

GUIDE FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENTS EXPRESSING MENTAL HEALTH DISTRESS

This document offers guidance for when a student's behavior or appearance becomes concerning. The information contained is not exhaustive so if you are ever in doubt, please don't hesitate to consult with Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) at (201) 761-6420.

If a behavior falls between colors, follow the recommendations for the higher color.

SITUATIONS YOU CAN ADDRESS AND MAKE REFERRALS

MINIMAL RISK TO SELF OR OTHERS

TYPES OF SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Student does not express or indicate issues of risk to self or others.
- Only a few indicators of distress are evident (e.g., difficulty focusing, troubles with sleep).
- Disrespectful or inappropriate language.
- Visible distress, academic distress, sleep or eating problems, emotional outburst, social withdrawal.
- Issue is typically impacting only one area of the student's life (e.g., family, academic or social).

EXAMPLES

- Student mentions they are having a hard day, they are stressed about a class, or they are worried about a relationship.
- Student talks with their peers about being depressed or anxious, but denies suicidal or homicidal thoughts.
- Student appears to have distorted body image and frequently references a desire to lose weight.
- Student is stressed about upcoming exam and discloses history of test anxiety.
- Student sends an email with profanity demanding immediate response.
- Student raises voice at the office receptionist and demands assistance.
- Student references a mental health concern, but indicates that they are connected to professional support (e.g., on or off campus).

WHAT YOU CAN DO: OFFER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- Express empathy and encouragement (e.g., "that sounds really stressful," "I've seen you do brave things before").
- Encourage student to engage in helpful coping behaviors (e.g., "can you do something restful tonight?", "What helps you when you feel anxious").
- Encourage student to reduce vulnerability factors (e.g., "it might be helpful to get good sleep the night before the exam you're worried about", "let's arrange for tutoring or study group").
- Tell student about available support resources on campus (Counseling Center, CARE team, Office of Disability Services, TASC, STEM, CASE, and Financial Aid etc.)

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SITUATIONS REQUIRING ASSISTANCE OR CONSULTATION

POSSIBLE RISK TO SELF OR OTHERS

TYPES OF SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Individual may be at risk to self or others.

Several indicators of distress are evident (e.g. difficulty focusing, decreased appetite, poor class attendance, can't sleep).

Emotional reaction out of proportion to situation.

Issue is impacting more than one area of an individual's life (e.g., family, academic, social, personal).

Expressions of hopelessness (e.g., "what's the point", "it will never get better")

EXAMPLES

Student exhibits behavior that seems disorganized or paranoid. Individual may not be in touch with reality.

Student reports a history of self-injurious behavior (e.g., cutting, hitting, or burning self) and reports the urge to engage in this behavior again.

Student reports recent self-injurious behavior (e.g., cutting, hitting, or burning self) but no need for medical attention.

Student is experiencing a sudden and distressing event (e.g., death of loved one, break up, divorce) and seems emotionally inconsolable.

Student mentions a mental health concern and is not connected to professional support (e.g., "I've been too depressed to go to class, but I haven't told anyone except you").

WHAT YOU CAN DO: CONSULT WITH A RESOURCE ABOUT YOUR CONCERNS

If in doubt, ask: "Are you having any thoughts of killing yourself or wanting to be dead?"

If the student is willing to speak with someone: Assist student in calling/walking to the counseling center to get support (e.g., "Here, let's call the counseling center together", "We can walk over to CAPS together right now")

If the student is not willing to speak with someone: Inform the distressed student that you would like to call a mental health resource for guidance about how to best help. You call CAPS and ask to consult about a distressed student

Notify campus CARE Team

Call the Campus Safety if the student is disruptive to others (e.g., yelling obscenities in a public area) or environment (e.g., punching or breaking things)

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URGENT SITUATIONS REQUIRING IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE

IMMINENT RISK TO SELF OR OTHERS

TYPES OF SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Situation presents an immediate threat of harm to self or others (e.g., individual has a weapon, verbal threats are being made).

Student discloses intent to harm other or take own life.

Multiple indicators of distress are evident (e.g., difficulty focusing, weight loss, poor class attendance, appears exhausted, unable to clearly communicate, disoriented/confused).

Issue is significantly impacting multiple areas of a student's life (e.g., family, academic, social, personal).

EXAMPLES

Student tells you that they are in the middle of self-harming in a way that could be lethal (e.g., cutting, taking unprescribed pills, etc.).

Student attempts or threatens to cause physical harm to others.

Student states that if a situation is not resolve appropriately "you will pay for it."

Student threatens immediate danger to self (e.g., threatens to shoot self, take pills, jump off a building).

Expressions of undue burdensomeness (e.g., "your lives will be easier if I'm dead").

Student atypically gives away possessions or atypically refuses to make future plans (e.g., "I don't know if I'll be around").

Student in the classroom yelling, unresponsive to the instructor's attempts to de-escalate the situation, begins to throw things.

Student is unconscious, unresponsive, or tells you that pills were ingested.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: CONTACT AN EMERGENCY RESOURCE

Call campus safety (or 911) when the individual poses immediate danger to self or others. Campus Safety will notify the Administrator on Call who will notify needed parties and student's emergency contact.

If you are with student at the time distress is disclosed, stay with the student.

Offer campus support resources to any bystanders who may have been upset by the situation.

Notify CARE team of any bystanders you might be concerned about.