

Supporting Students In Distress

Presented by Vassar College Counseling Service

What are the issues that could be affecting students in your class

Mental Health Physical Health Ability Alcohol and Substance Use
Interpersonal Violence Identity Based Oppression Difficult Family Circumstances

Observable Signs that a Student May be in Distress

Academic Indicators

- Uncharacteristic changes in academic performance
- Not handing in work or handing it in late
- Failure to turn in or attend exams
- Repeated absences at class, labs, or meetings
- Extreme disorganization
- Requests for extensions or special considerations or accommodations
- Overblown or disproportionate reaction to grades and indications of perfectionism
- Written or artistic expressions with themes of unusual violence, morbidity, and despair; papers or art pieces that target themes around suicide or murder

Emotional/behavioral Indicators

- Direct statements about distress, family problems, or loss
- Depressed mood
- Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
- Social withdrawal
- Irritable, agitated, angry, or anxious behavior
- Expressed hopelessness or worthlessness
- Attempts to avoid you
- New or recurrent behavior that interferes with the effective management of your class, work team, etc.
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional response to events
- Shaky, trembling, pacing

Physical Indicators

- Marked change in dress, hygiene, or weight
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class or difficulty paying attention
- Noticeable cuts, bruises, or burns
- Frequent or chronic illness
- Disorganized speech, rapid or slurred speech, or confusion
- Suspicions of a student being under the influence of substances in class

Other Indicators

- A "gut-feeling" that something is wrong
- Other students/peers and professors expressing concerns about this student to you
- Avoidance Anxiety Cycle

If you see a student with any of these concerning behaviors, what can you do to intervene?

- Find a private location. Be aware of your surroundings and privacy
- If having a remote meeting, ask their exact location and phone number

- Use a direct approach with the student and express your concern
- Example: "I am worried how you are doing. I wanted to talk so I can understand what is going on for you... "

- Describe your **OBSERVATIONS**

- Be specific regarding the behaviors that have raised your concerns, It is important that you describe your observations in a non-judgmental way. Not helpful to use labels or diagnoses, just behaviors.
- Example: "For the past two weeks, I've noticed that you seem sleepy in class, participate less than you used to, and have missed meetings."

- Express your **FEELINGS**

- Example: "I'm concerned about you "

- **LISTEN** to what they tell you about what is happening / Ask follow up questions to deepen the conversation so they will give you a fuller context
 - **Provide empathy and validation before problem solving**
 - Soothe student's amygdala to access their pre-frontal cortex
 - Listen non-judgmentally
 - Slow down a bit
 - Validate their feelings and be empathic
 - ♣ "What a terribly difficult thing that you have had to navigate. It sounds so stressful and painful."
 - Normalize and reduce stigma
 - ♣ Example: "It's actually pretty common for students to feel that way when they are going through such a difficult thing."
 - Try to ask open-ended questions that result in a more informative answer than "yes" or "no"
 - Before agreeing or disagreeing, and before assuming that you know what the other person meant or felt, reflect what you heard and/or ask questions to assure your understanding
 - Instead of jumping in on silence, wait until the speaker has more time to pull thoughts together
 - ♣ If a student shows signs that may indicate possibility for suicidality, we will teach you how to ask them directly about this in **QPR** training

Differentiation of a Crisis from Distress

If a student:

- o Is feeling at risk
- o Is having thoughts of hurting themselves or others
- o Does not think they can keep themselves safe
- o Is seeing or hearing things that are not real
- o Is delusional

Then it is a crisis and they need to be assessed right away.

Assisting a Student in Crisis

- Keep the student in the room with you or on the video call while you contact the CRC - 845-437-7333
- Ask for the Administrator on Call (AOC) or Security
- Explain in detail the current situation and the need for the student to be assessed by a counselor
- If the student is not in the room with you, communicate the exact location of the student

Assisting a Student in Distress

If a student is upset and struggling, but not in crisis, provide:

- 1) Good listening
 - 2) Normalizing their concerns - "you are not alone, others have experienced this too"
 - 3) Validation - "I can understand why you are feeling upset given what you are dealing with"
 - 4) See if they want your assistance in brainstorming solutions (some students just want to be heard and are not at a place of readiness of wanting solutions from you)
 - 5) Most helpful if plan is specific, concrete, broken down into small manageable steps
 - 6) Helpful to write down the plan or have them write it down during their meeting with you
- No expectation for you to solve their problem
Offer what you can, refer when appropriate

Supporting Behavioral Change Using Motivational Interviewing

Once the student has identified a behavior **THEY** are concerned about:

1. Explore the benefit or value of the problematic behavior:
2. Then ask them to identify any problems or difficulties that the behavior is causing for them
3. Be curious with them in exploring if there might be a way for them to reduce the negative outcomes, while potentially meeting their need in a different, healthier way
4. Help them to identify their goals for themselves.
5. Provide scaffolding
6. Help them to predict potential future obstacles or barriers and to think through in advance how they will address
7. Follow up without judgment to see how it went - if they were unable to complete their plan, explore with curiosity what got in the way and brainstorm together what to try next

When to Refer

- Asking what is happening does not mean it is your role to have to fix the problem. Maintaining boundaries is important. Good to refer when appropriate.
- Frame your role as a supportive person reaching out to a student and then referring to appropriate campus resources.

A referral is usually indicated in the following situations:

- A student presents a problem or requests information that is outside your range of knowledge.
 - A student is reluctant to discuss a problem with you,
 - You do not believe your contact with the student around the issue has been effective,
 - You don't have the time
 - A student is becoming over-reliant or dependent upon you,
 - You begin to feel that the advising relationship is crossing a boundary into a counseling or therapeutic relationship.
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- Student Support Network - Alert the SSN team about your concern by visiting their site at www.vassar.edu/studentofconcern or calling the Associate Dean of the College for Student Living and Wellness and/or the Dean of Studies.

How to keep yourself in a helpful space while talking to students in distress

Normal to feel anxious, stirred up when others are sharing their emotional pain

No expectation that you have to fix their problem

Goal is to be present, calm and to deeply listen

Provide validation, normalize their feelings

Use calming strategies for yourself or the student as needed

Breathing exercise

Grounding Look around you. Identify and name:

5 things you see; 4 things you feel; 3 things you hear; 2 things you smell; 1 thing you taste

If they are interested and you feel you have relevant information, you can assist them in brainstorming solutions

Then refer as appropriate

Engage in self care - seek support and consultation as needed

Participate in Primary Prevention Efforts on Campus

- Holding awareness of the many commitments and responsibilities of students when creating course curriculum, work expectations, etc - don't add to busyness culture (quality vs quantity)
- Spreading out assignments or tasks
- Giving kind, honest, and clear feedback
- Try to find ways to help students move past assumptions
 - Build into your coursework and your dialogue ways to show that you are available and willing to work with them
 - Invite students to talk to you if they have concerns or initiate a conversation yourself.
- Communicating clear expectations
- Balance between flexibility and maintaining structure and limits
- Type & level of support needed by students with psychiatric or chronic illnesses will fluctuate.
- Share your hope/expectation that students make healthy choices for themselves, including getting adequate sleep, and not engaging in AOD use in a way that will negatively impact their well being as a student