

## Addressing Disruptive Behavior Among Healthcare Professionals

Disruptive behavior among healthcare providers and staff is a persistent problem. 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 reported witnessing nurses engage in disruptive behavior. Further, 71 percent of participants felt that disruptive behavior contributed to medical errors.<sup>1</sup>

Not only can disruptive behavior be corrosive in healthcare organizations, but also it can contribute to job dissatisfaction, poor staff morale, job turnover, inadequate communication, patient safety hazards, and unnecessary expenses. Confronting disruptive behavior can be challenging, but it's critical for patient and staff safety. To address this serious problem, healthcare organizations can implement a variety of strategies.

1

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

2

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

3

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).

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 the individual with the alleged disruptive behavior of a complaint, and establish a mechanism that allows the individual to respond to or dispute the allegation.

7

Develop a tiered corrective action plan commensurate with the disruptive behavior.

8

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

9

Develop an approach for managing situations that involve disruptive behavior as a result of substance abuse. Identify organizations and resources to support impaired 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.

## Endnote

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1 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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