

## Addressing Disruptive Behavior Among Healthcare Professionals

Disruptive behavior is a persistent problem among healthcare providers and staff members. A survey of doctors and nurses at more than 100 hospitals showed that 77 percent of participants had witnessed physicians engage in disruptive behavior, and 65 percent had witnessed nurses engage in disruptive behavior. Further, 71 percent of participants felt that disruptive behavior contributed to medical errors.<sup>1</sup>

Disruptive behavior can be destructive in healthcare organizations, and it can contribute to job dissatisfaction, low staff morale, job turnover, poor communication, safety hazards, and unnecessary expenses. Confronting disruptive behavior can be challenging, but doing so is critical for patient and staff safety and well-being. To address this serious problem, healthcare organizations can implement various strategies.

1

Develop and enforce a code of conduct that establishes expectations for professionalism, respect, and dignity in the healthcare organization.

2

Identify in the code of conduct specific behaviors that are disruptive or inappropriate and that require disciplinary action. Examples include overt disruptive behaviors (e.g., yelling, intimidation, and [sexual harassment](#)) and covert behaviors (e.g., refusing to follow protocols, ignoring phone calls, and delaying attention to patient needs).

3

Seek organizational leadership and executive committee support for the code of conduct, professional standards, and early intervention when incidents of disruptive behavior occur.

4

Include information about the organization's code of conduct in employment arrangements, partnership agreements, and business contracts.

5

Develop a process to evaluate and document incidents of disruptive behavior. Clearly establish evaluation roles and responsibilities, what information should be documented, and who is responsible for documentation. Include peer review policies for evaluating disruptive behavior complaints.

6

Implement a process for notifying providers or staff members who receive disruptive behavior complaints, and establish a mechanism that allows them to respond to or dispute the allegation.

7

Develop a tiered corrective action plan commensurate with the type of disruptive behavior and the frequency with which it occurs (e.g., an initial incident of covert behavior might result in a verbal warning).

8

Implement a process to monitor individuals' behavior following corrective action for disruptive incidents.

9

Develop an approach for managing disruptive behavior that is a result of substance abuse or behavioral health issues. Identify organizations and resources to support individuals (e.g., the state medical association, an employee assistance program, or other local support programs).

10

As a condition of employment arrangements or partnership agreements, require “for cause” alcohol and drug testing.

11

Identify standards for confidentiality related to reporting disruptive incidents, evaluating incidents, and taking disciplinary action.

12

Educate both clinical and administrative staff at the organization about the code of conduct, professional standards, and consequences of disruptive behavior as part of orientation and ongoing training efforts.

13

Conduct culture of safety surveys to gauge healthcare providers’ and staff members’ perceptions of professionalism within the organization.

## Resources

- [MedPro Group: Red Flags for Disruptive Behavior in Healthcare Professionals](#)
- [MedPro Group: Risk Resources: Disruptive Behavior](#)
- [MedPro Group: The Corrosive Effect of Disruptive Behavior on Staff Morale and Patient Care](#)
- [MedPro Group: The Patient Safety and Financial Implications of Disruptive Behavior](#)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2019, January). *Patient safety primer: Disruptive and unprofessional behavior*. AHRQ PSNet. Retrieved from <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/15/disruptive-and-unprofessional-behavior>

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