

Responding to Students with Depression

Depression is a common mental health problem that varies in severity and duration. Symptoms of depression affect mood, energy, and cognition and can interfere with academic or work performance and interpersonal relationships. In its less serious form, depression is a temporary reaction to loss, stress, or life challenges. It can be alleviated through the passage of time and/or the natural healing effects of social supports, daily routines, and simple coping strategies like distraction, a structured daily schedule, and exercise. Severe or chronic depression requires professional help.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness
- a deep sense of sadness
- an inability to experience pleasure
- irregular eating and sleeping
- difficulties with concentration, memory, and decision-making
- fatigue and social withdrawal

Sometimes depression includes irritation, anxiety, and anger (particularly with men). **In its most serious form**, depression can be accompanied by self-destructive thoughts and intentions as a way to escape from the emotional pain. **Research shows** that depression can be highly responsive to both psychotherapy and/or medication.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk to the student in private.
- Listen carefully and validate the student's feelings and experiences ("It is very difficult, tiring, and distressing to feel this sad so often").
- Be supportive and express your concern about the situation ("That you are feeling this badly concerns me greatly and I am glad you told me about it").
- Discuss clearly and concisely an action plan such as having the student immediately call for a counseling appointment ("I know depression can't get better as long as it is a secret and is not actively responded to. Counseling can really make a difference here").
- Refer the student to the Counseling Center, 607-274-3136, or the Health Center, 607-274-3177.
- Be willing to consider or offer flexible arrangements (e.g., extension on a paper or exam), if appropriate, as a way to alleviate stress and instill hope.
- Ask student if they have thoughts of suicide. If so, do not leave the student alone. During business hours, walk the student over to the Counseling Center. After 5:00 pm and on weekends, access emergency services by calling the Office of Public Safety, 607-274-3333.

- If you feel overwhelmed or unprepared to help a depressed student, call the Counseling Center, 607-274-3136, to consult. Report your concerns to your Dean's office or to your supervisor for assistance, or
- Report your concerns to the Assisting Students at Risk initiative <http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/services/assist/>

AVOID

- Downplaying the situation ("But you normally seem so happy").
- Arguing with the student or disputing that the student is feeling depressed ("Your grades are so good, are you sure you're really depressed").
- Providing too much information for the student to process.
- Expecting the student to stop feeling depressed without intervention ("Sad feelings pass and maybe they will for you, too").
- Assuming the family knows about the student's depression.