

HOW TO HELP A STUDENT

There are various stressors often associated with college life. These can include balancing an academic work load and job schedule, developing a personal identity away from home, being introduced to new cultures and ideas, etc. Students may come to you asking for help, and there are going to be times when you believe a student needs help with a particular concern.

The information contained in this handout will provide some general guidelines to keep in mind when helping students through difficult times. The recommendations are meant to show a student how much you are genuinely concerned about their well-being. The suggestions are also important because they will help you realize you cannot solve every problem for all people and that you may need some assistance as well. The recommendations will show you how you can be most helpful by involving the appropriate people to assist in resolving the student's concern.

Things You Can Do To Help A Student

Whether a student approaches you about a problem they are having or you want to approach them about something you are concerned about, keep in mind the following important general guidelines when attempting to be helpful.

Find a **PLACE** that is private and comfortable. People are usually more receptive to being helped and will listen more to what you have to say when nobody else is around.

LISTEN. People who are in need benefit most from someone who actively listens to their concerns. Do not rush to fix, advise, correct, or disagree with the student; just listen. In being an active listener, look at the individual directly, ask his/her to clarify things you do not understand, summarize what they are saying to you in order to be sure there is mutual understanding, and ask questions to help the student take a closer look at what he/she is saying. Once you have listened to the person and he/she feels understood by you, the student will likely be more receptive to hearing your ideas and advice.

VALIDATE. Understand and acknowledge the student's current distressing situation and how he/she feels about the situation. Validation often calms people because they no longer have to convince the listener they have a problem that is serious to them. Therefore, do not say things such as, "Don't worry about it," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."

AVOID judging, evaluating, and criticizing, even if the student asks your opinion. These behaviors will likely push the student away. Remember to see the person's distressing situation from his/her perspective and reality.

TALK to the student when both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.

SHARE your own previous concerns that may be similar to the student's problems. Do this in a way that does not minimize or take away from the person's concerns.

Be **SPECIFIC** about why you are concerned. Tell the individual what you have observed recently, such as him/her eating less, missing classes, not attending floor meetings, etc.

Develop **OPTIONS**. Brainstorm with the student some possible ways of resolving the issue and suggest various resources to obtain further help, such as friends, family, clergy, RAs/GAs, or professionals on campus. This can assure the student things can get better and things will not always seem hopeless.

You May Need Help Too

In your attempt to be helpful, you may find yourself unsure what to say in order to be most helpful or you have helped in every way possible but the person just does not want help. Keep in mind the following guidelines when such situations occur.

CONSULT when in doubt of how to help or to discuss the appropriateness of your intervention. You can consult a House Dean, RA/GA, and a CAPS counselor any time. These individuals can provide suggestions of other ways you can be most helpful to the student.

Know your **LIMITATIONS**. There may be situations where outside help needs to become involved. Good examples of such situations include, but are not limited to, when the student has suicidal thoughts or makes suicidal gestures. There are professionals on campus that you can turn to when you feel overwhelmed and become involved beyond what seems comfortable and appropriate. These individuals include your House Dean, RA/GA, and a CAPS counselor. It is important you realize you are indeed helping the student by getting these individuals involved because it requires their knowledge and experience.

Remember to **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**. Your role is to provide support; it is not to be a hero. In your desire to show someone you care, you may begin feeling stressed because you took on too much responsibility and placed more effort than necessary. It is vital that you attend to your own needs. Do not let the situation cause you to start doing poorly in school, have health problems, or take enjoyment out of your life. Remember that you can be most helpful by expanding your support system and talking to your House Dean, RA/GA, and a CAPS counselor.

Consultation with CAPS

There are several reasons why you may want to consult with a CAPS counselor regarding a student. After reading this information, you still may have questions of how to best talk to a troubled student about your concerns. You may feel the type of help the student needs is out of your realm of knowledge and experience. You are finding yourself too stressed and overwhelmed with the help you are providing. A CAPS counselor can help in these and other related situations. Visit or call CAPS and ask for the on-call counselor.

Making A Referral To CAPS

The student in need of assistance may be struggling with issues that can best be resolved by having his/her talk to a counselor. Therefore, suggesting counseling can often times be the best

thing you can do for the student. Here are some suggestions of how to refer someone to counseling at CAPS.

1. Assure the student that resolving the issue through counseling, facing oneself, and acknowledging one's limitation are all signs of **STRENGTH** and **COURAGE**, rather than signs of weakness or failure.
2. **SHARE** your own positive counseling experiences, if applicable.
3. Offer to **WALK** with the person to CAPS or **CALL** CAPS together to schedule an initial appointment.
4. Know **INFORMATION ABOUT CAPS** that may further convince the student to seek counseling, such as CAPS' policy of confidentiality, free services, telephone number, web site, and regular and emergency hours.

Confidentiality At CAPS

The Counseling and Psychological Services at the University of Pennsylvania strictly adheres to the confidentiality of information shared between therapists and their clients. CAPS is ethically committed to confidentiality and federal as well as state laws require it. This means that the student's attendance in counseling is kept private. Attendance is not on any academic record and is not shared with individuals outside of CAPS. State and federal laws state that there are four exceptions to confidentiality:

1. A student may request that his or her counselor reveal information to other individuals or agencies of the student's choice. In these cases, a release form needs to be signed by the student.
2. Instances where there is imminent danger of serious harm to the student or others.
3. Cases involving physical and/or sexual abuse to those who may not be able to take care of themselves, such as individuals below the age of 18 and the elderly.
4. Where otherwise requested by subpoena or mandated by court order or state/federal law.