

# How to Respond to Violence in the Academic Environment and Prevent Its Recurrence – A Psychiatrist's Perspective

Preventing violence and its consequences is one of the most serious challenges for mental and social health. From the perspective of a young psychiatrist, it is crucial not only to respond to manifestations of violence but also to create conditions that prevent its recurrence. In combating violence, the most important aspects are early detection, therapeutic support, social education, and the building and strengthening of healthy relationships – both within family environments and professional, school, or academic settings.

## **Why is preventing violence so important?**

When meeting patients who have experienced physical, psychological, economic, or emotional violence, I notice that each case is unique, but a common denominator is a deep sense of harm and loss of safety. Violence leaves traces not only in the body but, above all, in the psyche – in the form of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, or cognitive impairments leading to difficulties in everyday learning and work. In academic environments, which should be spaces for intellectual development and freedom of thought, manifestations of violence also occur. Mechanisms that favor its emergence and perpetuation are complex, encompassing structural, cultural, and psychological factors.

The hierarchical structure of universities promotes power asymmetry, in which individuals at higher levels may abuse their position over staff, doctoral students, or students. From a psychiatric perspective, this mechanism resembles a dependency relationship, where fear of losing opportunities for development or career advancement blocks the victim's response. Low awareness of what constitutes violence (not just physical) means that many people associate it solely with physical aggression or shouting, failing to recognize subtle forms such as humiliation, neglect, manipulation, or isolation. Lack of knowledge leads to internalization of experiences and self-blame, which consequently results in anxiety disorders, depression, and reduced self-esteem.



The culture of competition and pressure, characteristic of academic environments, often relies on constant rivalry for publications, grants, and positions. High pressure fosters an atmosphere in which aggression and competition are treated as “normal tools” for achieving success. Psychologically, this mechanism resembles behavioral modeling – juniors learn from seniors that violence can be an effective strategy. A lack of adequate education and effective response procedures further exacerbates the problem. Even if universities have anti-violence regulations, they are often ineffective – real tools to protect victims and sanction perpetrators are missing. Victims feel that reporting violence will not yield results, leading to learned helplessness, a psychological mechanism in which a person ceases attempts at self-protection. Normalization and silence by witnesses reinforce victims’ sense of isolation and perpetuate the belief that “this is just how it is.” From a psychiatric perspective, this is a mechanism of collective rationalization, in which a group justifies harmful behavior to avoid confrontation.

The consequences of violence in the academic environment are profound and multidimensional. They affect both individuals and entire institutions. From a clinician’s point of view, the individual impact on mental health is most important. Victims often experience chronic stress, feelings of threat, and lowered mood. Continuous humiliation or neglect leads to loss of confidence in one’s own abilities, and chronic stress results in psychosomatic symptoms: sleep problems, headaches, concentration difficulties, or somatic illnesses. Violence also reduces the quality of education – students and doctoral candidates lose motivation, creativity and innovation decline, staff and student turnover increases, and the mentor-student relationship is disrupted. The occurrence of violent behaviors also affects the institution’s reputation – a university perceived as a place of violence loses authority in the eyes of students, doctoral candidates, and the public, faces difficulties in attracting talent, exposes itself to legal and financial risks, and weakens its position in international cooperation.

## How to Respond to Violence?

An effective response to violence requires the involvement of witnesses, victims, and institutions. Witnesses play a crucial role – their response can break the cycle of violence. Therefore, they must not ignore the situation; they should intervene safely, show support for the victim, document the events, and report them to the appropriate authorities. Victims need to regain a sense of safety and agency, name the situation, seek support, report the violence, and document the incidents.

Equally important is the education of all members of the academic community and the strengthening of positive individual resources, such as psychological resilience, subjectively perceived social support, and a sense of coherence. Academic institutions have the duty to create a safe environment through clear anti-violence procedures, the establishment of independent bodies, rapid and transparent responses to reports,



education and preventive measures, provision of psychological support, and a zero-tolerance policy toward violence.

Preventing recurrence of violence requires working on the perpetrator's emotions, ongoing therapy and monitoring, sometimes changing the environment, and strengthening the victims' psychological resilience. Education of the academic community – workshops and training in non-violent communication – is essential to change our perspective on violent behaviors in universities and institutions.

From a psychiatrist's perspective, the most important point is to remember that violence is not an individual problem but a societal one. Effective response requires cooperation from all parties. Preventing the recurrence of violence is a long-term process, but achievable if we combine empathy, education, and consistent action. Only then can a university be a place where scientific development goes hand in hand with a sense of safety and care for the psychological well-being of all members of the academic community.

*Dr. Joanna Smolarczyk, MD, PhD in Health Sciences*

