Faculty And Staff As Helping Resources for Students

Students typically encounter a certain amount of stress (e.g., academic, social, family, work, financial, cultural) during the course of their educational experience at the University. While most students cope successfully with the demand of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable.

While the recognition of emotional problems and the offer of help is an important service to students, we are not suggesting that faculty and staff members function as counselors. We hope that this brochure will help you assess a potentially difficult situation and provide you with some specific ideas about what you can do when you are confronted with a student in distress.

Tips for Recognizing Troubled Students

Before describing students in emotional distress, it may be helpful to describe another group of students who also exhibit disturbing behavior.

The Disruptive Student: This group of students engages in behaviors that are disturbing, but are typically not due to emotional distress. These students tend to be immature, manipulative, or engage in disorderly conduct, in and out of class. Such behaviors actively hamper the ability of the other students to learn and of faculty to teach. The best resource for them may be the Dean of Students Office rather than counseling. Just and fair student conduct measures which hold the student accountable for behaviors that violate campus or community standards are often just what the student needs to regain self control and to have a positive developmental outcome.

The Disturbed Student: At one time or another, everyone experiences some level of stress and discomfort. It’s not unusual to experience anxiety, depression, or confusion, but these feelings become significant when they are recurrent or extreme. Various studies suggest that between 10 and 20 percent of the student population experiences enough emotional distress to warrant some type of help. Generally, we identify three levels of student distress which indicate that the problems are significant and may need attention, especially when present over a period of time.

Recommended responses depend on the level of distress that the student is experiencing. When dealing with a student who shows Level 1 or Level 2 behavior, you have several choices. You can choose to deal directly with the situation on a more personal level; or you can make a referral. The goals in dealing with a student who shows Level 1 or Level 2 behavior are to provide support, to aid the student in resolving the problem, and/or to assist the student with a referral.

Level 3 problems are often the easiest to identify due to their extreme nature. Since Level 3 problems have the most potential for serious consequences, specific procedures for helping students in crisis are more clear. Basically, you need to stay calm and know whom to call for help. We suggest that you also insure that, while calls are being made, someone stay with the distressed student. Information about whom to call is outlined in the section of this pamphlet titled At Level 3.

Levels of Emotional Distress

Level 1: These behaviors may not be disruptive to others but are possible indicators that something is wrong and that help is needed.
• Serious grade problems or a change from consistently good grades to unaccountably poor performance;
• Excessive absences, especially if the student had previously demonstrated good, consistent class attendance;
• Perfectionism, procrastination, or excessive worrying;
• Unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction, i.e., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, dominating discussions, etc.

Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully include a depressed, lethargic mood; being excessively active and talkative (very rapid speech); swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; sweating excessively under normal environmental conditions; falling asleep in class.

Level 2: These behaviors may indicate significant emotional distress and a need for more personal help.
• Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional when asked to disclose the circumstances prompting the request.
• Behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with effective class management.
• Unusual or exaggerated emotional response which is obviously inappropriate to the situation.
• Listlessness, withdrawal from activities or friends; or the student simply does not look happy.
• Significant change in sleep or eating patterns.

Level 3: These behaviors usually show a student in obvious crisis who needs emergency care.
• Highly disruptive behavior (hostile, threatening, violent, withdrawal into the corner of the room or into a fetal position).
• Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech, unconnected or disjointed thoughts).
• Loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things which “aren’t there,” beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability).
• Overly talking or hinting of suicidal thoughts or intentions (referring to suicide as a current and viable option).
• Homicidal threats.

Some Things to Do at Level 1:

1. Monitor the student’s behavior, keeping track of the problem behavior.
2. Talk with the student in private when both of you are not rushed or pre-occupied. 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 confident about what to do next.
3. If you have initiated contact, express your concerns in behavioral, non-judgmental terms (e.g., “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and I’m concerned,” rather than “Where have you been lately? going off again?”).
4. Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the gist of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and the feelings (“It sounds like you’re not used to being so far away from friends and family and you’re feeling kind of isolated, left out.”). Let the student talk.
5. Work with the student to clarify the costs and benefits of each option for handling the problem from the student’s point of view.
6. Avoid judging, evaluating, or criticizing unless the student asks for your opinion. It is important to respect the student’s value system, even if you don’t agree with it.
7. Maintain normal class standards for student performance.
8. Consult with a counselor or Dean of Students as needed.

Some Things to Do at Level 2:

The suggestions included under Level 1 continue to be appropriate.

1. These students can consume large amounts of faculty time. Set limits on when and for how long you are willing to meet with these students.
2. Unusual emotional responses are sometimes used to distract people from issues at hand. Try to stay on task when dealing with these students.
3. Consider referring the student to a counselor.

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At Level 3:

1. Stay as calm as possible.
2. If possible, find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate agency or person are made.

For students expressing a direct threat to themselves and/or others, or acting in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way, call:

Campus Public Safety 503-352-2230
Student Counseling Center 503-352-2191

VP of Student Life/Dean of Students Office 503-352-2212
When Should You Make A Referral?

Even though a student asks for help and even if you are willing to help, there are some circumstances which may indicate that a referral is in order.

For example:

- You know you can’t handle the request or the behavior. There are limits to the kinds of help a faculty or staff member can provide;
- You believe that personality differences will interfere with your ability to help;
- You know the student personally (as a friend, a neighbor, or a friend of a friend) and believe that you could not be objective;
- You are feeling overwhelmed, pressed for time, or otherwise at a high level of stress yourself;
- The student acknowledges a problem but is reluctant or not able to discuss it with you;
- After working with the student for some time, you find you don’t know how to proceed;
- The problems the student is experiencing are better handled through alternative helping methods such as Financial Aid, the Registrar’s Office, Affirmative Action, or Legal Advising.

How to Make a Referral

One of the important steps in any relationship in which we try to be of help to another person is deciding when we have the responsibility to move beyond providing informal help and doing something more formal. This can facilitate a smooth entry into the system and can often assist the counselor in making a faster connection with the student.

What May Be Expected During a First Visit to the Student Counseling Center (SCC)

The SCC assists students with:

- Dealing effectively with academic stressors;
- Developing healthy relationships, fostering personal growth, and enhancing individual potential;
- Coping with crisis and resolving problems;
- Overcoming problems resulting from trauma, personal history, or situational crisis through time-effective counseling or referral for more intensive, lengthy, or specialized care.

SCC is staffed by psychologists, counselors and psychology graduate students who are specially trained to work with university students. Concerns that students typically bring to SCC focus on issues related to, depression, making and sustaining relationships, dealing with stress and anxiety, eating disorders, and working with family problems.

Services provided by the SCC are free and confidential. Anything a student says to a counselor, the fact that a student used this service, or any test results will not be disclosed to other persons or agencies within the limitations of professional ethical standards. No information about counseling goes on an academic record.

The typical appointment lasts about 50 minutes. Prior to meeting with a counselor, the student will be asked to complete some paperwork which the counselor will use to assist the student. During the first meeting, a student will be asked to talk about concerns and - with the help of the counselor - to develop plans for dealing with those concerns. Often that may be all that is needed. However, if the counselor and student agree that additional help is needed, then further appointments can be made at a mutually convenient time. Some problems requiring specialized services or more lengthy interventions are referred to community resources.

Consultation for Faculty and Staff

If you have chosen to personally follow through with a student, you may still have some questions about how to best handle the situation. SCC staff members are available to consult with you in order to:

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

Student Counseling Center staff members may be reached at 503-352-2191 during regular business hours, Monday through Friday 9am to 5pm. If your call is extremely urgent, and you do not reach a staff member at the SCC you may call Student Health at 503-352-2269 and request that they contact an SCC staff member. After hours emergency coverage is provided by the Washington County Crisis Line at 503-291-9111. You may also call Campus Public Safety at 503-352-2230 or call 911.

For more information about Student Counseling Center services, visit: www.pacificu.edu/studentlife/counselingcenter

Student Counseling Center
Pacific University
Forest Grove, OR 97116
503-352-2191

Tips on Recognizing & Assisting Students in Emotional Distress

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