

Identifying and Responding to Students in Distress

Faculty and staff interact with students on a daily or regular basis and may notice behaviors that raise questions about a student's well being and/or the safety of the student or others. Below are categories and examples of behaviors that may indicate serious difficulties:

Displaying emotions that are

inappropriate for the situation or are more exaggerated or erratic than normal (e.g., extremely withdrawn or animated)

aggressive (e.g., resentful, irritable, abrasive, aggressive, hostile, frustrated)

sad/depressed (e.g., tearful, hypersensitive, full of despair, feels worthless)

Acting in ways that

are aggressive (e.g., threatening others, discussing previous violent actions, develops antagonist relationships).

suggest a student may be sad, depressed or possibly suicidal (e.g., excessive change in weight, withdrawn or reclusive, giving away prized possessions, difficulty sleeping, listless, no energy, talk of death or dying).

suggest a student may not be able to take care of oneself (e.g., decline in personal hygiene, inability to make decisions despite receiving help, disjointed thoughts and impaired speech, losing touch with reality, seeing/hearing things that aren't there).

Communicating messages to you that indicate problems

(e.g., obsession with death, weapons, or even a romantic or religious obsession; thoughts of suicide, or discussing "going away" or discovering a way to "solve all their problems;" being under an unusual amount of stress)

Significant change in or poor school performance

(e.g., used to get As and Bs and now receiving Ds and Es, overly dependent on you, infrequent attendance, procrastination, turning in poor or no work at all, making repeated requests for special considerations like extended deadlines, have difficulty concentrating, display behaviors that interfere with class)

How You Can Respond

First

Consult with colleagues or a campus resource to think through your plans.

Call the Counseling Center to discuss your concerns and how you can talk about your concerns with the student during your meeting.

Enlist the help of someone else, so the student isn't left alone, and you aren't left alone with the student.

If you feel comfortable doing so, invite the student to meet with you for a conversation.

Meet in a quiet and secure place if possible.

Listen attentively and respond in a straightforward and considerate way.

State specifically what behaviors you have observed and why you are concerned about the student.

Outline your goals and (if appropriate) ask the student to outline his/her goals for the meeting.

Work to understand what is causing distress for the student. Acknowledge his/her feelings and let the student know you want to help him/her resolve the problem. Be non-judgmental and caring. Listen carefully. Paraphrase what the student is telling you, so you can be sure you understand the situation.

Avoid aggressive or dominating body language and keep your voice slow and calm to try and keep the student relaxed.

Talk about the situation as a problem that you will work together to solve, suggesting assignment and/or class options that will help the student. Encourage the student to seek support and assistance from family, friends and others as appropriate, and perhaps to contact the Counseling Center (be sure to give the student the information to do so).

Help set up initial meetings for the student with the Counseling Center, Health Center, Career Services or other appropriate campus resources.

When contacting a campus resource, have available as much information as possible, including your name; the student's name and location; a description of the circumstances and the type of assistance needed; and an accurate description of the student.

Note that appropriately seeking help is a sign of strength and not weakness:
"We all need help on occasion."

Follow-up

After discussing the problem with the student, you might need to pursue further action if the behaviors of concern persist. If the situation seems more imminently problematic (i.e., you are concerned about the student's or your own immediate safety), contact the Office of Public Safety, 607-274-3333.

Involve a colleague, your Dean's office or supervisor to get a new perspective on the situation.

Report your concerns to the Assisting Students at Risk initiative
<http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/services/assist/>