

TIPS ON RECOGNIZING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

University of Washington Counseling Center
401 Schmitz Hall 206-543-1240

You as a faculty or staff member may often have close, ongoing relationship with students. As a result, you might sometimes learn that a student feels overwhelmed or seems in distress. In this special role, it can be hard to be the main source of support for a distressed student. It is important to know your own limitations in providing assistance and to understand when to refer a student on for more intensive help. We want you to refer struggling students to appropriate resources; the UW Counseling Center (CC) in Schmitz Hall and the Hall Health Mental Health Center (HHMHC) are two of the resources available to students.

Please remind the student that they can see a counselor at the Counseling Center for an initial screening and up to 5 additional sessions at no charge. Beyond the 5th session students pay a small fee. Also, students may be able to use their insurance at either location (CC or HHMHC). At both sites, counseling is *confidential* and counseling records are kept separate from other departments on campus.

If the student is reluctant to seek help and you remain uncomfortable with the situation, contact the Counseling Center (206-543-1240) to discuss your concern.

When referring a student, consider the following guidelines:

Approach the student in a non-judgmental way. If they have been missing class or assignments try "I've noticed you've been falling behind. I'm concerned about how you are doing" rather than "You are going to fail my class. Why are you not doing your work?"

Talk to the student in private. It can be embarrassing for the student to talk to you if other students might hear or judge them.

Listen to your student. It can be helpful to repeat back what they are saying with a focus on both the content and feeling behind what they are saying "It sounds like you are not used to this much work in such a short period of time and you are worried about not getting it all done." Or "It sounds like you're not used to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things".

Don't ignore strange behavior. Comment directly and kindly on what you have observed.

Never discuss your concerns with other students. If you need to talk about your concerns, consult with the Counseling Center staff or one of your colleagues.

Help the student see other options—that there are professionals on campus ready to help. If you feel that the student is in crisis, you can call the Counseling Center or have the student call from your office. Tell the Counseling Center receptionist that this is an "urgent matter" and you would like to talk with the Counselor-On-Duty. The receptionist will get you or the student connected with someone who can talk with you about options. If the COD is already with someone, the receptionist may have to ask you to hold for a few moments while she finds another available counselor.

If a student seems reluctant about seeking help, you might offer to walk with him/her to the Counseling Center. Remind the student that s/he can speak to a counselor without any obligation to continue beyond that initial consultation.

Not sure if you should refer a student for help? Look for these signs of distress...

Academic Problems: drop in grades, difficulty concentrating, missed assignments, unorganized or erratic performance, continual seeking of special accommodations (e.g., extensions), essays of creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair, inability to make decisions despite your repeated efforts to clarify or encourage.

Concerning Behaviors: tearfulness, agitation or anger, expression of worthlessness or hopelessness, expression of concern by other classmates, direct statements indicating distress, statements suggesting family problems, acting more withdrawn or significantly more animated than usual, self-injurious behaviors (cutting self, hiding cuts), bizarre behavior that is obviously inappropriate for the situation (e.g., talking to something/someone that is not present).

Physical Signs: deteriorations in physical appearance, visible changes in weight, lack of personal hygiene (consistent smell), impaired speech and disjointed thoughts, coming to class hung-over or smelling of alcohol, listlessness, lack of energy, frequently falling asleep in class.

Statements suggesting suicidal feelings: Any written note or verbal statement that has a sense of finality or mentions suicide, statements that are threatening or indicate they "are going away for a long time", "jokes" about wanting to die, essays or papers that focus on despair, suicide or death.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse: Coming to class or a meeting when intoxicated or high is a sign that drug and/or alcohol abuse may be a serious problem. This can place a person at higher risk of harm to self or others.

What to do with a potentially suicidal student: Students who talk about suicide or seem depressed should be asked directly about their intentions (e.g., have you been having thoughts about ending your life?). Do not ignore a student who talks about "not wanting to be around" or avoid asking questions out of fear you might give them ideas about killing themselves. Most people who are suicidal will answer these questions.

If you are unsure about whether or how to intervene with a student who appears to be distressed, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this student's behavior distressingly out of the ordinary?
- Is this beyond my skill level?
- Is the behavior getting worse?
- Does the behavior place anyone at (immediate) risk?
- Am I feeling like I want to talk with someone about my observations and concerns?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, it is probably a good idea to consult with one of the resources listed below.

Whom to call for assistance

If you feel you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911.

If you have questions or would like to consult about a student, please call one of the resources listed below. Each of these agencies serves as consultants and resource persons to faculty and staff.

Counseling Center – Schmitz Hall, Fourth Floor, 206-543-1240

Health and Wellness/Consultation and Assessment Team (CAT) 206-543-2684

Hall Health Mental Health Clinic – 206-543-5030

UW Police Department (non-emergency) – 206-685-8973