

WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN DISTRESS A GUIDE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

• Introduction

College is often a difficult and stressful time for students. With students trying to juggle school, work, and family responsibilities, there are times when these demands can feel overwhelming and unmanageable. These feelings can easily disrupt academic performance and may result in emotional distress or harmful behaviors such as substance abuse or suicide attempts. As a faculty or staff member, you are in a key position to identify and help students who are in crisis. If you are seen as caring and trustworthy, you may be a potential resource during stressful times. This may be particularly true for students who are uncomfortable talking to family or friends. Your expression of concern and interest may be critical in helping students get back on their feet, both academically and personally. A personal counselor from Counseling and Career Services is available to assist you in working with students in distress and to consult with you regarding the best course of action for a particular student.

• General Signs of Distress

Marked Changes in Academic and Class Performance

- Poor preparation and poor test performance
- Infrequent class attendance
- Unusual or changed pattern of interactions with others
- Marked change in class participation
- Excessively anxious in class
- Disruptive behavior
- Social withdrawal

Odd Behavior or Appearance

- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Irritability or pressured (slow or labored) speech
- Marked change in personal hygiene or dress
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Alarming or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality
- Aggressive or belligerent behavior

References to Suicide, Homicide or Death

- Talk of suicide, homicide, or death in verbal or written statements

How You Can Help

You are encouraged, whenever possible, to speak directly to a student when you sense that he/she is having academic and/or personal difficulties. If you feel comfortable doing so, openly acknowledge to the student that you have noticed her/his distress, that you are sincerely concerned about his/her welfare, and that you are willing to help explore his/her alternatives. Here are a few key things to remember when approaching a student in distress:

- ❖ PRIVACY IS IMPORTANT. Talk to the student in private when both of you have time. 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 comfortable about what to do next.
- ❖ HONESTY IS IMPORTANT. It is beneficial to be open with a student about the limits of your ability to assist (e.g., limits of time, energy, training, objectivity). It is often reassuring to a student to hear that you respect his/her willingness to talk to you and that you want to support him/her in getting the help he/she needs.
- ❖ REASSURANCE IS IMPORTANT. Assure the student that things can and will get better. It is important to help the student realize that there are options. There are many kinds of referrals. The best one is the referral to which the student responds. Depending on the situation, have the student consider friends, clergy, family members, and campus/community resources.

Important components of effective referrals

YOUR ATTITUDE

An attitude of sincere interest and concern toward a student in need is critical to referral success.

REASON FOR REFERRAL

Your thoughts about the reason for the referral should be made clear to the student. It is helpful if you explain how a counselor can assist the student.

MUTUAL DECISIONMAKING

Including the client in the referral decision-making process creates the best climate for helping a student, unless he/she is seriously disturbed and unable to accept such responsibility.

TIMING

Timing is important. When a student is receptive toward a referral, offer to pick up the phone and make an appointment for the student in his/her presence. Call Counseling and Career Services (772-4840) to make an appointment or to consult with a personal counselor.

CONTACT COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES

Discuss with a personal counselor any relevant information about the person you referred. Please note that if you decide to share information about the student with the counselor, it is better to receive permission from the student beforehand.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Assure the student that what she or he discusses with a personal counselor will not be shared unless she or he gives the counselor written permission to do so.

** It is important to note that referrals are most effective:

- when you escort the person to Counseling and Career Services
- when you call ahead and make an appointment, and
- are much less effective when you merely suggest that the student see a counselor.

Counseling Services

CRISES - Will be handled immediately.

NON-CRISES - May entail a brief waiting period.

APPOINTMENTS - To make an appointment, call Counseling and Career Services (772-4840) or stop by L-140 during office hours.

PERSONAL COUNSELING - During a student's first counseling appointment, the counselor will assess the student's needs in order to determine the best course of action for the student. The counselor will discuss the appropriate service options with the student. Depending on the student's needs, he/she may participate in individual or group counseling sessions. If referred for individual counseling, the student will meet with a counselor on a short-term basis. Other options that may be considered might be referral to another on-campus or community-based agency. It is also feasible that the student may leave the initial appointment feeling able to handle the problem on his/her own.

**** All information shared with a personal counselor by a student will be kept confidential except: when the student poses a danger to him/herself, when the student poses a danger to someone else, when the abuse of a minor, elderly person, or mentally handicapped person is involved, or when the student requests in writing that the information be shared. ****

If you are interested in a student's contact with a personal counselor, information can best be obtained directly from the student. It should be noted that students are not bound by the same promises of confidentiality that mental health professionals are obliged to keep.

Additional Consultation

Additional consultation with a personal counselor is available at Counseling and Career Services (772-4840). Please feel free to call with any questions/concerns.