

## Crisis or Stress?

There is a difference between students who are in a serious mental health crisis and those who are suffering from lower levels of stress. Understanding the difference will help you respond appropriately to the situation. We hope this information will not only assist you in assessing the severity of a student's personal problems, but will also give you some specific ideas about what to do when dealing with a student who appears to be distressed.

## Students in Stress

Students encounter stress for a variety of reasons during the time they attend the university. Academics, family problems, social situations, work, and financial problems 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 challenge 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 re-establish 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 depth 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

At one time or another, everyone feels depressed or upset. However, there are warning signs for stress, which, when present over time, suggest that the problems a person is dealing with 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

## What You Can Do for a Student in Stress

If you choose to approach a student you are concerned about or if a student seeks you out, here are some suggestions which 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 non-judgmental. Express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. Be direct and specific. 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 College life and you're feeling left out of things." Remember to let the student talk.

€ Refer. Point out that help is available and seeking help is a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help, Academic Success Center, Counseling Services, Campus Ministry, Health Services.

€ 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. Provide support as appropriate.

We hope this information will not only assist you in assessing the severity of a student's personal problems, but will also give you some specific ideas about what to do when dealing with a student who appears to be distressed.

### Students in a Serious Mental Health 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
- € Homicidal threats, written or verbal, 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)

If you observe any of the above behaviors/symptoms, call Public Safety at ext. 3502, 504-0656, 740-1483, or dial 911.

If you would like help in assessing the situation you may call Counseling Services at ext. 3578.