Does a student seem excessively slowed down, or much more agitated and restless? Does a student express loss of hope or loss of future-oriented direction?

• Risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving, being under the influence, vandalism, etc.

• Actual threats made to other members of the class, the professor or GSI, etc.

• Horror movies and fiction are an accepted part of American culture. Many students who write about violence may simply be mimicking what they are exposed to in society.

Finally, it is important to remember that disturbing writing can be a cry for help. In some cases, this may be one way that a student in distress is asking for attention and help from a safe and trusted University employee. One key role instructors can play is helping students find the help they need.

What To Do

It is normal for instructors to initially feel overwhelmed when dealing with disturbing situations. However, there are many formal and informal ways of doing something to reach out to help students you are concerned about.

First and foremost, consult with a colleague, section chair, or appropriate administrative person in your department to evaluate the above issues and attempt to answer them with a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If you answered ‘no’ to many of the questions/issues noted above, then keep in touch with the student per usual, and monitor as needed. If you answered ‘yes’ to many of the questions/issues noted above, then consider the following action steps:

1. You are always welcome to call CAPS for consultation, guidance and assistance—we always have someone available for this work every hour we are open. Just call the main number and ask for the “COD” (counselor on duty). In addition to CAPS, you can contact the Dean of Students office, Psychiatric Emergency Services at University Hospital (which functions as an Emergency Department for psychiatric concerns), and the Department of Public Safety.

2. If you decide to talk with the student, approach the student informally, outside of class, and ask the tough questions in a compassionate, nonjudgemental manner. Focusing on the content of a piece of writing rather than its writer is especially helpful. For example, “I was struck by this piece you wrote. I would like to hear more about what you were trying to do in this piece.” Or, “This piece feels very sad. Is that what you were trying to convey? For what response?” Generally, open-ended questions asked in a gentle but assertive manner can elicit richer responses.

3. Be persistent. A student may need several personal interactions.

A Note of Caution

In the current environment in which violent acts toward others have received a lot of media attention, the impulse to react immediately without reflecting on the consequences is natural but in the long run often undesirable. The following points can be helpful in determining the most appropriate response:

• Not all disturbing writing leads to violence. Not all writers or creators of disturbing work tend to act violently (e.g., Goethe, Edgar Allen Poe, Anne Rice).

• Students often use their journals and writing assignments to work through their problems and explore their imaginations. This is similar, in many ways, to children who act out their violent fantasies through play.

• The meaning of what constitutes “violent or disturbing writing” is different for different people, contexts and cultures. Some ideas originally conceived in another language may seem more violent when written in English. Some cultures think about and express ideas about anger and violence in more nuanced ways than is typical in the United States. This does not necessarily lead to higher acts of violence.
4. If appropriate, connect with the student’s support system. Most professors and GSIs are not trained mental health professionals. However, neither are they bound by the confidentiality laws that licensed mental health providers are. This gives professors and GSIs an advantage in enlisting the help and support of others. Although some faculty or GSIs may think that FERPA prevents them from calling others to help (colleagues, parents, staff at CAPS), that is not actually the case. When possible, the student’s help should be enlisted in identifying parents, friends, relatives or other supportive people. This can help the student feel trusted and empowered.

5. Faculty and GSIs are encouraged to call upon all appropriate resources to help the student, and to receive consultation to effectively help the student. If appropriate, contact the student services professional in your dean’s office to determine how best to access the student support system of the University.

6. Be prepared to help the student immediately, as part of a conversation about the situation. You may need to call CAPS or walk the student over to CAPS. It can also be very helpful to have a CAPS informational brochure in your office that you can give to a student in need.

CAPS as a Key Resource

• Please visit MiTalk (mitalk.org) which is a new student mental health focused interactive website. It is a tool for students and others who are helping students.

• CAPS can also help you connect with other student support services available to you. Most notably, the Dean of Students office often plays a role in helping students navigate multiple issues and systems within the University.

• A proactive example of a formal program you can provide for your department is QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), a suicide prevention outreach effort that has gained national recognition. You can visit our website for information on QPR, fill out the request form and we will set up a session for your department.

What To Do “Right Now”

If there seems to be imminent danger, to the student or to others, instructors should call DPS immediately (24 hours/day). In this situation, instructors are also encouraged to contact their program or department heads.

Ann Arbor/Campus Emergency 911
Department of Public Safety 763-1131

Other Resources

Psychiatric Emergency Services 996-4747
Located at UM Hospital
Counseling and Psychological Services 764-8312
3100 Michigan Union
http://www.umich.edu/~caps
http://www.mitalk.org

Dean of Students Office 764-7420
3000 Michigan Union
http://www.umich.edu/~dofs

Your specific department head, assistant or associate dean, or student services professional in your department

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