
Assisting Students In Distress: A Resource Guide for Faculty and Staff

INTRODUCTION

Counseling and Career Services (CCS) supports the academic mission of the college by providing services and programs that help students achieve their educational goals. Services are designed to improve learning skills, assist with career planning, and reduce the effects of emotional and interpersonal problems that interfere with learning. All registered students are eligible for CCS services. These services address student problems that range from developmental concerns to more serious psychological difficulties

YOUR ROLE AS FACULTY/STAFF

Faculty and staff play a central role in student help-seeking efforts. First, you are often in a direct position to observe students and be aware of their behavior. Second, students frequently turn to informal help-givers like you to obtain advice and support. Although faculty and staff are not expected to provide counseling, it is often helpful for you to understand the critical role you can play in:

- Responding to student problems
- Being familiar with the signs that indicate a student is in need of help
- Understanding the steps in making a referral to professionals

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to assist you and others in the campus community in your efforts to respond to students in distress by providing the following:

- Information about student problems
- Information on the important role of faculty in responding to student problems
- Tips on how to respond to student problems
- Information about professional resources on campus that assist students with problems
- Guidelines on how to make a referral to a professional

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STUDENT PROBLEMS

- Stress, pressures, and problems are a normal part of college life. While many students cope with these demands successfully, a significant number of students have difficulties that interfere with their performance.
- Studies on the incidence of emotional troubles among college students predict that at least 10% of our student body, suffer from discernable emotional problems such as depression, acute anxiety, substance abuse, and other more serious conditions.
- An even greater number of students experience developmental problems in adjusting to college life and adulthood, such as defining identity, relating to others, and identifying educational and career goals.
- The most common difficulties in adjustment as well as more serious emotional problems affect students' academic performance, personal effectiveness, and the quality of life in the campus community.
- Thus, identifying students in need of help and assisting them in getting help are important responsibilities for all of us in the campus community.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SYMPTOMS OF STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

Sometimes it is very clear when a student is having difficulties coping, and at other times psychological distress is masked with less obvious symptoms. Some obvious and not-so-obvious signs of distress are:

PROBLEMS WITH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- Poor academic performance and preparation, particularly if such behavior represents a change in previous functioning
- Excessive absences or tardiness, especially if such behavior represents a change in previous functioning
- Repeated requests for special considerations

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES BEYOND DAY TO DAY STRESSORS

- Death or severe illness of family member or close friend
- Relationship struggles with intimate partners; relationship break-up and/or participation in an emotionally/physically abusive relationship
- Sexual assault
- Legal and/or financial problems facing parents/family.

UNUSUAL BEHAVIORS

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Disruptive classroom behavior
- Marked changes in personal hygiene
- Impaired speech or disjointed, confused thoughts; writing appears fragmented, as though the student cannot maintain a logical sequence in his/her thought process.
- Aggressive or threatening behavior
- Extreme mood changes or excessive, inappropriate display of emotions
- Hyperactivity, irritability, or heightened anxiety
- Prolonged or extreme emotionality
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain
- Bizarre or strange behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality
- Use of mood altering chemicals (e.g., alcohol, "uppers," marijuana, amphetamines; frequent use of breath mints can indicate substance abuse issues, as can bloodshot, watery eyes, dilated pupils, and frequent runny nose)
- Withdrawal from classmates, friends, and family
- Lying and/or stealing
- Excessively watching violent movies and listening to music that tends to be loud, provocative, and disrupting. The music may also feature projections of anger and hostility.

REFERENCES TO SUICIDE/HOMICIDE

- Overt references (threats or statements of intention verbalized or written in academic assignments, emails, text messages, etc) to suicide or homicide expressing the desire or

intent to harm self or others, helplessness, hopelessness, and/or the sense of being ostracized from the world.

- Plans to commit acts of violence toward self or other
- Indications of persistent or prolonged unhappiness; pessimism about the future or the student projects a tremendous amount of anger, frustration, and resentment toward other students and faculty and staff
- Unnecessary and extreme risk-taking behavior
- Relinquishing of treasured belongings
- Access or fascination with weapons, especially guns

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

Because you come in frequent contact with many students, you are in an excellent position to observe students, identify those who are in distress, and offer assistance. Your care, concern, and assistance will often be enough to help the student. At other times, you can play a critical role in referring a student for professional assistance and in motivating him or her to seek such help. Guidelines for responding to distressed students are summarized below.

REPORT: The College requests all faculty and staff to report observations of disturbing and/or disruptive student behavior to the appropriate administrators. Faculty is requested to report observations of students' unusual behaviors and/or references to suicide/homicide to Karen Martucci, Ph.D., Director of Academic Services. Staff is requested to report observations of students' unusual behaviors and/or references to suicide/homicide to Joe Moon, Ph. D., Dean of Campus Life. The College requests that these administrators be notified via email and/or phone when students generate among members of the community moderate to severe concern. Depending upon your comfort level, your relationship with the student, and the severity of the student's level of distress, you may also choose to respond to the student directly, with attention to the following guidelines:

OBSERVE: The first important step in assisting distressed students is to be familiar with the symptoms of distress and attend to their occurrence. An attentive observer will pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings.

INITIATE CONTACT: Don't ignore strange, inappropriate or unusual behavior—respond to it! Talk to the student privately, in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern. Early feedback, intervention, and/or referral can prevent more serious problems from developing.

OFFER SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE: Among the most important helping tools are interest, concern, and attentive listening. Avoid criticism or sounding judgmental. Summarize the essence of what the student has told you as a way to clarify the situation. Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem and generate coping strategies. Suggest other resources for guidance and support such as friends, family, clergy, and professionals on campus.

CONSULT WITH PROFESSIONALS: In your attempt to help a student, you may need input from a professional. Counselors at the Counseling and Career Services can suggest possible approaches to take, can intervene directly with students, or provide you with support. Call 4-8394 and ask to speak to Dr. Sandi Schein, Director, or Dr. Melonie Hill, staff psychologist.

REFER DIRECTLY TO A PROFESSIONAL: Know your limits as a help-giver; only go as far as your expertise and resources allow. When a student needs more help than you are able or willing to give, it is time to make a referral to a professional.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MAKING A REFERRAL TO THE COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES

When you have decided that professional counseling is indicated, inform the student in a direct, concerned, straightforward manner. Because many students initially resist the idea of counseling, it is useful to be caring, but firm, in your judgment that counseling will be useful, to be clear about the reasons you are concerned, and to be familiar with the procedures and services of the Counseling and Career Services or other help-giving agencies on campus. In your role as faculty and staff, it is important to allow the student to accept or refuse counseling.

Suggest that the student call or make an appointment in person. Provide the Counseling and Career Services phone number (4-8394) and location (East Village Residential Complex, Beta Hall, First Floor). Remind the student that counseling services are **FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL**.

Sometimes it is useful or necessary to assist the student directly in the appointment-setting process. In these instances, you can offer the use of your phone or call the receptionist yourself while the student is in your office. You may think it wise to actually walk the student over to Counseling and Career Services.

Finally, if you are concerned about a student but unsure about the appropriateness of the referral, call Counseling and Career Services for a consultation.

A FINAL NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY: We are required by law and by professional ethics to protect the confidentiality of all communication between psychologist and client (except in cases where harm to self or harm to others is indicated). Consequently, we cannot discuss with others the details of a student's situation or even indicate whether the student is, in fact, in counseling. In order for information about the student to be released to you or others, we must first get the permission of the student. Our initial paperwork asks the student to indicate who referred him/her to Counseling and Career Services and provides each student the option of giving us permission to inform the referral source that the student actually participated in his/her initial counseling session.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RESPONDING TO STUDENT EMERGENCIES

Emergency situations are rare. However, when they do occur, immediate and decisive action is necessary. Generally, a psychological emergency involves one or more of the following conditions:

- A suicidal attempt, gesture, or stated intention
- Behavior posing a threat to self
- Behavior posing a threat to others
- Loss of contact with reality
- Inability to care for oneself

In the event of one of these emergency situations, it is helpful to follow these guidelines:

- Stay calm, as this will help you respond more effectively and help to reduce the student's anxiety or agitation.
- If possible, provide a quiet, private place for the student to rest while further steps are taken.
- Talk to the student in a clear, straightforward manner.
- If the student appears to be dangerous to self or others, do not leave the student unattended
- Make arrangements for appropriate intervention or aid.

The primary campus resources for responding to mental health emergencies are Counseling and Career Services, Residence Life Coordinators, and the campus police. The following options are available to you:

- Call Counseling and Career Services (4-8394) for urgent consultation and assistance.
- Walk the student to the Counseling and Career Services for an emergency assessment.
- If the student is unusually aggressive or otherwise unmanageable, call Emory Police at Oxford (4-8377).

Provide the campus resource with as much information as possible about the student and the situation.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COUNSELING AND CAREER SERVICES

WHERE: East Village Residential Complex, Beta Hall, First Floor
HOURS: 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. (Monday through Friday)
PHONE: (770) 784-8394