



## Navigating Disruptions in the Moment

Disruptions might include a sudden eruption of distress, a disturbance, or a challenge in the classroom. They result in a charged juncture that requires the instructor to intervene. These stressful moments or emotionally challenging situations can negatively impact the integrity and safety of the learning environment.

Below are recommendations for navigating these moments when they occur.

### **Acknowledge an incident or event and its impact**

Should you choose not to bring up a current event that may be emotionally and politically charged, students may bring it up for you. Be aware that a lack of response to a disruption could imply your agreement or consent. If you respond, be sure to tell students why you are doing so. Acknowledge disparate impacts for different people. Be aware of and acknowledge your own and your students' positionality and lived experiences. Give students an opportunity for private reflection,

### **Assess the moment**

If an unexpected disruption occurs, you will need to quickly determine whether the disruption or event is potentially harmful, benign, or course related.

- If the disruption is hurtful or learning is disrupted, you will need to intervene in support of the affected student(s). Silence can signal tacit approval.
- A harmless disruption might disappear if the instructor does not give it additional attention.
- A disruption may also be productive if it can be connected to the course content or methods or serve as a meaningful addition to the course.

### **Respond in the moment**

Instructors have a variety of options to consider. They have to manage their own emotions in the moment and select an appropriate instructional response.

- You might want to begin by managing your own emotions. Take a few deep breaths, a long pause, or tense a muscle and then relax it. This signals to students that you noticed. If you are experiencing anxiety, you might briefly focus the feeling of your fingertips on the desk or grasping a marker. These can calm a "fight or flight" response.
- Refer to course norms and reiterate expectations, return to classroom values, or share with students how you plan to navigate this moment.
- Be aware of the limitations on discussions of topics unrelated to course content or your field by reviewing the section on Instructional Roles in policy [AC64 Academic Freedom](#).
- If you identify a potential course connection, you might say "I want to make a connection between this and the content for today" or "What can we learn from this?"

- You may also shut down the conversation by stating “That/this has no place in our course,” “We are not continuing this conversation”, or “I don’t know where you are going with this, but let us return to the content for today.”
- Immediately after a difficult moment, refocus students’ attention on learning by shifting to a different kind of activity, e.g., from lecture to individual work such as a [classroom assessment technique](#).

## Follow-Up

After an incident in your learning environment, consider your own needs as well as those of your students and follow appropriate procedures for reporting, if necessary.

Follow-up with your students:

- Reach out to (all/certain) students to provide emotional support
- Provide additional content/material or resources (e.g., <https://redfolder.psu.edu/>)
- Reiterate (or set future) [class norms](#), [expectations](#), [ground rules](#) and [values](#).

Follow-up with the head of your academic unit, verbally and in writing.

Report through university channels

- [Report a concern for a student experiencing academic, health, safety, or financial distress](#)
- [Report student misconduct](#)
- [Report Bias](#)
- [Report a Behavioral Threat](#)

Care for yourself by connecting with a confidant (e.g., mentor, colleague, or therapist)

## Prepare to Return to Class

Develop a plan before your next interaction with students. Consider potential student needs as well as learning opportunities.

- (How) might returning compromise student safety?
- Students should be respected by you and other students
- Other students’ action should not interfere with their peers’ ability to work, learn, and participate in your class (see [Penn State Student Code of Conduct, section 3.g](#)).
- (How) might returning to the subject of the disruption encourage new ways of thinking and understanding? [Penn State values](#) support a diverse community (see [Penn State Mission and Values](#)), because students learn when they hear different perspectives and are challenged to think critically and reflect.