Helping students in distress

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 Can I Do? Helping students 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.

Other Things To Consider
- Unprovoked anger or hostility.
- Irritability, constant anxiety or tearfulness.
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (e.g. agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion).
- Overtly suicidal thoughts, such as referring to suicide as a current option.

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.

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**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

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