REFERRING THE DISTRESSED STUDENT GUIDE

As faculty and staff members, you are in a unique position to observe signs that a student is experiencing emotional distress, as well as to influence the student to get the help they need to regain emotional and academic functioning. While you are not expected to do a thorough assessment, your willingness to listen in a caring, non-judgmental manner may motivate the student to get the help they need. This guide will help you identify the signs of a student in distress, signs of a mental health crisis, and appropriate ways to respond to student in distress in your role as staff and faculty members.

A marked change or decline in a student’s demeanor, performance, or appearance may signal that the student is experiencing considerable emotional distress. The following are commonly observed signs of distressed students in an academic environment.

**Signs of Distressed Students**

- Withdrawal from class participation
- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Unusual comments/speech in discussions
- Excessive or inappropriate anger
- Extreme anxiety
- Exaggerated emotional response that is obviously inappropriate for the situation
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Significant change in personal hygiene, dress, or general appearance
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Writing which reflects preoccupation with death or morbid content
- Strange or bizarre thoughts/behavior indicating possible loss of contact with reality
- Possible alcohol/drug use

**Response:**

- Talk to the student privately, outside of class about your concerns. Express your concern in terms of specific behaviors. (e.g. “I’ve noticed you’ve been missing classes lately, and I’m wondering if everything is okay.”)

- Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, nonjudgmental way.

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Referring Distressed Students

-know your limits. You will be able to help some distressed students simply by listening to them and providing a little support and guidance. However, many distressed students will require much more assistance than you may want or be able to provide in your role as professor, advisor, or mentor. Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself include: (1) feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by the situation, (2) feeling angry at or afraid of the student, and (3) having thoughts of "adopting" or otherwise rescuing the student.

-make a good referral to the counseling center. Frame the decision to seek counseling as a courageous, mature choice. Let the student know that counseling services are free, voluntary, and fully confidential.

-if possible, you may want to offer to walk the student over to the Counseling & Student Development Center or allow them to use your phone to schedule an appointment. The Counseling & Student Development Center is located in Building 39, Suite 120, (202) 274-6000.

-if you would like to talk to a counselor about your concerns about a student, call for a consultation. Counseling Center staff can help you with suggestions on how to work with this student in the classroom or how to encourage them to seek professional help. Keep in mind that counselors are not able to share information about any students obtaining services at the Counseling & Student Development Center.

Signs of Mental Health Crises

Occasionally, you may observe a student whose distress and impairment is so severe that it constitutes a mental health crisis. In these rare situations, immediate help is needed.

- Writing which states suicidal or homicidal intentions or plans
- Suicidal statements or suicide attempts
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality)

Response:

-if a student is experiencing a serious mental health crisis, immediate help is needed. If you believe there may be imminent danger to the student or someone else, call Campus Police immediately at (202) 274-5050.

-if the crisis occurs during operating hours of the Counseling & Student Development Center and there are no signs of immediate danger, walk the student over to the Center for an immediate appointment with a counselor.