

Responding to Students in Distress, A Guide for Faculty and Staff (updated Oct 2012)

Faculty and staff are often in a position to notice and identify students who are at risk or in crisis. Recognizing the signs of emotional distress and responding in a timely manner may be critical factors in helping students resolve problems that are interfering with academic progress.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Academic Indicators:

- Withdrawal from usual social interaction, classroom participation, discussions, frequently isolated
- Withdrawal from academic work (missed classes/assignments/exams)
- Marked changes in quality of work, drop in grades
- Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed exams, etc.)
- missed appointments
- Essays or papers that focus on despair, suicide or death
- Incapacitating test anxiety

Personal/Interpersonal Indicators:

- Spells of unexplained crying
- Direct statements indicating personal or family problems
- Outbursts of anger or unusual irritability
- Exaggerated personality traits (e.g. more withdrawn or animated than usual)
- Expressions of concern about the student by others
- Irrational or garbled conversation
- Grief and loss
- Talk about dropping out
- A hunch or gut feeling that something is wrong

Physical Indicators:

- Noticeable changes in energy level (hyperactivity or exhaustion/falling asleep in class)
- Notable changes in appearance that suggest neglect
- Visible changes in weight
- Coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs

Safety/Risk Indicators:

- Severe depression
- History of suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Statements to the effect that the student is “going away for a long time”
- Any written note or communication that has a sense of finality, excessive aggression or suicidal tone
- Giving away of prized possessions
- Self harm behaviour i.e. cutting, excessive risk-taking
- Repeated mention of guns or other means of violence

- Indication that the student has a lethal plan and the means to carry it out.

HOW TO RESPOND: Some Suggestions

1. Discuss your concerns directly with the student in private and listen carefully for the response. Talking about a problem does not make it worse.
2. Express your concern for the student's welfare. Be specific about the behaviours that cause you concern. "I've noticed that you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned."
3. Refer the student to make a personal counselling appointment or to see their physician. If appropriate, assist the student in making an appointment.
4. Consult with counselling department, colleagues, department chair, supervisor or regional dean.
5. **Urgent or crisis situation:** (Student is emotionally overwhelmed and unable to carry on) Call or walk student to Counselling Dept. and ask for crisis appointment. If after hours refer to Crisis Line 1-888-353-2273. Arrange for student to contact family or friends. "Who do you feel you can talk to?"
6. **Emergency situation: (Student is a safety risk to self or others)** Do NOT leave the student alone. Contact Counselling Department and indicate that it is an emergency. Contact family or friends of the student. Arrange for student to go to hospital. Call 911 for police or ambulance.

A FEW DO'S AND DON'TS:

THE DON'TS:

- Avoid making promises of confidentiality. If a student is a risk to self or others, such promises cannot be kept.
- Don't be afraid to ask the hard questions. "Has it been so bad that you've thought of harming yourself?" Often a student will be relieved to know that someone is taking it seriously.
- Don't use clichés. "I know how you feel." People resent it because you can't know exactly how they feel right now.
- Don't be judgmental. "You're being selfish." "Life is tough, get on with it." They will shut down and do whatever they need to do to get away from you.
- Don't minimize the student's problems. "You're over-reacting." "I'm sure you don't mean that." "This is not such a big deal." This can be experienced as patronizing and just another example of how people do not get it. At that point in time it feels overwhelming to the student.
- Resist the urge to problem-solve or fix it. Most likely they are not ready for it yet and they may resent it or feel pushed.

SOME DO'S:

- Express your concern
- Keep it simple. Use basic terms: scared, sad, angry, hurt, confused, overwhelmed. "It looks like you're really scared."
- Know your limits. You do not have to take on the role of counsellor
- Maintain your boundaries. It is acceptable to stay "in role" as a faculty or staff member.
- In challenging situations, always consult. Do not deal with a crisis alone.

- Document the incident. Report the incident to the Regional Dean and your department head or supervisor.
- Follow up with student to ensure that the situation is being managed.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Counselling is confidential in nature. Information about students who seek counselling cannot be released except in the following circumstances:

The student provides written authorization for the release of information.

- The student is in clear danger of harm to self or others.
- Release of information is required by law (court order).
- The student discloses information pertaining to current child abuse.

If, as a faculty or staff member, you are interested in following up to see whether or not a student has acted on a referral recommendation, it is best to ask the student directly. Students are not bound by the code of confidentiality that professional counsellors are obliged to observe.

In addition to direct services to students, the Counselling Department offers consultation services to faculty and staff that have concerns about a student but are uncertain as to how to respond. In addition, if a whole class has been impacted by a traumatic event, a counsellor could come and facilitate a debriefing for the group. When in doubt, please call!

Counselling Department Contact Numbers

- Penticton – Laurie Minuk, ext. 3232
- Kelowna – Glendon Wiebe (Department Chair) ext. 4202, Carolyn Palfrey Scherer ext. 4407
- Vernon & Kelowna – Derrick Doige ext. 2208
- Salmon Arm – Susan Cawsey ext. 8221