

Identifying, Helping and Referring Students in Distress

A Guide for Faculty and Staff



UNIVERSITY OF
ALBERTA

STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICES

by
Kim Maertz Ph.D., R. Psych

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Office of the Dean of Students, and Dr. Bill Connor in particular, for providing funding for the printing of this booklet.

Identifying, Helping and Referring Students In Distress

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

College and university students are experiencing increasing distress due to the pressures of academics, relationships, work, finances and family in our ever more complicated world today. Although most students are able to find ways to effectively cope with these demands, a large number are overwhelmed by these pressures. As a result, their academic performance is significantly affected and they experience severe emotional distress. If not identified and resolved at an early stage, these negative feelings can escalate into one or more unhealthy coping strategies including: significant alcohol or drug use, eating disorders, other addictions, self-harm, suicide attempts and harm or threats of harm to others.

As well, if left unchecked, distressed students can have a serious impact on the balance and welfare of the university community. Serious incidents of violence on Canadian campuses are well documented. The University of Alberta has a policy called the Protocol for Urgent Cases of Disruptive, Threatening or Violent Conduct, to help deal with these cases. Information on this document can be obtained from the University Secretariat (492-4965) or on the U of A's website at www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/gfcpolicymanual/content.cfm?ID_page=38967.

Preventing these unfortunate incidents from occurring at all is the responsibility of all staff on campus. As a faculty or staff member, you are in a unique position to identify, help and refer distressed students. This document will help guide you through the process.

A. Identifying Students in Distress

Identifying students in distress can sometimes be very easy and obvious and at other times more difficult and subtle. This identification can be made easier by looking for several common indicators. These indicators can be broken down into four major categories: academic, emotional, behavioral and social. Remember not all indicators need to be present to be of concern, and to warrant action on your part.

1. Academic Indicators:

- Significant drop in grades.
- Inappropriate content in writing (relating to suicide, violence or death).
- Chronic procrastination on assignments and papers.
- Lack of participation in class.
- Dominating classroom discussions.
- Incoherent writing style.

- Repeated requests for special consideration (i.e., extensions on assignments, papers or exams).
- High number of absences from class or tardiness.
- Sleeping or extreme drowsiness in class.
- Frequently interrupting lectures.
- Missed exams.

2. Emotional Indicators:

- Emotional outbursts (i.e., anger, crying, giggling).
- High levels of anxiety and worry.
- Devoid of any emotions.
- No motivation.
- Extreme mood swings.
- Significant depression.
- Agitation, restlessness or hyperactivity.
- Red or swollen eyes.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Extreme suspiciousness.
- Statements indicating hopelessness or helplessness.
- Paranoia.
- Obvious confusion.
- Overt references to suicide.

3. Behavioral Indicators:

- Aggressive or disruptive behavior.
- Deterioration in personal hygiene or dress.
- Dramatic weight gain or loss.
- Hostile or sarcastic remarks.
- Strange or bizarre behavior.
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there.
- Sudden appearance of a speech disorder (i.e., stuttering or difficulty articulating words)
- Vacant staring.
- Excessive day dreaming.
- Direct communication that the student is experiencing significant issues.
- Repeated e-mails to you.
- Intoxication or impairment from another substance while in class.

4. Social Indicators:

- Isolation from other students.
- Little or no participation in class.
- Little or no contact with friends or family.
- Significant problems with roommates, friends or family.

- Open conflict with university staff or instructors.
- Frequent requests to talk with you after class or meet with you in private.
- Unusual or a changed pattern of interaction with other students.
- Threats of harm to others.

B. Helping Students in Distress

There are a number of strategies to make your interactions with a distressed student more positive and ultimately more helpful. Consider the following:

1. Meet In A Private And Relaxed Setting

To avoid any possible embarrassment or defensiveness, ask the student to meet with you in private. Your office would likely be most appropriate, when you are not rushed or preoccupied. Be sure to eliminate any possible disruptions (i.e., turn your phone off, use a do not disturb sign). Taking the time to meet with the student is the first way to express that you care about him/her and are concerned about his/her welfare.

2. Truly Listen To The Student

Active listening will maximize the likelihood that the distressed student will want to be open and honest with you. Listen for both the student's thoughts and feelings, and reflect these back to the student, in a way that shows you have really heard him/her. For example, say, "What I hear you saying is you are really struggling with some personal issues and you are feeling very depressed and anxious." Then allow the student time to clarify your understanding.

3. Be Direct And Specific

Directly tell the distressed student what specific behaviors you have observed and are concerned about. For example, you could say, "I've noticed that you've missed the last four classes and I have been wondering if you're O.K." This would be much better than "Why are you always missing class?"

Also, do not be afraid to ask students direct questions. If you have noticed the student appears very depressed lately for example, you could say, "You have appeared very down lately, "Have you had any thoughts of hurting yourself?"

4. Avoid Giving Immediate Advice

It's often better to really listen to the student and develop a thorough understanding of what is distressing him or her, before giving advice. Advice given too early can be ill informed and stop the student from expressing their true feelings or feel emotionally supported by you. Once you do have a good grasp of the situation, advice giving may be very appropriate.

5. Avoid Judging Or Criticizing The Student

If the student feels you are judging or criticizing them in any way, it is highly unlikely the student will have any trust that its safe to talk to you. Even though you may not agree with what the student is saying or doing, you need to show that you still respect them as a person. Even if you're not being critical or judgmental, don't expect that the student will immediately reveal more personal issues to you. This may take a more enduring connection.

6. Instill A Sense Of Hope

In your conversation with the distressed student, try to give him/her the sense that a positive change in their life situation is possible, and there is support and resources available to them that can help. Providing a balance between concerned listening and exploring potential options to deal with the student's distress can provide a sense of hope. Also, when appropriate, normalize the student's feelings by reassuring him/her that other students in similar situations commonly feel the same way.

7. Maintain Appropriate Professional Boundaries

Although playing a supportive role with a student in distress is essential, it is still necessary to maintain your role as far as academic requirements and institutional policies. Some flexibility in this role may be possible, but remain very aware of how this discretion may be interpreted by the student and academic community. Use your own emotional reaction in part as a guide to what feels appropriate, and don't do anything you're not comfortable with. As well, don't promise anything you are unable to deliver.

8. Don't Assume You're Being Manipulated

Although some distressed students clearly may be trying to manipulate you to get what they want, don't assume it. Until a student proves otherwise, you need to believe what he/she is telling you. Often only a thorough assessment of the situation will allow one to determine whether you're being manipulated by the student.

9. Consider Your Own Safety

Since distressed students can sometimes become volatile or overtly hostile, keep your own safety in mind. With potentially aggressive students, keep both a safe distance from the student and maintain a route to escape should the interaction escalate. If you feel in danger, contact either Campus Security (492-5050), or Emergency Services (911).

10. Know And Respect Your Own Limits

For many distressed students, simply listening to them and giving them support is enough to help them through some difficult times. For others however, you may not be equipped to deal with the complexity of the issues, or type of concerns they present with. In this case, acknowledge their concerns and make a good referral based on the problems that are identified. Be honest with the student about your own limits of time, training, energy, objectivity or willingness to help.

11. Consult If You're Unsure How To Handle The Situation

It may not always be clear how to best help the distressed student, or where to refer them. If in doubt, you can consult with a colleague, or contact one of the student support services on campus. For the University of Alberta campus, contact could be made with Student Counselling Services (492-5205), the Office of the Dean of Students (492-4145) or Campus Security (492-5050).

C. Referring Students in Distress

1. Acknowledge That There Are Many Good Reasons To Make A Referral

There are a number of circumstances which would suggest that making a referral to another student service or community service would be appropriate. Examples of these circumstances include:

- Assistance is required which is beyond your range of knowledge and skills.
- You are too busy or unwilling to provide the time necessary to be supportive to the student.
- You have tried to support the student, but the student is still struggling significantly.
- The student has admitted that there is a problem, but is not comfortable talking further to you about it.
- You can no longer be objective, due to your personal feelings and/or issues.
- The student is compromising the professional boundaries you are trying to maintain.
- There is a serious risk of harm to yourself, the student or others.

2. Explore Other Sources Of Support

Where appropriate, explore with the student other sources of support including: family, friends, community services, clergy or campus services. Students may simply never have thought of these options, or may have prematurely ruled them out for a variety of reasons. Useful websites to identify some alternate sources of support include: the University Student Services website at www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/student-services/, the Support Network at www.thesupportnetwork.com and the Student Distress Centre at www.su.ualberta.ca/su/businesses_and_services/student_distress_centre.

3. Refer For Counselling

If students do not have adequate support based on your assessment and you aren't able to provide it, consider referring them on for counselling. Student Counselling Services (SCS) on campus is the most appropriate service for such referrals. SCS is responsible for counselling clients who have a wide variety of personal, academic, social and emotional issues. For more information on SCS check out their website at www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/counselling/.

4. Don't Push The Student Into Counselling

Do not coerce or trick the distressed student to go for counselling. It is far better if students are given the information about the service and make this decision on their own. Information about Student Counselling Services will alleviate some of their fears of the unknown.

If after given information about counselling the student is still reluctant, accept their feelings of skepticism or reluctance, so your relationship with them isn't jeopardized.

5. Inform Students That Counselling Is Free, Confidential and Provided by Chartered Psychologists

Make the student aware that counselling provided by Student Counselling Services on campus is free. Students are entitled to up to 12 individual counselling sessions per academic year, at no charge. As well, what is said during counselling sessions is kept in strict confidence, and university faculty/administration or parents have no access to their files. Written permission would need to be given to release any information on the student's file, and staff or parents can't even be told whether they are attending counselling. As well, all counselling at SCS is provided by either Ph.D. or Master's level psychologists or Ph.D. level Counselling Psychology Students in training.

6. Reduce The Student's Fears Related To Counselling

Try to reduce the distressed student's fears around attending counselling by presenting a positive and accepting attitude toward counselling. Common fears and concerns include:

- a) Only "crazy" or "mentally ill" people go for counselling.

Help them understand that all students can potentially benefit from counselling, because everyone can be overwhelmed at times.

- b) Going for counselling is a sign of weakness.

Reassure them that counselling is a smart choice, just like going to a physician when they are having medical concerns.

- c) University faculty, staff, or parents will find out about their personal issues.

Let them know that counselling services are strictly confidential.

- d) Their problem isn't severe enough to warrant counselling.

Tell them that their problems don't need to be at a point of crisis to access counselling services. Dealing with issues before they reach crisis levels can be a good choice, and easier to overcome.

- e) They believe that few people access counselling services.

They need to know that thousands of students access Student Counselling Services every year, and therefore they would not be alone in this choice.

- f) They are unsure exactly what their problems are, and are unsure what to say to a psychologist.

Tell them that part of the counselling process is to explore these issues and concerns, to develop a clearer sense of what is going on and how they might deal with it.

7. Encourage The Student To Make An Appointment For Counselling

Encourage the student to phone (492-5205) or drop by Student Counselling Services (2-600 SUB) to make an appointment. Their hours of operation are Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. from September to April, and 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. from May to August. An appointment will be made with the first available psychologist.

8. Assist The Connection With Student Counselling Services

If the situation with a student is considered serious and you question the likelihood of the student making an appointment without assistance, it may be appropriate to offer your phone to the student, to phone on behalf of the student to make an appointment, or to walk the student over to the Student Counselling Services office.

9. Make Students Aware Of Intake

If students are in severe distress they can access intake times at Student Counselling Services, where they will be seen by a psychologist for a 20 minute session, to assess their immediate needs and determine what type of assistance is required. Appointments are not necessary and intakes are available at 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. weekdays. Intakes are on a first come, first serve basis. Accommodation for severely distressed students will be made outside of these times, if deemed necessary.

10. Do Not Promise To Keep Secrets

Be careful not to promise that you will maintain a secret if the student is immediately in danger of committing suicide, or has threatened to harm someone else. Both of these situations require that you intervene immediately.

11. In Case Of A Suicide Threat

If the threat of suicide is imminent, escort the student directly over to the University of Alberta Hospital emergency department or contact Campus Security to do so. If the threat is not imminent, but you are still concerned, connecting them up with counselling would likely be appropriate.

12. In Case Of Harm To Others

If the threat of harm to others, or to yourself, is perceived as serious, contact Campus Security (492-5050) immediately. Campus Security may then in turn involve the Edmonton Police department if deemed appropriate.

13. Follow-up With The Distressed Student

After having referred a student for counselling or another relevant service, it is important to follow up to see if they actually made contact with the service and see how they experienced the assistance. In this way, you can assess whether further referral is needed and convey your ongoing concern for the student.

Student Counselling Services
2-600 Students' Union Building
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2J7

(780) 492-5205
www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/counselling