

## **RESPONDING TO EMOTIONALLY TROUBLED OR DIFFICULT STUDENTS**

As a member of the University community, you have ongoing and direct contact with students. This places you in a position to identify students who are struggling with personal and/or academic concerns. How involved you want to be in the student's problems will likely depend on how you see your role in the University, your training, your experience, and your personality. These guidelines, your knowledge of the services available, and your awareness of your personal attributes can help you become more comfortable with determining when and how you wish to intervene with students.

All students will experience some level of stress. Some will face life events that are more challenging such as significant changes in a relationship, the death of someone close, family crises, and physical illness. Others will face severe difficulty with anxiety, depression suicidal thoughts, anger, addictions and even psychotic episodes. How students respond to these challenges and how these challenges impact their academic functioning will vary greatly based on their coping abilities and personal situation.

### **Signs and Symptoms Warning of Student Distress:**

- Excessive procrastination and poorly prepared work, especially if inconsistent with previous work
- Infrequent class attendance with little or no work completed
- Unusual dependency: hanging around or making excessive demands for contact outside of normal periods of association
- Listlessness or frequently falling asleep in class
- Repeated requests for special consideration
- Marked changes in personal hygiene
- High levels of irritability, including unruly, aggressive, violent, or abrasive behaviors
- Inability to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage
- Excessive weight gain or loss
- Normal emotions that are displayed to an extreme degree or for a prolonged period of time: for example, tearfulness or nervousness
- Impaired or garbled speech and disjointed thinking
- Threats to others
- Reference to suicide as a current option
- Bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate, such as talking to "invisible people"

### **Consider making a referral when:**

- The issue is outside your range of knowledge or expertise
- Helping the student could compromise or change the status of your relationship with the student (perhaps it is too personal)
- The student feels uncomfortable talking with you about the issue
- The assistance you have provided has not helped sufficiently
- You feel the differences between you and the student are such that you cannot help them.
- You feel overwhelmed, overly responsible for and worried about the personal safety of the student
- The student's behavior is a significant and ongoing disturbance to others.

### **How to approach the student:**

- Ask to see the student in private
- Speak to the student in a straightforward fashion that shows concern for his or her welfare and focuses on observable behaviors
- Express your concern in a non-judgmental manner. (State what you observed)
- Ask if the student is talking with anyone (friends or family) about the problem, pointing out that isolation is rarely useful when dealing with problems.

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- Let the student know that counseling is accessible, free and confidential.
- Suggest that the student come to the Counseling Center or call for an appointment while they are in your office.
- Encourage the student that if counseling didn't help in the past to try it again.
- Don't attempt to coerce or intimidate the student into counseling.

### **"How can I assist the student who might be reluctant to seek counseling?"**

- Hand them a Counseling Center brochure and direct them to the section explaining the Center's policy of strict confidentiality
- Remind them that services are available to them at no cost
- If the student doesn't think his/her concerns are at the point of needing counseling, remind them that counseling can help prevent one's problems from reaching crisis proportions-the mere fact that one is seeking counseling doesn't mean one is in bad shape or "crazy"
- Acknowledge, validate, and discuss the student's real fears and concerns about seeking help
- Emphasize counseling as an empowering tool of change for those who choose to use it

### **"How can I help a student make an appointment at the Counseling Center?"**

- Offer the use of your phone for the student to call and make an appointment.
- Consider making the call for the student if the student wishes for you to do so while in your presence.
- If you feel the situation is an emergency, call the Counseling Center, identify yourself, and inform the person who answers of the student's need to be seen immediately.
- If necessary, walk the student over to the Center. The Counseling Center makes it a priority to see immediately any student in crisis.
- Once a student becomes a client at the Counseling Center, the terms of confidentiality apply fully. Unless, the student signs a Consent for Release of Information, the Counseling Center may release no further information about the student. That means you, as the referral source, will not be able to obtain any further information about the student after admission occurs.

### **"What if the student resists or refuses to seek counseling?"**

Unless the student is at risk for harm to self or others, counseling remains a voluntary option for students. Despite every effort on your part to facilitate a referral, the student may choose not to follow through on your suggestion that they seek counseling. If you find yourself in this situation continue to express your belief that they could benefit from counseling, and keep your offer of help available to the student.

Document the whole process for your personal files should you need to verify your assistance to this student in the future. If a student is at risk for harm to self or others, please report this to the Counseling Center as soon as possible. If the student is with you, tell the student that you will arrange for him to be seen ASAP by a counselor. If the student leaves with the intent to disregard your referral, you should call the Counseling Center as soon as possible.

### **Dealing with a volatile student**

This refers to situations where a student is agitated, appears out of control or acts strangely.

- Request to remove the student from the classroom environment so that you may speak with them privately.
- Remain calm. You stand a better chance of calming down the student.
- Be respectful but set clear and firm limits-
- "I see that you are upset. I need you to sit down. For us to have a conversation, I need you to..."

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- Be clear and precise in the words you use.
- Be patient and listen carefully to find out whether the student is understanding what you are saying. You may have to repeat yourself.
- Be concrete. Try to identify a specific issue and suggest something that can be done to address it. For example, you may suggest that the student accompany you to the Counseling Center.
- If a student behaves in an inappropriate manner in class and will not accept a referral, state firmly but compassionately that unless the behavior ceases you may have to bar the student from class. If at any time you feel that you or anyone else is in threat of harm contact the University Police Department at 915-7234.

**The University Counseling Center is open Monday-Friday from 8:00 to 5:00. To make an appointment call 915-3784. If you need to reach a counselor after those hours, contact the University Police Department at 915-7234 and tell them you need to speak to a counselor. They will page the person on call and you will be contacted by the counselor.**