Student Notetaker

Flash Point on Campus:
Recognizing and Preventing Campus Violence

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Lecture: Violence on Campus
Mindset of Awareness & Commitment to Action

Objectives:

- Define campus violence
- Identify the campus violence prevention formula
- List myths associated with campus violence
- Identify a Flash Point
- Define the Spectrum of Violence
- Recognize Behaviors of Concern
- Identify an Action Point
- List available options to report a Behavior of Concern
- Define the emotion of sadness as a Behavior of Concern
- Define stalking
- Identify a triggering event
- Identify behaviors that are never acceptable
- Recognize common roadblocks to reporting a Behavior of Concern

There are situations that occur on campus that never make the news, including incidents that most people don’t even think of as being part of a Spectrum of Violence. Things like intimidation, bullying, and stalking that could lead to what we call a Flash Point.
Campus violence covers a wide range of disruptive behaviors that may include threats, harassment, intimidation, bullying, vandalism, theft, stalking, campus dating violence, physical assault, sexual assault, property damage, and/or murder/suicide.

Campus homicides, to include active shooter incidents, are infrequent events, but garner an incredible amount of media attention. In reality, these incidents merely represent the “tip of the iceberg.”

You can make a difference in keeping your campus safe. **Awareness + Action = Prevention.** Of course the action has to be appropriate and effective, but without awareness and the willingness to act, you can truly be vulnerable.
Myth number one: “Someone just snapped.” In truth, people rarely “just snap.” It may seem that way to those who didn’t recognize the signals, but usually there were signs in the form of behaviors. Violence is evolutionary and builds up over time. It is often preceded by behaviors which might suggest the propensity for future violence.

Myth number two: As an individual, you really can’t do anything to prevent violent incidents; they’ll happen no matter what anyone does. Not only is that not true, it’s dangerously untrue.

Another myth is that these situations will resolve themselves. In fact, we know that just the opposite is true. They won’t go away and could actually escalate. Early intervention is the key to preventing campus violence. Students are truly the tip of the prevention spear. Their involvement is imperative.
A Flash Point is a time and place where anger or hostility flares into violence. It’s a moment when someone loses their ability to manage their emotions and acts out in ways that are harmful to themselves or others.

It is important to note that the exact location of a Flash Point can vary from one situation and individual to another.

Violence, and the buildup to violence, can be shown on a spectrum. You could also think of it as regions of a country, with pathways across.

The far right side is more of a lawless territory. It includes physical violence or even death. Behaviors in this region are obvious, dangerous, and sometimes fatal.

In the next region are threatening behaviors. These behaviors include bullying, stalking, harassment, and intimidation. They don’t always amount to physical violence; they are destructive to the campus community.

The region on the far left is where most of us live our lives. It’s not truly on the spectrum of violence; it’s everyday human behavior. It’s not the total absence of conflict or anger; it’s just human behavior. After all, we’ve all had bad days where we might snap at someone. That doesn’t mean that violence is inevitable, but sometimes it is a signpost on the path toward violence.
In between everyday behavior and obvious emotional and psychological violence is what we call Behaviors of Concern. This is a gray area and one that we want to emphasize. It is uncommon for someone to switch instantly from nonviolence to violence.

If you realize that you are a stakeholder in your own safety and security, and you understand that violence evolves, then Behaviors of Concern will mean something more to you. These are the potential signposts that, when you understand them, can help you recognize when a low-threat behavior may be part of a pattern that’s building toward violence.

It’s important to be aware that there’s no “profile” of a campus violence offender. The fact is you just can’t predict with certainty which individual might become violent, which is why recognizing and responding to Behaviors of Concern is so important. A threat is one observable behavior; others may include brooding and/or comments about frustration or disappointment, and an interest in violence that is exhibited through writings and drawings.
Some are more obvious than others and include characteristics such as an obsessive interest in violent events or a sudden fascination with weapons. However, sometimes Behaviors of Concern are more subtle. In those cases, your own instinct may be your best guide.

If there’s a behavior that makes you uncomfortable, even if sometimes you can’t really put your finger on why it’s making you uncomfortable, you should heed that warning; many people call this immediate apprehension or cognition **intuition**.

Pay attention to those red flags; pay attention to the people who are sending messages that there might be something wrong. You have to trust your gut instincts. Most people ignore them or deny them. They believe they are overreacting. Campus security has found that, in most cases, that
person’s intuition was “right on target.”

As mentioned before, when you recognize a Behavior of Concern, it doesn’t mean that violence is inevitable. But it is important to remember that when violence does occur, Behaviors of Concern can almost always be found.

If you recognize a Behavior of Concern, you may choose one or more of the following three options. The first option is to simply note it. In many cases, that is the right response. Just note what you saw and remember it in the event something else happens tomorrow or in the following weeks that seem to be part of a pattern or escalation.

The second option is to talk to the individual you are concerned about. And option three is to report your concern to an appropriate person or department.
Do not focus on “snapshots”; individuals having a bad day or two. Instead, attempt to look at behavior in context. Significant changes in patterns of behavior are far more telling. You may be seeing a pattern or an escalation.

How will you know when and in what way to prevent a Flash Point? Post-crime scene investigations often find that directly prior to the violent event, a friend heard the offender making threats directed at a specific person. And several weeks prior to the violent event, several people saw the offender lose his temper in the student lounge. Those close to him noted that the offender’s normally cheerful demeanor had become more sullen. Each of these signs—these Behaviors of Concern—was a potential Action Point.

An Action Point is the juncture where you recognize that violence may be an outcome and you respond with an appropriate action. It’s important to exercise caution when setting an early Action Point. No one can predict human behavior with certainty.

It is advisable to err on the side of caution when it comes to setting your Action Point earlier rather than later. Stress tolerance and coping skills are highly subjective.

It goes without saying, however, that the more quickly a threat is reported, the better the chance of containing an event before any violence takes place or, in the event of an injury incident, of minimizing the harmful consequences and preventing a recurrence.
Oftentimes, the path to violence begins with someone experiencing a loss in his or her personal or academic life. Sometimes just having a chance to talk about things—to vent—can be a powerful stress reliever. You don’t have to wait until you think someone is clearly on a path to violence before you ask them how they are doing.

If you’ve talked with a troubled student and their answers concern you, it may be time to go to the next level of action. Report it to an appropriate person or department. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to the individual displaying the Behavior of Concern and if their behavior seems potentially threatening, then you should report it immediately. Anger, in its milder form, may be someone just having a bad day. In its extreme form, aggressively angry behaviors are harmful and, for that reason alone, require timely attention and effective intervention. The same is true for physical violence, as well as all threats and threatening behavior. All of these behaviors must be taken seriously and must be brought to the attention of the appropriate person or department.

Who is the appropriate person or department to report Behaviors of Concern? That will vary from campus to campus. Many colleges have set up confidential systems for reporting concerns through hotlines, anonymous email, or texting services. Also available are offices such as Campus Security, Student Life, Student Counseling and Psychological Services. You may even choose to talk to someone such as a Resident Assistant, Professor, or a Teaching Assistant.

It has often been said that it is not what happens to us in life that is important; it’s how we react to what happens to us that is important. Stressors are a part of life. However, each individual has their own resiliency or “bounce back” capability that significantly impacts how life’s “ups and downs” are addressed. Resiliency, along with tolerance to frustration and impulsivity, are key ingredients when it comes to individuals’ coping skills being overwhelmed.
We often hear about a stereotype associated with a violent offender--that he or she was a “loner.” While some people are quiet by nature and may enjoy their solitude, others may be experiencing a change in personalities. This sense of separateness is more than just being a loner. It can involve feelings of isolation, sadness, loneliness, not belonging, and not fitting in. When a person who is usually friendly and outgoing suddenly becomes quiet and disengaged, that change is a Behavior of Concern.

When people go into a crisis state, it affects the way they think, feel, and behave. Stress is cumulative and the road to violence is a progressive one. That is why frequency, duration, and intensity are critical criteria when evaluating Behaviors of Concern. There are individuals whom the experts term “injustice collectors.” They perceive every slight as something that they should take action upon. They’re constantly hypersensitive to criticism. No matter how much time has passed, the “injustice collector” will not forget or forgive those wrongs or the people he believes are responsible.
Behaviors of Concern
- Sadness -

- Some Behaviors of Concern, such as sadness, might not look like they could lead to a Flash Point.
- What begins as sadness may evolve into a serious depression and the potential for suicide.
  - Suicide is aggression turned inward, wherein homicide is aggression turned outward.

There are other signs that someone might be moving beyond normal, occasional sadness. Sleeping or eating patterns may change. They may begin to miss classes or lose interest in things. A classmate or a roommate may be in the best position to notice these changes.

Individuals suffering from severe depression, teetering toward suicide, experience incredible psychological pain and a high degree of ambivalence. This crisis state may pose a significant risk to the individual and others. Suicide is simply aggression turned inward; wherein homicide is aggression turned outward. In many instances there is a fine line between the two.

What begins as sadness may evolve into a serious depression and the potential for suicide. An individual contemplating suicide may not be thinking about taking his life alone, but may also decide to take the lives of others on campus.

Stalking occurs most commonly in the context of an intimate partner or domestic violence relationship. Stalking can also occur between strangers and acquaintances. Less than one-fourth of women and about one-third of men are stalked by strangers.

Stalking refers to acts of following, viewing, ...
communicating with, or moving in a threatening or menacing manner toward someone without that person’s consent. It entails a pattern of harassing behaviors intended to frighten, intimidate, terrorize, or injure another person.

The primary motives for stalking include power, control, and possession. Offenders refuse to accept the end of the former relationship (real or perceived) and to give up their hold over the victim. Stalkers look upon the individual as a possession, one that solely belongs to them.

Oftentimes there’s a “triggering event” that causes a violent Flash Point in a student. It might be something significant to that individual, such as a failing grade. It might be something personal, such as a relationship that has gone bad. It could be something that happened at home, such as a financial problem, a divorce, or maybe even a death in the family. On the other hand, it might be a series of “imagined slights” to someone who is overreacting and blowing a situation out of proportion.
When people go into a crisis state, it affects the way they think, feel, and behave. Stress is cumulative and the road to violence is a progressive one. That is why frequency, duration, and intensity are critical criteria when evaluating Behaviors of Concern.

Whether or not you might think they may lead to physical violence, aggressively angry behaviors are harmful. For that reason alone, they need to be reported immediately. The same is true for harassment, intimidation, bullying, and making threats. These behaviors don't necessarily amount to physical violence, but they are destructive to the campus community and must be reported. And, obviously, any physical violence should be reported.

Property destruction, dating violence, physical assault, and sexual assault are behaviors that must be taken seriously and reported to the appropriate person or department. For these behaviors, the only effective response is to report them immediately.
The first roadblock is simply lack of awareness. People who have not been trained to recognize Behaviors of Concern will not have the awareness needed to respond.

There are psychological barriers, too. Some people worry about being seen as a “snitch” or as someone “crying wolf.” They may be concerned about something, but they want to be sure a situation is really serious before taking action.

Sometimes people hesitate to report something because they are worried about retaliation. That’s why confidential reporting systems can be so valuable.

Another possible roadblock is a common issue related to the “busyness” of modern society. The fact is that we all have a million things on our minds as we go through the day. That’s especially true in college where you are juggling classes, assignments, and other work, as well as trying to have a social life.

In all the commotion, it’s easy to forget about something that may have concerned you earlier in the day or week. That is why it’s important to report it when it happens—don’t put it off. When you take action and report something that concerns you, you may be adding a critical piece to the puzzle. One piece of information, by itself, may not seem important, but when combined with other pieces of information collected, may prove vital. If you see something or sense something, say something. At the very least, a fellow student may get some much needed assistance at a critical juncture in his or her life.
Work from a mindset of Awareness. Be aware of the people around you so you can recognize Behaviors of Concern. Be prepared and committed to take action when action is required. Don't talk yourself out of doing what you need to do. The stakes are too high.

Behaviors of Concern, if left unchecked, will not go away and, in many cases, can escalate into more violent behavior.