

A Faculty Guide to Encountering Students in Distress or Personal Crisis

Faculty teaching in the classroom often have the first opportunity to observe if a student is in some kind of personal distress or crisis. As such, you may be in the position to be the first to extend a “helping hand” to a troubled student. These suggestions are intended to guide you in extending that helping hand.

As an instructor, you may become aware of student’s anxiety, depression, loneliness, marital and family adjustment situations, sexual concerns, feelings of low self-worth, career dilemma, or other situations that are causing the student to be personally distressed or in a troubled mental state.

While this distress results from the student’s personal situation, the effects of a troubled personal life sometimes becomes evident in the classroom and may affect not only the student’s ability to succeed in the class, but may affect you and other students in the class as well.

Consult with University Health & Counseling Services (UH&CS) Counselors to determine how you can help.

As a consultant, our role is to help you determine the best course of action for addressing your concern. We accomplish this by discussing with you your concerns and brainstorming ways in which you can help. While your primary role is on the academic success of our students, your assistance in getting students to appropriate support resources is appreciated and helpful in achieving this goal. If the troubled student’s behavior is impacting the ability for other students to learn, you may want to consider checking our Faculty Guide to Managing Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom.

Faculty may be in the position to extend the first “helping hand” to a troubled distressed student.

A few reasons why faculty and staff consult with UH&CS are to:

- Get ideas for how to suggest to someone that they seek counseling or assistance.
- Become aware of services and resources available to help with a particular concern.
- Learn how to refer a student to our services.
- Request that we meet with students who are dealing with a difficult situation.
- Get ideas about how to prevent a negative situation from starting or escalating.

When you have had an interaction with a distressed or troubled student, report this to your Academic Dean, University Health & Counseling Services or Office of Student Affairs. See reverse for resources.

Indicators of students in crisis

Students in crisis may exhibit the following early warning indicators:

- Marked change in academic performance or behavior
- Depressed or lethargic mood (i.e., drowsy, sluggish, sleepy)
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Repeated absences or tardiness
- A negative change in classroom performance
- Verbal aggressiveness in class meetings
- Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed examinations, etc.)
- Essays or creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair
- Tearfulness
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Exaggerated personality traits (e.g., more withdrawn or animated than normal)
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- Expressions of concern about a student in the class by his/her peers
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Any written note or verbal statement that has a “sense of finality” (suicidal)
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors
- Out-of-control behavior
- Verbal or written (email) threats of harm to self or others

None of these warning indicators alone is sufficient for predicting mental health problems, aggression and/or violence. When presented in combination, they may indicate the need for documentation and further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention. This documentation and further analysis is something that should be undertaken with the support of UH&CS, and in consultation with your Academic Dean.

First approach to helping

- Try to talk with the students in a private location, mention you are concerned and cite a specific reason why you have concern.
- Give the individual time to talk about their situation, just listen.
- Use a calm voice when talking to the student.
- Ask student if he/she would like to talk with a UH&CS Counselor who has expertise in helping students to “cope” with a variety of matters that can be troubling.
- Mention that Counseling is without fee and is confidential (unless harm is likely).
- If student would like to talk with a Counselor, offer to wait for the student to phone or walk the student to Counseling Services to set up an appointment (assuming this is not a crisis situation which may require more immediate attention).
- If student prefers to not have you accompany him/her, suggest the student call University Health & Counseling Services for an appointment.