



COUNSELING CENTER
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Enhancing Campus Welfare: Assisting Troubled Students



UW-Stevens Point
Counseling Center
"Mental Health Matters"

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS IN EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

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FACULTY/STAFF AS HELPING RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

University students often encounter a great deal of stress (academic, social, family, work, financial) during the course of their educational experience. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students in difficulty have a number of resources available to them. These include close friends, relatives, clergy, and coaches. In fact, anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in time of trouble.

When a student requests help either directly or indirectly (i.e., missing classes, changes in performance, tearfulness), it is helpful for the faculty/staff to step out of the role of an evaluator and become a "concerned mentor." Many students may feel uncomfortable with communicating vulnerability or uncomfortable emotions to faculty, so presenting as a "concerned mentor" can help the student feel more comfortable in asking for assistance.

Students have only a certain amount of mental energy. If this energy is consumed in attempting to cope with various problems a student is facing, little energy is left over for the student to apply to learning. The student, therefore, loses motivation for learning. A good example of this is an international student struggling to learn the English language. He becomes frustrated and discouraged. Energy that he puts into dealing with this problem saps away his energy toward his academic studies.

This brochure will help you assess students feeling emotionally overwhelmed and help you choose productive options for assisting students in distress.

TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING TROUBLED STUDENTS

Three general levels of student distress, when present over time, suggest that problems being dealt with are more than "normal."

LEVEL 1 These behaviors, although not disruptive to others, may indicate that something is wrong and help is needed:

- ♦ serious grade problems or a drop from good grades to unaccountably poor grades
- ♦ excessive class absences, especially if good attendance had been the norm
- ♦ unusual or markedly changed pattern of classroom interaction, such as participation avoidance, excessive anxiety when singled out, and the need to dominate discussions
- ♦ other behaviors suggesting stress - a depressed, lethargic posture, excessive motor activity and very rapid speech, marked change in dress and hygiene, and falling asleep in class.

LEVEL 2 Behaviors at this level may signify emotional distress as well as reluctance to seek personal help:

- ♦ repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions - especially if the student is uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing circumstances prompting the requests
- ♦ new or regularly-occurring behavior which strains the boundaries of decorum and interferes with effective classroom management, such as the persistent but nonproductive interruption of lectures
- ♦ unusual or exaggerated emotional response inappropriate to the situation.

LEVEL 3 These behaviors identify students needing emergency care:

- ♦ highly disruptive behavior (hostile, aggressive, violent, etc.)
- ♦ disorganized/unclear communication (garbled, slurred speech, unconnected or disjointed thoughts)
- ♦ loss of contact with reality (seeing/hearing things which "aren't there," beliefs or actions at odds with reality/probability)
- ♦ overtly suicidal thoughts (suicide viewed as viable option)
- ♦ homicidal threats.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Because they can be strikingly out of the ordinary, LEVEL 3 behaviors are easy to identify. To best help the student, STAY CALM AND KNOW WHOM TO CALL FOR ASSISTANCE. For managing Level 3 behavior, contact the **Counseling Center** at x 3553 and/or **Protective Services** at x 3456. The Emergency Room at St. Michael's Hospital can be reached at 715- 346-5100.

LEVEL 1 and LEVEL 2 behaviors allow response choices. You can, for example, choose to bypass emotional issues and deal directly with the student's request and/or disruptive behavior. This limits faculty/student interaction to classroom issues.

Some faculty choose to interact with distressed students on a more personal level. If you approach a distressed student, or a student seeks you out for help, here are some suggestions for keeping the relationship comfortable and productive:

- ◆ Talk in private, when both of you have time and are not preoccupied. Give undivided attention. Just a few minutes of effective listening may help the student feel confident about what to do next.
- ◆ If you initiated contact, express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms ("I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I am concerned." versus "Where have you been? Goofing off again?").
- ◆ Listen to thoughts and feelings in a non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by restating the gist of what you hear, Include both *content* and *feelings* ("It sounds as if you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things.") Let the student talk.
- ◆ Avoid giving advice or evaluating unless asked for your opinion. Providing easy and quick answers may indicate that the problem is not important or meaningful. Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.

WHEN IS REFERRAL THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION?

After you have identified a student experiencing difficulties that may impede their academic progress, the next step is to help them find the most appropriate resource to get help. Let your level of comfort guide whether you think a campus referral should be made. If you feel uncomfortable in talking about your student's problem with him or her — such as believing personal differences will interfere, having limited experience in dealing with certain types of problems, or experiencing your own high level of stress — then a referral is likely an appropriate course of action. Referrals are easier to make when you have knowledge of the various helping agencies on campus. Please note the CAMPUS REFERRALS section of this handout for potential referral sources. It is generally helpful to follow-up with the student by checking in with him or her to determine if he/she made contact with the support service.

THE ART OF MAKING REFERRALS

Although most people accept referrals easily, others feel rejected. The best policy is to be frank with students about the limits of your ability to help – limits of time, energy, training, or objectivity. Assure them that you respect their willingness to talk with you about concerns and that you will support them fully in acquiring assistance. Explain that being referred doesn't mean they have a serious problem. Their concerns might be among the more common reasons students seek help — such as changes in motivation, difficulties in relationships, anxiety or depression, and worries about the future.

Troubled students have a number of resources available to them. If you can, prepare students for the change in helpers by sharing what you know about the referral person or agency they have chosen.

If students are hesitant about coming to the Counseling Center, you might suggest they contact the **24 Hour**

Crisis Assistance: 1-866-317-9362; a 24-hour crisis counseling service. Trained counselors will assist callers anonymously.

FIRST CONTACT AT THE COUNSELING CENTER

Students should make their own appointments, if possible. They can stop by the Center on the third floor of Delzell or phone 715-346-3553. The center is open 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The receptionist will make an appointment for the earliest available date. **STUDENTS EXPERIENCING AN EMERGENCY ARE ASSISTED THAT DAY.**

By law, students association with the Center is held in strict confidence.

During the first appointment, the therapist works with a student on assessing needs and developing an appropriate plan of treatment. We offer consultation and short-term counseling. If a student's need is for a longer-term, more ongoing treatment, we will assist him/her in locating appropriate service. Our service is **CONFIDENTIAL** and **FREE** of charge to registered students.

ADDITIONAL CONSULTATION

Staff members at the Counseling Center would be pleased to help you in person or by phone:

- 1 Assess the situation, its seriousness, and the potential for referral;
- 2 Learn about resources, both on and off campus, so you can suggest the most appropriate help available when talking with a student;
- 3 Find the best way to make a referral, if appropriate;
- 4 Clarify your own feelings about a student and consider the ways you can be most effective.

For consultation with the Counseling Center, please call 715-346-3553 or drop by the third floor of Delzell during regular working hours. Ask to arrange a faculty/staff consultation.

Adapted by permission of the University Counseling Services, State University of New York-Buffalo. (9-92)

CAMPUS REFERRALS

Please familiarize yourself with the following campus referrals that can assist you in helping the student feel more comfortable emotionally and academically:

PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Telephone: 715-346-3456

Services: 24 hour transportation and/or protection

COUNSELING CENTER

Telephone: 715-346-3553

Services: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm — emergency consultation, evaluation, treatment and referral

TUTOR-LEARNING CENTER

Telephone: 715-346-3568

Services: Call for open hours — tutors for many campus classes, assistance with writing papers

ACADEMIC ADVISING CENTER

Telephone: 715-346-3361

Services: Call for appointment — assistance for undeclared majors, establishing educational plans

CAREER SERVICES

Telephone: 715- 346-3226

Services: Call for appointment — exploring careers, job searches, locating jobs, graduate school pursuits

DISABILITY SERVICES

Telephone: 715- 346-3365

Services: Call for appointment — academic accommodations for disabled students

FINANCIAL AID

Telephone: 715-346-4771

Services: 7:45 am to 4:30 pm — financial assistance regarding appropriate loan options

HEALTH SERVICES

Telephone: 715- 346-4646

Services: 7:45 am to 4:30 pm — prompt and high quality medical services, wellness approach to health

24 Hour Crisis Assistance (Off-Campus Referral)
Telephone: 1-866-317-9362

24-hour phone assistance