

Resources
for Today



IDENTIFYING AND REFERRING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY & STAFF

University students can encounter a great deal of stress at times (i.e., academic, social, family, work, financial) during the course of their educational experience. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students in distress have a number of resources available to them. These include close friends, relatives, clergy, coaches, etc. In fact, anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in time of trouble. Another obvious resource for students is university faculty, staff members and resident assistants if they live on campus.

We believe there is a powerful rationale for faculty, staff members and RAs to intervene when they encounter distressed students. The inability to cope effectively with emotional stress poses a serious threat to a student's learning ability. As a faculty, staff member or RA, your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in helping a struggling student reestablish the emotional equilibrium necessary for academic survival and success.

Your willingness to respond to students in distress will undoubtedly be influenced by your personal style and your particular philosophy about the limits of your responsibility for helping students grow emotionally, as well as intellectually. Obviously, a student's openness to assistance, and such situational factors as class size, length and depth of your relationship, and the location of the contact, may have a substantial effect on the type of interaction you can have with a student.

We hope this guide will not only help you assess what can sometimes be a difficult situation, but give you some specific ideas about what you can do when confronted with a student who is in distress.

Student Counseling Services' staff is available in person or on call 24 hours per day, everyday, including holidays and weekends.

Tips for Recognizing Troubled Students

At one time or another everyone feels depressed, anxious or upset. There is a difference between students who are in a serious mental health crisis and those who are suffering from general levels of distress. Understanding the difference will help you respond appropriately to the situation.

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Students in Distress

- serious grade problems or a change from consistently good to unaccountably poor performance
- excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated consistent class attendance
- unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction (e.g., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, dominating discussions, etc.)
- a depressed, lethargic mood, excessive activity and talking (very rapid speech), swollen and red eyes, marked change in personal dress and hygiene, sweaty (when room is not hot), falling asleep in class
- frequently missing morning classes on Mondays, Fridays or the day after a holiday possibly due to alcohol and drug use
- repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the circumstances prompting the request
- new or regularly occurring behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and interferes with the effective management of your class
- unusual or exaggerated emotional response which is obviously inappropriate to the situation
- references to escaping, disappearing, and/or running away from stressors; subtle statements of wanting to die or getting into an accident to relieve self from responsibilities

Students in a Serious Mental Health Crisis

- highly disruptive behavior (hostile, aggressive, violent, etc)
- inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech, unconnected or disjointed thoughts)
- loss of contact with reality (seeing, hearing things which "aren't there," beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability)
- overtly suicidal statements (referring to suicide as a current option)
- homicidal threats

What You Can Do for a Student in Distress?

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about, or if a student seeks you out for help with personal problems, here are some suggestions which might make the opportunity more comfortable for you and helpful for the student:

Talk to the student. Talk to the student in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel confident about what to do next.

Be direct and non-judgmental. If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, non-judgmental terms (e.g., "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? Don't you care about anything?").

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Listen sensitively. Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the gist of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings: "It sounds like you're not accustomed to being so far from home and you're feeling lonely." Let the student talk.

Clarify options. Work with the student to clarify the costs and benefits of each option for handling the problem from the student's point of view.

Demonstrate respect. Avoid judging, evaluating or criticizing unless the student specifically asks your opinion. Such behavior is apt to close the student off from you and from getting the help needed. It is important to respect the student, even if you don't agree with his or her value system.

Refer. Point out that help is available and seeking help is a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help (e.g., Student Counseling Services, Student Medical Services, various campus ministries). Tell the student what you know about the recommended person or service.

Follow up. Following up is an important part of the process. Check with the student later to find out how he or she is doing. Provide support as appropriate.

When Should You Make a Referral?

Even though a student asks for help with a problem and you are willing to help, there are circumstances which may indicate that you should suggest that the student use another resource. Examples might be:

- the problem or request for information or assistance is one you know you can't handle
- you believe that personality differences will interfere with your ability to help
- you know the student personally (as a friend, neighbor, friend of a friend, etc.) and do not think you could be objective enough to really help
- the student acknowledges the problem but is reluctant to discuss it with you
- after working with a student for some time you find that little progress has been made and you don't know how to proceed
- you are feeling overwhelmed, pressed for time, or otherwise at a high level of stress yourself

Making a Referral

Some people accept a referral for professional help more easily than others. It is usually best to be direct with students about the limits of your ability to assist them - limits of time, energy, training, and objectivity. It is often reassuring to students to hear that you respect their willingness to talk to you and that you want to support them in getting the assistance they need. Confused students may feel comforted to know that they don't necessarily have to know what's wrong before they can ask for help.

Assure them that seeking help doesn't necessarily mean that they have serious problems. It is possible that their concern is one of the common reasons that college students seek the help of another person. These include feeling down or low on energy and motivation; experiencing difficulties in relationships with friends, parents, boy/girlfriends, spouses, or children; feeling anxious or depressed; and having concerns about future goals or plans. There are many kinds of referrals. The best one is the one to which the student will respond. Depending on the situation, have the student consider friends, clergy and other religious members of their community, family members, community agencies, and campus offices. If you can, try to prepare the student for what to expect if he or she takes your suggestion. Tell the student what you know about the referral person or service.

Additional Consultation is Available to You

You may still have some questions about how best to handle a situation involving a student who is emotionally distressed. Student Counseling Services' counselors will be pleased to help you:

- assess the situation, its seriousness, and potential for referral
- learn about resources, both on and off campus, so you can suggest the most appropriate help available when talking with the student
- find the best way to make a referral, if appropriate
- clarify your own feelings about the student and consider the ways you can be most effective

For consultation with Student Counseling Services, call 651.2340. After regular work hours, contact the University Police Department and they will put you in contact with an on-call counselor.

Emergency Assistance & Referral Numbers

If you are involved with a student who is expressing a direct threat to self or others, or who is acting in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way, try to stay calm and arrange for someone to stay with the student and call:

During office hours:

Ext. 5000 - University Police
Ext. 2340 – Student Counseling Services
Ext. 3287 – Student Medical Services

Outside office hours:

651.5000 - University Police Department. Ask to have the counselor on call contact you

Life threatening emergencies:

Call 911

Behavior Intervention Team

Web Site Referral Form at <http://wtamu.edu/BITeam>
Email to BITeam@wtamu.edu

Adapted from material developed by St. Edwards University's Counseling & Consultation Center

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