

Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff play an important role in helping students as you are seen as a first point of contact. Students may exhibit behaviors that indicate that they may have a problem before they even realize it. By showing interest and concern, you the faculty or staff member may assist the student to achieve both personal and academic success.

Recognizing a Student in Distress

All of us experience life's challenges; however, students may experience significant distress that may suggest a more serious problem. Here are some indicators that a student may be in need of support and guidance:

- **Academic Issues:** A noticeable decline in quality of work, changed patterns of interaction, increased absences, repeated requests for course work extensions, course grade apathy or failure to turn in assignments.
- **Substance abuse:** Apparent as evidenced by odors, glassy or bloodshot eyes, mood swings, slurred speech, poor concentration and lack of coordination.
- **Extreme disorganization or erratic performance:** Especially important if the student was previously very organized and sudden change in behavior is observed
- **Signs of depression:** Appears sad, changes in appearance, poor hygiene, changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns, difficulty concentrating, socially withdrawn, etc.
- **Anxious or nervous behaviors:** Appears to be agitated, irritable, or even aggressive, inappropriate emotional responses, difficulty accepting grades or has a disproportionate response to grades.
- **Bizarre behavior:** Speech patterns that make no sense, odd or eccentric behavior, difficulty with normal interpersonal communication, lack of emotion, or misinterpretation of reality.
- **Loss of a significant relationship:** Loss of a significant relationship due to death, divorce or a breakup coupled with inadequate coping and grieving skills.
- **Physical Changes:** Dramatic changes in weight either an increase or decrease, deterioration of physical hygiene, sleeping in class, confusion, bloodshot eyes or smelling of alcohol, frequently absent due to illness.
- **Self-injurious behaviors:** Cutting, superficial cuts made to the body typically in the arm or leg is observed. This is not always a suicide attempt but a way to cope with and alleviate emotional pain and suffering. Without judgment, let the student know you care, and make them aware of counseling services.
- **Suicidal references:** Please take these actions very serious and take action: talking about suicide, disconcerting writing assignments or statements on social media, statements of violence, morbidity, social isolation, despair, or papers/statements that

focus entirely on suicide or death. Suicidal thoughts are not necessarily dangerous or acted upon, but probably indicate that a student is quite distressed and in need of help. If you believe this is an urgent situation and danger to the student is imminent please immediately contact University Police (Utica) at (315) 792-7111 or Site Security (Albany) at (518) 437-8600 or call 911. If you believe this is not urgent but would like to discuss your concerns about a student with one of the counselors please call us Utica (315) 792-7172 or Albany (518) 442-5800. We are always available to help you sort out your concerns about a student.

• **Harm to others:** Please take these actions very serious and take action: threats to others either verbal or written. Immediately contact University Police (Utica) at (315) 792-7111 or Site Security (Albany) at (518) 437-8600 or call 911.

Responding to a Student in Distress

- If you feel comfortable, bring the student into a private area to share your concerns as opposed to discussing them in front of others.
- Listen attentively and respond in an honest and considerate way.
- Try to maintain a nonjudgmental manner.
- Address the student's behavior, what you have seen or heard and why you are concerned.
- Maintain an open and neutral posture. Don't assume you know what is going on. For example; "I have noticed you've been falling asleep in class recently and not turning in your work, I am worried about you".
- Keep your voice calm.
- Avoid aggressive or dominating body language such as standing over a student while trying to have a conversation with the student. Maintain an open posture by facing them and sitting at down at their level across from them and within an easy conversation distance.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Do not interrupt and practice active listen. *TIP-to demonstrate to a student that you are listening try repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. For example, "It sounds like you have been feeling overwhelmed by all the pressures your family has placed on you." Try to include the content of what was said and the overall emotional theme or concept when paraphrasing.
- Ask the student if they have people in their support system, who they are, and how often they are in contact with them. Encourage them to keep the lines of communication open with all their supports.
- If you feel uncomfortable or uncertain how to assist a student who appears to be in distress, please make a referral to counseling services.

Making a Referral

Utica Campus: SUNY Poly Wellness Center, Counseling Services – (315) 792-7172

Albany Campus: UAlbany Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) - (518) 442-5800

If you feel that you have helped the student as much as you can, it may be time to make a referral to counseling services. If the student does not wish to see a counselor on-campus, counseling staff will gladly assist them in making an off-campus referral. In the case of an off-campus referral it would be helpful for a member of the counseling staff to meet briefly with the student in order to assure they make the most appropriate recommendation based on their needs and personality. For non-emergency situations here are some tips for making a smooth referral to meet with a counselor:

- Let the student know your reasons for making the referral. Be clear that this is a recommendation, a suggestion, based on your genuine concern for their well-being. This process is much more effective when delivered in this manner.
- Provide the student with specific information about the office: location, hours of services, website, etc.
- It is very important that the student knows that the counselors are obligated under the law and by our ethical duty to maintain strict confidentiality.
- Ask the student if they would like to call for an appointment while in your office (respect their decision if they would rather do this at another time).
- Provide the student a brochure if you have one.
- Inform the student that bringing a friend or family member to their first session is acceptable.
- All records are strictly confidential and are only accessible to Wellness Center staff
- It may be helpful to inform the student that the counselors who work at the college are licensed therapists with an extensive background in both mental health and college counseling.

Sources:

<http://www.umich.edu/~mhealth/pdf/HelpingStudentsInDistress>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-campus/201110/stress-in-college-students>

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