

Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty or Staff

From time to time everyone feels upset or depressed, including college students. While the majority of college students successfully manage the realities of college life, others have a hard time coping with difficulties, and experience distress that interferes with their lives. Because they respect and trust you as an advisor, mentor, faculty or staff member, a student in distress may seek you out for help. Other times, you may recognize signs of distress in a student and initiate contact. Being aware of signs of distress, ways to intervene, and sources of help for the student can help you feel more in control of situations that may arise.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Marked changes in academic performance or behavior
- Poor performance and preparation
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration
- Change in pattern of interaction
- Change in mood, motor activity, or speech
- Noticeable changes in physical appearance: dramatic weight gain or loss, change in personal hygiene or dress
- Disruptive behavior
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional response

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Talk to the student in private when both of you have time.
- Express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms: “I’ve noticed you missed many class sessions this month and I’m concerned.”
- Let the student talk, and listen in an empathic and sensitive way.
- Help the student become aware of possible solutions to the problem.
- Have the student discuss pros and cons of each option, so that she or he can make an informed decision.
- Remember not to impose your value system on the student. You cannot make decisions for the student, no matter how well-intentioned you are.

WHEN TO MAKE A REFERRAL

Often you will be able to assist many students simply by listening. However, some students may require much more attention than you can provide. Do not hesitate to refer the student to the University Counseling Center if:

- The problem is more serious than you feel comfortable handling.
- You have helped as much as you can but further help is needed.
- Your personal feelings about the student may interfere with your objectivity.
- You feel overwhelmed and pressed for time.

- The student is reluctant to discuss the situation with you.

HOW TO MAKE A REFERRAL

- Be frank with the student about the limits of your time, expertise, or objectivity. Tell the student that you think she/he should get help from another source, and suggest the University Counseling Center. If the student is reluctant to seek professional help:
- Normalize the process of talking with a counselor as a positive, helpful experience.
- Reassure the student that counselors talk to students about a wide range of concerns, and that problems need not reach the crisis stage before help can be beneficial.
- Assure the student that she or he can meet with the counselor on a one-time basis without committing to ongoing therapy.
- Inform the student that counseling services are confidential, and that, except in cases of harm to self or others, any contact or information about the student cannot be disclosed to anyone without the student's written permission.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A STUDENT CALLS US

Students should make their own appointments if possible. You can help the process by offering the number of the University Counseling Center (504-865-3835). If the situation is urgent, the student can be seen on the same day in a walk-in appointment, or immediately if in crisis. If the situation is less urgent, the student is given an initial intake appointment, usually within a week or two of the call, to meet with a staff counselor.

The student is asked to come to the intake appointment about 20 minutes early to complete information forms (this process is temporarily waived in an emergency). The student will then meet with a counselor, and together will determine how the University Counseling Center can best meet the needs of the student. The services are free of charge. If you would like feedback regarding a student, ask him or her to sign a release of information, which allows the counselor to speak with you.

CONSULTATION IS AVAILABLE

If you are concerned about a student, call the University Counseling Center at 504-865-3835. Our counselors are available for consultation and can help in a number of ways, including:

- Assessing the seriousness of the situation.
- Suggesting possible courses of action.
- Exploring both on- and off-campus resources.
- Determining the best way to make a referral, if appropriate.

IN AN EMERGENCY

Signs That a Student Is in Crisis and Needs Emergency Care

- Highly disruptive behavior (hostility, aggression, etc.).

- Strange or bizarre behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality.
- Suicidal or other self-destructive thoughts or actions: direct or indirect; verbal or in written material (assignments, journals, etc.).
- Homicidal threats.

What You Can Do To Help

- Stay safe: If danger seems imminent, call Campus Police at 504-865-3434.
- Stay calm and avoid escalation.
- Call the University Counseling Center at 504-865-3835 (make sure someone is with the student while the call is being made).
- Ask the student directly if she or he is drunk, confused, or having thoughts of hurting her- or himself.
- Show that you take the student's feelings seriously.
- Let the student know that you want to help.
- Reassure the student that with help she or he will recover and feel better.
- Stay close until help is available.