

How You Can Help Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty and Staff

Why Students Encounter Stress

Students encounter stress for a variety of reasons. Academics, family problems, social situations, work, and financial concerns are just some of the sources of stress. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures become overwhelming and unmanageable.

The inability to cope effectively with emotional stress poses a serious threat to a student's overall functioning. The expression of interest and concern by a faculty or staff member may be a critical factor in helping a struggling student reestablish the emotional equilibrium necessary for success in a university environment.

Your willingness to respond to students in distress will undoubtedly be influenced by your personal style and your particular beliefs about the limits of responsibility for helping students mature, both emotionally and intellectually. Some students may be more open to assistance than others. In addition, factors such as class size or the nature of your relationship with the student may also have a substantial effect on the type of interactions you have. It's important to be realistic about what you can offer when making a decision about how you can help a student.

Understanding the Difference between a Student in Crisis and a Student Experiencing Stress

Student in Crisis

A crisis is a situation in which an individual's usual style of coping is no longer effective, and the emotional or physiological response begins to escalate. As emotions intensify, coping becomes less effective, until the person may become disoriented, non-functional, or attempt harm. **If a student is in a serious mental health crisis, you might see or hear the following:**

- Suicidal statements or suicide attempts
- Written or verbal threats, or attempted homicide or assault
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
- Inability to communicate (e.g., garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g., seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality)
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g., hostility, aggression, violence)

Student Experiencing Stress

Stress is a part of every student's life. However, there are some indicators that, when present over time, suggest that a student's stress level may be a cause for concern. **In these circumstances, you might see or hear the following:**

- Uncharacteristic changes in academic performance
- Uncharacteristic changes in attendance at class or meetings
- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech
- Social withdrawal
- Marked change in personal dress, hygiene, eating and/or sleeping routines
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class
- Requests for special consideration, especially if the student is uncomfortable talking about the circumstances prompting the request
- New or recurrent behavior that pushes the limits of decorum and that interferes with the effective management of your class, work team, etc.
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional response to events

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What To Do When You Suspect a Serious Crisis

If you believe there may be imminent danger of harm to a student or someone else, as evidenced by several of the crisis symptoms listed under the Student in Crisis Section, immediately call the UT Police (471-4441) or the Austin Police Department (911) for assistance. You may also consider walking the student to the Counseling and Mental Health Center

(CMHC). Doing so is an excellent way of showing your concern and support, and helps ensure that the student receives the help they need. CMHC is open Monday through Friday, from 8am to 5pm.

If you are concerned about a student but unsure how to approach the situation, call the [Behavior Concerns Advice Line](http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal) to <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal> at 512-232-5050 for a confidential consultation. This service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

What You Can Do for a Student Experiencing Stress

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student seeks you out, here are some suggestions that might be helpful:

- **Talk to the student** in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. 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 comfortable about what to do next.
- **Be direct and nonjudgmental.** Be direct and specific. Express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example, say something like "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I'm concerned," rather than "Why have you missed so much class lately?"
- **Listen sensitively.** Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings. For example, "It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things." Remember to let the student talk.
- **Refer.** Point out that help is available, and emphasize that seeking help is a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help. (See Referral Resources [[link to Referral Resources page](#)] for ideas.) Tell the student what you know about the recommended person or service.
- **Follow up.** Following up is an important part of the process. Check with the student later to find out how he or she is doing, and provide support as appropriate.

Dealing with students in distress can be a stressful and taxing experience. Be sure to take care of yourself, too. Seek support from colleagues and supervisors. It may also be helpful to talk with a counselor. Counseling services are available free of charge for faculty and staff members currently covered by UT's health insurance benefits through the [Employee Assistance Program](http://www.utexas.edu/hr/eap/services.html) <http://www.utexas.edu/hr/eap/services.html>. To schedule an appointment, call 512-471-3366.