

Identifying and Referring Students in Distress

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, others can experience these pressures as overwhelming and unmanageable. The inability to cope effectively with emotional stress poses a serious threat to a student's learning ability. Students in distress have a number of resources available to them. We believe there is a powerful rationale for faculty and staff to intervene when they encounter distressed students. As faculty and staff, your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in helping a struggling student re-establish the emotional equilibrium necessary for academic survival and success. On campus, these resources include faculty and staff as potential sources of empathy and support in times of trouble.

Tips for Recognizing Troubled Students

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.

Students in Distress

- Deterioration in quality of work
- Repeated absence from class, especially if the student has demonstrated consistent class attendance
- Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed examinations, etc.)
- Essays or creative works which indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, suicide or death, rage, or despair
- Unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction
- A depressed, lethargic mood, excessive activity and talking, swollen and red eyes, marked change in personal hygiene, sweaty and hot when room is not hot, falling asleep in class
- Visible changes in weight

- 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
- Overtly suicidal statements
- 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 encounter 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, such as “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?”
- **Listen sensitively**—Let the student talk. 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 the feelings: “It sounds like you’re not accustomed to being so far from home and you’re feeling lonely.”

- **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/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. 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 may include:

- 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 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 the student for some time you find that little progress has been made and you are unsure of 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, including 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; 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, campus offices, and community agencies. 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.

Emergency Assistance and Referral Numbers

During Office Hours

- Faculty and staff are encouraged to walk students they feel are in crisis to Student Counseling Services, CC 116 or call 651-2340 for a consultation about your student.
- If students threatening violence, it is more beneficial to contact the University Police Department at 651-2300.
- Student Medical Services are also available at 651-3287.

Outside Office Hours

- 651-2300 – University Police Department

Life Threatening Emergencies

- Call 911

Behavioral Intervention Team

- Web Referral Form at wtamu.edu/BITeam