USC Center for Excellence in Teaching

# Disarming upset students

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A stepwise procedure for respectfully managing upset students, particularly during classroom discussions.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Before facilitating a classroom discussion, especially one with controversial or potentially-upsetting content, review this document to prepare for managing students who become upset and/or disrupt the discussion. For assistance, contact [USC Center for Work and Family Life (CWFL)](https://search.usc.edu/s/redirect?collection=usc-search&url=https%3A%2F%2Femployees.usc.edu%2Fwork-family-life%2F&auth=NL4jQ6KzMG4jE5RJWftsgA&profile=_default&type=FP)

Despite best efforts at prevention through careful course and discussion design and facilitation, some academic discussions will become challenging ones because a student becomes emotionally upset. When this occurs, the USC Center for Work and Family Life recommends the psychology-based approach known as disarming.

### Disarming

Natural responses to confrontation, in or outside of the classroom, may include counter-attack, defensiveness, and submission, but these have major disadvantages, especially when it comes to disarming a challenging class discussion. Disarming is not a natural response to confrontation for most people; it’s counter-intuitive and may feel unnatural at first. Based primarily on empathy and focusing on others’ needs despite their unpleasant demeanor, disarming can be difficult and takes practice. It involves letting go of being right, managing emotions, being sincere, changing demeanor, finding truth in criticism, and taking responsibility (at times more than you may deserve). Disarming during a challenging discussion means taking a psychology-based approach to

* diffusing the energy of a confrontation
* removing the ability for continued attack
* creating an opportunity for meaningful dialogue

Disarming techniques can work well on direct attacks, such as rudeness and hostility, strong expressions of anger, and defensiveness that may occur during challenging discussions, but not on passive-aggressive behavior.

### Steps

There are 4 steps to disarming a challenging class discussion that has become heated or resulted in upset. Problem-solving and moving on, or continuing the discussion, can only be attempted after all the steps are accomplished.

1. Initial disarming statement of gratitude
2. Truth in the criticism
3. Cognitive empathy
4. Emotional empathy

### Initial disarming statements

Beginning with a statement of gratitude will be unexpected. For this reason, it can buy you time to gather yourself and think, and set a positive tone. Sample statements include the following.

* I’m glad you brought that up.
* I appreciate your directness.
* Thank you for speaking up about this.

### Finding truth

Resist the natural urge to explain or defend. Instead, attempt to find the student’s truth in the situation. Identify your actions in the discussion and take responsibility for what you can, without agreeing with the student(s). However uncomfortable it may be to acknowledge, there is usually some truth in criticism for which you can take responsibility by saying something like “You’re right. I did \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

### Cognitive empathy

This type of empathy involves demonstrating you understand a student’s point-of-view, why an issue is important to them, and their unmet needs or expectations. A student’s needs and expectations might revolve around time, reputation, respect, consideration, security, embarrassment, etc. The following statements can be used to express cognitive empathy.

* Your expectation was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Clearly, that was not met, giving you the impression of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.
* I see how \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ creates a problem.

### Emotional empathy

In the previous step, you demonstrated that you understood the student’s point-of-view. For this step, to express emotional empathy, you demonstrate that you understand the student’s feelings. Resist minimizing the student’s anger, as anger will almost always be present. Try saying “I can see that this makes you angry.” Before problem-solving and getting back to the discussion, end with inquiry like “Did I get that right?”

### Common pitfalls

The following actions are likely to re-arm an upset student, or cause a class discussion to continue to be challenging and heated.

* Explaining or problem-solving before disarming
* Attempting to disarm when feeling provoked
* Expressing the need to be right
* Apologizing excessively
* Saying “I understand” or “I know how you feel” or “I’m sorry if…”
* Abandoning disarming techniques if an attack continues

### Resources

[CWFL video examples of disarming demonstrated in a clinical setting](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjxZjzm4c6I&list=PL998FBC4E7CBBB5E4)