

INDICATORS OF DISTRESS IN STUDENTS

Counseling and Psychological Services
University of Pennsylvania

There are personal background and current academic, physical, psychological, and other indicators that one can be aware of when considering if a student may need counseling. A student presenting one or a couple of the following indicators does not mean she or he is necessarily experiencing severe distress. However, several of the signs taken together may well indicate that the student needs or may be asking for help.

Student's Background

- Previous emotional disturbance requiring therapy/counseling, or many scattered counseling visits.
- Traumatic family event(s), such as parents' separation or divorce, serious illness or death of family members, etc.
- Recent loss of an important person (by death or otherwise) or relationship (friendship, romance, etc.) or of self-esteem.
- Previous period of poor functioning, alcohol/drug abuse, or aggressive /boisterous behavioral pattern.
- Long-standing or recurring problem/symptom/concern, such as disturbing episodes of anxiety, depression, binge eating, etc.
- Pattern of extreme mood swings, especially without apparent reason.

Academic Indicators

- Deterioration in quality of work
- Missed assignments or appointments
- Repeated absences from class or not participating in the study or social groups
- The student continually seeks special accommodations (e.g., late papers, extensions on projects, postpones exams, etc.)
- Essays or projects have themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair
- Inappropriate disruption or monopolization of classroom time

Physiological Indicators

- Deterioration in physical presence or hygiene
- Visible increase or decrease in weight
- Visibly and chronically tired or having sleep difficulties (problems falling asleep or getting up from bed)
- Complaining about stomach pains, feeling nauseous, or having headaches
- Shaking or tremors
- Restlessness

Psychological Indicators

- Marked changes in concentration and motivation

- Feelings of intense sadness
- Lack of interest and social isolation
- Crying spells
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts or statements of intention
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (e.g., agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotions)
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Irritability

Other Indicators

- Direct statements indicating family problems, including personal losses such as death of a family member or the break-up of a relationship
- Expressions of concern about a student by peers
- Written note or verbal statement which has a sense of hopelessness or finality
- Marked changes in grades
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss.

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