De-Escalating Intense Interactions with Students

I. “Intense Interactions”?  
   a. Things to keep in mind:  
      i. Remember: It’s NOT about YOU.  
      ii. “Crisis” is all about perception. At that moment, whatever is happening is a crisis for that student. It is his/her experience, so something we might view as benign or not a big deal could be a true crisis for the student.  
      iii. Although issues may have been building for a while, something happened within the last 24 hours to put that student in crisis mode.  
      iv. When in crisis mode, emotions go up and rationale goes down. This is why it is very difficult, or even impossible, to do any type of real decision making when interacting with someone in crisis mode. It is temporary.  
      v. Normal coping skills break down when a student is in crisis.  
      vi. A student can present as “in crisis” in different ways – some may be very emotional and crying, others may be argumentative and still others can be hostile or aggressive. Again – this is how he/she is experiencing the crisis and his/her normal coping skills and behaviors have broken down.  
         1. Even in crisis, this does not mean that the student has a right to make threats towards you or anyone else OR has the right to be verbally abusive.

II. Getting past “crisis mode”  
   a. Allow the student to be and to feel heard.  
      i. For the student to feel heard, you need to listen.  
      ii. You must listen to both the facts he/she is giving you AND the emotions that he/she is expressing – the emotions and emotional reactions to the facts is what has put him/her into “crisis mode”.  
      iii. Letting him/her talk gives him/her a chance to expend a lot of energy that may have been building up – this will work to your advantage as you talk to him/her.  
      iv. Students in crisis want EMPATHY, not sympathy. Someone in crisis does not want or need someone to sympathize with him/her about the situation – in order to feel heard, he/she need to feel that you are empathizing with him/her in that moment and are “with” him/her.  
      v. This may feel it is taking up a lot of time – and it might.  
   b. Allow him/her the time to get out what he/she feels they need to say.  
      i. This may feel like he/she is telling you a lot of information that is not relevant or unnecessary – or that you feel you already know.
III. The “Art” of Active Listening
   a. These are skills and actions that you can use when talking to a student. The actions help the student know that you are listening to him/her and really HEARING him/her as well.
      i. Emotion-labeling
         1. Respond to the emotion that the student is showing.
         2. “You look really upset” “I hear that you are really worried”
         3. This helps the student find his/her words and name the emotions, and it helps you confirm that you are on target with what is going on.
      ii. Paraphrasing
         1. Every now and then, restate to the student, in your own words, what emotions and reactions you have heard him/her state
         2. “OK – What I’m hearing is that…” “Let’s see if I’m clear on this. I heard…”
         3. This shows that you are actively following what he/she is telling you and allows space for any clarification.
      iii. Summarizing
         1. Similar to paraphrasing, but in summarizing, you want to restate facts about the situation to check accuracy.
         2. “Let me make sure I have all the information correct…”
         3. This is another opportunity for clarification.
      iv. Reflecting/Mirroring
         1. Use the same words that the student does so that you are always talking in his/her language.
         2. “This is really stressful for you…” “I can tell this is very hard on you…” “I can see this really sucks for you…”
      v. “I” statements
         1. Further shows the student that you are involved and active in what he/she is telling you. You can also use it to have a break in the conversation if it is getting highly emotional again.
         2. If you are feeling that the student is trying to be manipulative in some way, this is a good way to express your feelings about the interaction in a non-accusatory way.
         3. “I feel ____ when you/ this happens_____ because____”
      vi. Effective pauses & Using silence
         1. This allows a break in the interaction for both you and the student to think. It is also helpful for a student to feel that he/she is being allowed the time he/she needs to talk to you.
         2. A pause or brief silence also gives the student a chance to “work up” to saying something. It may be something very important or difficult for him/her to talk about, so not being rushed helps him/her feel you care and respect the interaction.
      vii. Validation & Support statements
         1. This is a statement that acknowledges that the student came to you with this issue.
2. “I really respect that you are being open about this” “I know it’s hard to talk about this stuff. Thank you for trusting me.”

viii. Redirecting
1. Very useful if you notice that one or two topics seem to make the student very emotional again – so you can use this statement to move onto a different, less highly emotional topic. It also allows you to have some control over what is being talked about without taking control away from the student.
2. “Let’s focus on…” “One thing we could do today…”

ix. Minimal Encouragers
1. These are sounds, non-verbal signals and phrases that let the student know you are interested and want to hear more. This also builds rapport or trust in the interaction.
2. Holding eye contact, nodding your head, stopping any other activity you are doing are non-verbal signals.
3. “Uh huh” “Ok” “Then?” “I understand” are common sounds and phrases.

b. Common communication blockers to try and avoid
i. “Why” questions – tend to make students defensive
ii. Quick reassurance – can come across as dismissive and rude
iii. Advising – can come across as telling him/her what to do instead of listening to him/her
iv. Digging for information – this is not the focus when someone is in crisis
v. Patronizing – tends to cause negative responses
vi. Preaching – can come across as dismissive and that you did not listen
vii. Interrupting – can come across that you aren’t interested

IV. Signs that things are going well
a. Decreased amount and intensity of visible emotional distress
b. Decreased visible body tension
c. Shift in the student’s language – He/she start to move from emotional words to more factual words and statements
d. Shift in the conversation content from emotional to rational
e. Increased willingness to talk about suggestions, problem solving
f. The student expresses that he/she want help to change/improve the situation that had put him/her into a crisis
g. The interaction will feel more collaborative and productive
h. Willingness to discuss options/suggestions
i. The student may also state that he/she is feeling heard, better, or understood
j. The student responds positively to the active listening skills – such as saying “Yes” “Yeah, that’s what it’s like” or “Ok, yeah – no that’s exactly what it’s like right now”
V. **The Aggressive or Agitated Student**
a. Try to keep in mind that this is how she/he is expressing being in crisis and his/her normal coping skills and behaviors have broken down. He/she is acting in a way that, to get out of the crisis, he/she feels will get him/her to their perceived needs.
b. Recognize and reflect to him/her that you can see and hear that he/she is angry.
c. Offer to take a break before you continue talking.
d. Allow him/her the opportunity to explain what is upsetting.
e. ALWAYS reinforce appropriate boundaries – being verbally abusive or making threats is never acceptable.
f. **ALWAYS call SECURITY or 911 if:**
   i. The student makes a threat to harm you personally.
   ii. The student threatens to harm someone else or cause property damage.
   iii. The student makes statements about killing himself/herself or not wanting to live.
   iv. You have a strong gut feeling that you are not safe with the student or that the student is not safe to be alone.

VI. **Different settings**

a. **Email**
   i. Although we all tell students to not send something extremely urgent or as a crisis via email (because we don’t all check it all the time), they still do sometimes!
   ii. If the email contains threats towards you or disturbing content, make sure you forward to the appropriate person for review. Please call ahead so that he/she knows to watch his/her email, and work with him/her about a response. The appropriate person could be Rob Kairis, Emily Ribnik, a 24 hour crisis hotline or the police. It is also helpful to keep print outs of the emails as you or someone else may need it for documentation later.
      1. Keep your desk reference card handy!

b. **Classroom**
   i. Set clear boundaries of appropriate classroom behavior and things that are more appropriate to talk to you about on a one on one basis.
   ii. If someone is agitated or aggressive – Start by calling him/her on it and stating that you understand her/she is upset, but it is not appropriate classroom behavior. He/she may persist – and if so – consider “taking away the audience” and dismissing the student from the class, or taking the class away from the student. Always remember you can call Security if a student refuses to leave or continues to disrupt the class.
   iii. If someone is visibly distressed and crying – offer to him/her that he/she can step out if he/she needs to take a break AND to follow up with you after class so you can talk to him/her. Allow another student to go with him/her if possible/appropriate.
   iv. Always keep your department head in the loop about what is happening in your classroom – and don’t hesitate to ask for help or guidance!
References:
A Practical Overview of Crisis Negotiation. Special Operations and Research Unit, FBI Academy (3/1992)

Crisis and Suicide Intervention. Special Operations and Research Unit, FBI Academy (1/1993)

The Art of Active Listening & Verbal De-escalation. Portage County Crisis Intervention Team Training (2006-current)