Recognizing Students in Distress

Students dealing with personal concerns or problems tend to show signs that they are struggling in some way. The following indicators may be useful in assessing whether or not a referral should be made:

1. Changes in mood, appearance or behavior

Some students do not directly tell you that there is a problem, but their appearance and behavior can be telling indicators. Deterioration of hygiene or appearance and dress may be visible cues of a problem. A distinct decline in academic performance, poor attendance, an uncharacteristic need for additional attention and repeated requests for extensions are examples of behavioral changes you might observe. Outbursts of anger, crying, extreme levels of activity or conversations that do not make sense could indicate psychological difficulties. Threats to classmates and angry, harassing behaviors may require intervention on several levels. These behaviors should not be tolerated and action needs to be taken to stop them. In addition, underlying psychological problems may need to be addressed as well.

2. Traumatic changes in personal relationships

Students are often stressed when they experience a traumatic change in their personal lives. The death of a family member or close friend, difficulties in important relationships, a divorce or break-up or changes in family responsibilities might increase stress and overwhelm the individual's usual capacity to cope. If you are aware of such a problem, you might wish to initiate a conversation.

3. Drug and alcohol abuse

Coming to class or a meeting while intoxicated or high is a sign of serious abuse of drugs or alcohol. Individuals often use drugs and alcohol to cope with life stresses and psychological difficulties. Unfortunately, the substance abuse itself frequently causes a further decline in social, academic, and work functioning. If you see signs of intoxication, do not underestimate their significance.

4. Academic difficulties

Students whose academic performance declines to a noticeable degree may be feeling overwhelmed in other areas of their lives. Some students might exhibit difficulties with concentration in class, fitting in and lower performance on exams.
5. Learning problems

Some students find the demands of college-level academic work to be greater than they anticipated. While it is expected that students will go through an adjustment period, those who demonstrate a consistent discrepancy between their ability and performance may need further assistance, and Counseling Services can help with these issues. Poor study habits, test anxiety, or an undiagnosed learning disability may be affecting their performance. Students, who indicate they have a disability, ask for accommodations, or mention that they had an IEP in high school should also be referred to the Disability Support Services Office located in the Learning Resources Building room 167. You and/or the student can contact Kim Fernandes at (816) 604-3192.

6. References to suicide

If a student talks or writes about suicide, this should be taken seriously! Thoughts of suicide can be dangerous and can serve as an indicator that the student is feeling overwhelmed or depressed. To assume that talk of suicide is intended solely to get attention is risky and can be a regrettable mistake. If you become aware of a student who is thinking about suicide, please refer or escort them to Counseling Services or Campus Police immediately based on your concern.

7. Stopping out

When a student indicates that he or she is considering withdrawing from all their courses and leave school, a referral to Counseling Services may be appropriate and helpful to the student. Often a complex number of issues are at play when a student decides to leave college. A change of place may not be all that is at issue.
Helpful Reminders Dealing with Distressed Students

There are no absolutely correct procedures for dealing with a distressed student. Each person has his or her own style of approaching and responding to others. Furthermore people have differing capacities to deal with others' problems. It is important to know your personal limits as a helper.

If you choose to try to help a distressed student, or if a student approaches you to talk about personal problems:

- Request to see the student in private.
- Speak directly and honestly to a student when you sense that he/she is in academic and/or personal distress.
- Ask if the student is talking to anyone, such as family or friends, about the problem. People tend to isolate themselves when in distress, and this is rarely a useful stance.
- If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately, and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? You should be more concerned about your grades."
- 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 content and feeling ("It sounds like you're not accustomed to this much work in so short a period of time and that you're worried about failing.")
- Avoid judging, evaluating, and criticizing, even if the student asks your opinion. It is important to respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.
- Behavior that is strange or inappropriate should not be ignored. Comment directly on what you have observed.
- Do not discuss your concerns with other students.

If you are concerned about a student's suicide potential, keep in mind that mental health professionals assess suicide potential, in part, by asking if the student has a plan for exactly how he/she would act on these thoughts, when and where the student intends to carry out the plan, and if he/she has ever attempted suicide before. The more specific and lethal the plan, the fact of having made a previous attempt and the greater the ability to carry out the plan, the higher the risk is that a suicide will occur. You need not be afraid to ask these questions. For people who are considering suicide, these questions will not furnish them with new ideas. Most people who are actively suicidal are willing to answer these questions. **When you encounter a student with suicidal thoughts, you should contact Counseling Services at (816) 604-3128/3072/3077 or Campus Police at (816) 604-3123 immediately.**