

WHAT CAN I DO? Helping students in distress

A GUIDE FOR PENN FACULTY AND STAFF

The college years can be very stressful for students as they face the challenge of a highly competitive academic environment and begin to assume adult roles and responsibilities. Many students come to college with family difficulties, financial problems or other struggles that challenge their ability to succeed in this new and demanding environment. Faculty and staff are in a unique position to identify students who are in distress, helping them to gain the skills and access the resources needed to cope with the demands of college life. You are often the first to witness early signs of distress as they are often played out on campus in classrooms and residence halls. Students also initially seek assistance from faculty and staff members, particularly when they perceive you as available and willing to listen. In addition to the support you can provide, there are also professional support services available to students on campus through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). CAPS staff are also available to consult with you about providing a student with the help that he or she may need.

How To Identify Students In Distress

Students dealing with personal concerns or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. The severity of the distress is one factor that will determine the response that will best serve a student in need.

At one time or another, everyone feels depressed or upset. When symptoms of distress are persistent over a long period of time or when they interfere with academic responsibilities and social relationships, it may be a cause for concern. Following is a list of signs that may indicate that a student is in distress.

Academic Signs

- Deterioration in quality of work.
- Missed assignments or appointments.
- Repeated absence from class or lab.
- Continual seeking of unusual accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed exams, etc.).
- Essays or papers that have themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage or despair.
- Lack of engagement in participation-oriented classes or with lab mates.
- Inappropriate disruptions or monopolizing classroom time.

Physical or Psychological Signs

- Deterioration in physical presence or hygiene.
- Excessive fatigue or sleep difficulties.
- Visible increase or decrease in weight.
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (e.g. agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion).
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Unprovoked anger or hostility.
- Irritability, constant anxiety or tearfulness.
- Marked changes in concentration and motivation.
- Overtly suicidal thoughts, such as referring to suicide as a current option.

Other Factors to Consider

- Direct statements indicating family problems, 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 that has a sense of hopelessness or finality.
- Your sense, however vague, that something is seriously amiss.

What You Can Do For A Student In Distress

If a student approaches you with a problem, take the time to listen in a non-judgmental and respectful manner. The following recommendations may help to make the process of providing assistance or a referral easier and more likely to succeed:

- **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 comfortable about what to do next. Ask if the student has ever talked about their concerns with any one else, including a counselor. Try to get an accurate understanding of their concern and, if appropriate, encourage the student to talk about their situation with a professional.
- **Be direct and non-judgmental.** Express your concern in nonjudgmental terms. Be direct and specific. For example, say something like "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I'm concerned," rather than "Why have you missed so much class lately?"

- **Listen sensitively.** 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. For example, "It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things." Remember to let the student talk.
- **Refer.** Point out that help is available and seeking help is a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help. (See the Referral Section on the back for ideas.) Tell the student what you know about the recommended person or service.

Making A Referral

- Do not attempt to make a referral when the student is so upset and confused that he/she cannot understand or listen to you. Wait until the student has calmed down enough to be able to converse and respond to your suggestions.
- Suggest in a caring, supportive manner that the student may benefit from meeting with a counselor at CAPS. You may want to explain the following:
 - Counseling at CAPS is confidential. This means that information about the student cannot be released to other Penn offices, family, professors, etc. without the student's written permission (the exception being if the student is in danger of harming him/herself or others). Counseling records are not kept with any academic records and are protected by law.
 - The services are free to currently registered Penn students.
 - CAPS staff consists of professionally trained clinicians from diverse disciplines, theoretical orientations, and racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Students can state a preference.
 - The first meeting is an intake/consultation session where the counselor listens to concerns and then helps the student to access the most appropriate services to address his or her concerns.
- Give the student the Counseling Center phone number (215-898-7021). You may wish to encourage the student to call from your office to set up an appointment or offer to walk the student directly to the CAPS office. If you feel that the student is in crisis, you can call the Counseling Center to consult with a trained CAPS counselor. In an emergency, the

student can be seen for a crisis appointment that day. When this is necessary, please call CAPS as soon as possible and speak to the Clinician on Call so that necessary arrangements can be made.

- Follow up is an important part of the process. Check with the student later to find out how he or she is doing. Provide support as appropriate.

Students In Crisis

A crisis is a situation in which an individual's usual style of coping is no longer effective, and the emotional or physiological response begins to escalate. As emotions intensify, coping becomes less effective, until the person may become disoriented, non-functional, or attempt harm. **If a student is in a serious mental health crisis, you might see or hear the following:**

- Suicidal statements or suicide attempts.
- Homicidal threats, written or verbal, or attempted homicide or assault.
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts.
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions.
- Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts).
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality).
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence).

What To Do When You Suspect a Serious Crisis

If you believe there may be imminent danger of harm to a student or someone else, as evidenced by several of these crisis symptoms, immediately call the Penn Police (215-898-7333 or 511 on campus). If you need help in assessing the situation, call the Counseling and Psychological Services Center (CAPS) at 215-898-7021 between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. You may also consider walking the student to CAPS during these hours since this is often an excellent way of showing support. After hours you can call 215-349-5490 and ask to speak to the CAPS Clinician on Call.

Penn Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services
133 S. 36th Street, Second Floor,
(Corner of 36th and Walnut Streets)
215-898-7021

Emergency number after hours:
215-349-5490
(Ask for CAPS Clinician on Call)

Penn Police
215-898-7333 or 511 (on campus)

Academic Support Programs
3820 Locust Walk
215-898-0809

Learning Resources/Student
Disabilities Services
3820 Locust Walk
215-573-9235

Career Services
3718 Locust Walk
McNeil Building, Suite 20
215-898-7531

Office of the Chaplain
3643 Locust Walk
215-898-8456

Office of the Vice Provost for University Life
3611 Locust Walk
215-898-6081

Student Health Service
Penn Tower, 34th & Civic Center Boulevard
215-662-2850

comfort share
validate
listen
strength
courage
consult

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