

Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Parents or Guardians

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, a parent or guardian, a student in distress may seek you out for help. Other times, you may recognize signs of distress in your student and initiate contact. Being aware of signs of distress, ways to intervene, and sources of help for your 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
- 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
- Financial difficulties despite adequate funding by you

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Talk to your student in private when both of you have time.
- Express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms: “I’ve noticed you have not called to talk this week like you normally do and I’m concerned.”
- Let your student talk, and listen in an empathic and sensitive way.
- Help your student become aware of possible solutions to the problem.
- Have your student discuss pros and cons of each option, so that she or he can make an informed decision.

WHEN TO MAKE A REFERRAL

Often you will be able to assist your 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.
- You feel overwhelmed.
- Your student is reluctant to discuss the situation with you.

HOW TO MAKE A REFERRAL

- Be frank with your student about the limits of your expertise or objectivity. Tell your student that you think she/he should get help from another source, and suggest the University Counseling Center. If your student is reluctant to seek professional help:
- Normalize the process of talking with a counselor as a positive, helpful experience.
- Reassure your 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 your student that she or he can meet with the counselor on a one-time basis without committing to ongoing therapy.
- Inform your 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 your 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.