

STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

(Counseling Center)

For many students, the college experience is a mix of anticipation and anxiety, competition and camaraderie, dependence and independence. In short, it is an exciting and sometimes stressful time. Academic pressures, family conflicts, relationship problems, career indecision, and changing values may cause "short circuiting." Many college students experience psychological crises which temporarily interfere with their lives. In any community, up to 10 percent of the population may be distressed by depression, acute anxiety, alcohol or drug abuse or other serious problems.

As a family member, you may encounter students who are experiencing serious problems. Oftentimes, you may be the first person that a student turns to for help. Students may look to you either in crisis situations or when they need support for typical adjustment and decision-making issues. What should you do?

This guide is designed to assist you in: 1) knowing some common causes of distress, 2) identifying possible warning signs of distress, 3) how you can help a student in distress, and 4) how to refer a student to the Counseling Center on their campus.

Common Causes of Emotional Distress

Relationship Breakup

Family Conflict

Loss of a Loved One

Divorce of Parents

Feeling Lonely

Academic Pressure or Failure

Serious Illness or Injury
Violent Traumatic Events
Not Fitting in with Peers
Unplanned Pregnancy
Religious Conflicts
Sexual Abuse or Assault
Physical Abuse or Assault
Identity Confusion
Perfectionism
Low Self-Esteem/Self-Concept
Loss of Goal or Dream

Common Warning Signs of Student Distress

Academic:

- Excessive Procrastination
- Dramatic Negative Change in Preparation or Performance
- Repeated Requests for Extensions or Special Considerations from their faculty
- Disruptive Classroom Behavior
- Excessive Absence/Tardiness
- Frequently Falling Asleep in Class
- Avoiding or Dominating Discussions
- Problems with Major and/or Career
- References to Suicide or Homicide in Verbal Statements or Writing

Interpersonal:

- Asking Instructor for Help with Personal Problems
- Withdrawal from Interactions with Faculty, Administrators, Staff, Peers
- Dependency on Advisor/Instructor/Professor
- Hanging Around Office
- Disruptive Behavior

- Inability to Get Along with Others
- Complaints from Other Students
- Isolating Self from Others

Behavioral:

- Change in Personal Hygiene
- Dramatic Weight Gain or Loss
- Lack of Energy
- Irritability, Aggressiveness
- Inappropriate or Exaggerated Behavior
- Impaired Speech
- Disjointed Thoughts
- Tearfulness
- Intense Emotion
- Inappropriate Responses
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Physically Harming Self
- Substance Abuse (e.g., smell alcohol on breath, slurred speech, bloodshot eyes)
- Insomnia or Excessive Sleep
- Talk of Hopelessness and Despair*
- Major life trauma: death of someone close; physical, sexual, emotional abuse; dealing with terminal illness of someone close *
- Expression of suicidal thoughts or feelings*

Any references to suicide, including thoughts, threats or attempts are extremely serious. Referral is necessary.

*** The behaviors marked with an asterisk (*) can indicate severe stress and crisis. Please call the Counseling Center on campus for assistance.**

What You Can Do

If you have noticed any of these warning signs, you are faced with the decision of whether or not to intervene. Your interest in your student's

well-being can make an important difference to a person in distress and may also help the student be successful at their school.

If You Decide to Intervene:

1. Talk to the student privately to help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.
2. Do not promise the student confidentiality regarding what he or she shares.
3. Listen carefully and respond to both the content and the emotions of the situation. Accept and respect what is said.
4. Discuss your observations of the student's behavior(s) which lead you to be concerned – be specific, direct and concrete, e.g., "I've noticed you have been missing class recently and I'm concerned."
5. Express your concern in a non-judgmental way; avoid negative comments or implications about personality or character.
6. Encourage the student to share his/her response to what you have said.
7. Try to focus on an aspect of the problem that is manageable. Assist the student with problem-solving: identify options for action and explore the pros and cons of each option.
8. Avoid easy answers such as, "Everything will be all right."
9. Help identify resources for what needs to be done/changed/improved.
10. Let the student know the limits on your ability to help him or her.
11. If the student appears to be in imminent danger of hurting himself or herself or others, call local PD number or 911.
12. If you would like to consult about a situation, mental health professionals at the College Campus' Counseling Center are generally available Monday – Friday, 8:00am – 5:00pm.

Notifying Others

In an effort to identify students who are in extreme distress and/or who are behaving in ways that are concerning to multiple people on campus (faculty, staff, students), see if your campus has a Students At-Risk Committee/department. Generally the purpose of the committee/department is to provide coordinated and centralized identification and response to such students.

How to Make a Referral to the Counseling Center

Presenting yourself as knowledgeable about campus services can ease a student's discomfort about seeking help. Assure the student that seeking help is a sign of strength and does not necessarily mean there are serious problems. Dispute the myth that only "weak or crazy" people talk to a counselor or use others for help. Assure the student you are referring him/her to the Counseling Center because you are concerned and want him/her to get appropriate assistance. Here are some suggestions for urgent and non-emergency situations.

Crisis Situations:

If you are concerned about a student being an imminent danger to himself/herself or others, call the Police at their local number or 911. In most cases, their response will involve having an officer facilitate transport of the student to a hospital emergency room or a Mental Health Center for evaluation.

Don't waste time by calling the Counseling Center first; the safety of the student is the primary task.

Urgent Situations:

During Business Hours:

For You: Counseling Center staff are generally available to consult with you about a situation usually Monday – Friday from 8:00am – 5:00 pm. You should call and ask to speak with the staff member on-call.

For the Student: The Counseling Center usually has a mental health professional on-call Monday – Friday from 8:00am – 5:00pm. The student can generally call or walk over to their Counseling Center to speak with someone. It is also appropriate for you to offer to walk the student over to the Center if you think this would help assist the student in following through with speaking to a mental health professional.

Outside of Business Hours:

If a situation needs immediate attention, such as you believe the student is a danger to him or herself or to others, you should call the Police or 911.

Students can usually also access their campus Crisis Hotline and speak to a trained responder.

Non-Emergency Referrals:

Encourage the student to contact their Counseling Center directly to schedule an initial assessment appointment by calling them as soon as possible. You may also want to offer to let the student call from your phone at that particular time if you believe extra support/encouragement is needed.

What to Expect at the Counseling Center

Scheduling an Appointment:

To schedule an appointment, a student can call or simply walk into their Counseling Center during business hours. There should be no additional charges for counseling services provided at their Counseling Center and students generally receive up to 12 individual or couples therapy sessions per year; generally there is not a session limit on participation in group therapy. Students will be scheduled for an initial assessment appointment which typically takes approximately 1.5 hours. This

assessment is used to determine if the Counseling Center's services are the best option for the student, and if so, which of the services are a best fit. If it is determined during the assessment that the student would benefit from individual therapy at the Counseling Center, the student will be assigned to a therapist and his or her first appointment will usually be for the following week. Usually a student must be taking at least one class on campus to be eligible for services.

Confidentiality Guidelines

Once you have made a referral, it is normal to want to find out what happened and how you can continue to help the student. However, ethical principles of confidentiality that are defined by the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association and State law determine what we can and cannot disclose to others.

Generally:

We Cannot:

- Let you know whether a student you referred has come for an appointment.
- Provide any information to anyone about a client without his or her written permission.

We Can:

- Answer your questions about making referrals to the Counseling Center.
- Offer you information about psychological concerns and problems in general.
- Provide other referral options.
- Consult with you regarding specific behaviors of a student about whom you are concerned.