

ASSISTANCE AND EMERGENCY REFERRALS

Try to stay as calm as possible. Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate agency are made.

Students expressing a direct threat to themselves or others or acting in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way (Level 3 Behavior) needs immediate attention. Call:

COLLEGE COUNSELING CENTER

(8:30-4:30 for consultation, evaluation, referrals) at
267-2330

UNIVERSITY POLICE (24 hours) at

267-2222

REACHOUT (24-hour crisis hotline) at

265-2422



THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

RECOGNIZING AND DEALING WITH STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

College Counseling Center
State University of New York at
Potsdam
131 Van Housen Hall
Email: counseling@potsdam.edu

315-267-2330

FACULTY AND STAFF AS RESOURCES

College students typically encounter a great deal of stress (e.g., academic, social, family, work, financial) during their educational experiences. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in time of trouble.

We believe there is a powerful rationale for faculty/staff to intervene when they encounter distressed students. As a faculty/staff member, your expression of interest and concern may be a critical factor in helping a struggling student re-establish the emotional equilibrium necessary for academic survival and success.

We hope this brochure will not only help to assess what can sometimes be difficult situations, but also give you some specific ideas about what you can do when confronted with a student who is in distress. We are not attempting to transform you into professional counselors. However, the following guidelines should prove to be more useful in helping you think more clearly about options for the intervention should you choose to assist the student in these areas.

TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING TROUBLED STUDENTS

We can identify three general levels of distress which, when present over a period of time, suggest that the problems the person is dealing with are more than the “normal” ones.

Level 1

These behaviors, although not disruptive to others, may indicate that something is wrong and that help may be needed.

- Serious grade problems or a change from consistently good grades to poor performance.
- Excessive absences, especially if the student had previously demonstrated good, consistent class attendance.

- Unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction, i.e., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, and dominating discussions.
- Other behaviors suggesting the student is having trouble managing stress may include; a depressed, lethargic mood, being excessively active and talkative (very rapid speech), swollen red eyes, marked change in personal dress and hygiene, sweating (when room is not hot); and falling asleep inappropriately.

Level 2

These behaviors may indicate significant emotional distress, but also a reluctance or inability to acknowledge a need for more personal help.

- Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions; especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the circumstances prompting the request.
- New or regularly occurring behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with the effective management of the immediate environment.
- An unusual or exaggerated emotional response, which is obviously inappropriate to the situation.

Level 3

These behaviors usually show a student is in obvious crisis and needs emergency care.

- Highly disruptive actions such as hostility, aggression, and violence.
- Inability to communicate clearly such as garbled, slurred speech, and unconnected or disjointed thoughts.
- Loss of contact with reality such as seeing/hearing things which “aren’t there,” beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality and/or probability.

- Expression of overtly suicidal thoughts referring to suicide as a current option and
- Homicidal threats.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Level 3 problems are easiest to identify and to handle, at least to the extent that specific procedures for helping students in crisis have been spelled out.

Basically, you need to stay calm and know who to call for help. The information is outlined in the section of this pamphlet titled **Assistance and Emergency Referrals**.

IN DEALING WITH A STUDENT WHO SHOWS LEVEL 1 OR LEVEL 2 behaviors, you have several choices. You can choose to not deal with it at all, deal directly with the situation in a way that limits your interaction to the classroom issue, or deal with the situation on a more personal level.

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student seeks you out for help with personal problems, here are some suggestions that might make it more comfortable for you and helpful for the student.

- Talk to the student in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel confident about what to do next.
- If you have initiated the contact, express your concern about the behavior in non-judgmental terms (e.g. “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and I’m concerned.” Rather than “Where have you been lately? Goofing off again?”).

- Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings (“It sounds like you’re not accustomed to such a big campus and you’re feeling left out of things.”) Let the student talk.
- Work with the student to clarify the pros and cons of each option for handling the problem from the student’s point of view.
- Avoid judging, evaluating, criticizing even if the student asks your opinion. Such behavior is apt to close the student off from you and from getting the help needed. It is important to respect the student’s value system, even if you don’t agree with it!

WHEN SHOULD YOU MAKE A REFERRAL?

Even though a student asks for help with a problem and you are willing to help, there are circumstances, which may indicate that you should suggest that the student use other resources. For example; you realize the problem or request for information or action is one you know you can’t handle or you believe that personality differences will interfere with your ability to help. You might know the student personally as a friend, neighbor, friend of a friend and think you could not be objective enough to really help. Sometimes the student acknowledges the problem but is reluctant to discuss it with you. After working with a student for some time you find that little progress has been made and you don’t know how to proceed – and are feeling overwhelmed, pressed for time, or at a high level of stress yourself.

MAKING A REFERRAL

Some people accept a referral for professional help more easily than others do. It is usually best to be frank with a

student about the limits of your ability to assist them— limits of time, energy, training, and objectivity. It is often reassuring to a student to hear that you respect their willingness to talk to you and that you want to support them in getting the assistance that they need. Confused students may be comforted to know that they don’t necessarily have to know what’s wrong before they can ask for help.

Assure them that seeking help doesn’t necessarily mean that they have serious problems. Common reasons that college students seek the help of another person include feeling down or low on energy and motivation, experiencing difficulties in relationships with friends, parents, boy/girlfriends, feeling anxious or depressed and having concerns about future goals or plans.

There are many kinds of referrals. The best one is the one the student will cause the student to take action. Depending on the situation, the student could consider friends, clergy, family members, and offices in the Division of Student Affairs such as the Counseling Center. As possible resources if you can, try to prepare the student for what they might expect if they take your suggestion. Tell them what you know about the referral person or service.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A STUDENT WHO GOES TO THE COLLEGE COUNSELING CENTER FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Students should make their own appointments if possible. They can visit or phone the College Counseling Center between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. An appointment will be arranged for the student to meet with a counselor as soon as possible. In urgent situations, we will assist the student immediately. All services are free.

At the student’s first visit there are informational forms (which can be waived temporarily in emergencies) to fill out before the student sees a counselor. During the first appointment a counselor begins an assessment of the student’s needs and the ways in which the Counseling Center may be able to help.

Students need to know that all services at the Counseling Center are confidential by law.

If the student is hesitant to come to the Counseling Center, you might suggest that they contact REACHOUT (265-2422), a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week crisis counseling and referral service. Trained counselors will assist the student anonymously. If they live on campus, suggest they talk with their R.A. or Resident Director.

ADDITIONAL CONSULTATION IS AVAILABLE TO YOU

If you have chosen to follow through with a student, you may still have some questions about how to best handle the situation. Staff members at the College Counseling Center would be pleased to help you.

1. Assess the situation, its seriousness, and the potential for referral,
2. Learn about resources, both on and off campus, so you can suggest the most appropriate help available when talking with the student,
3. Find the best way to make a referral, if appropriate,
4. Clarify your own feelings about the student and consider ways you can be most effective.

The Counseling Center staff is also available to conduct presentations to your departments on such topics as: Dealing with Depression, Adjustment to College, Sexual Assertiveness, Eating Disorders, Stress Management, Relaxation Techniques, Yoga, and Relationship Issues. Ask for a faculty or staff consultation.