

Supporting Students in Distress

Student life is a period of unique change filled with challenging events. As a member of the post-secondary community, you may identify and have the opportunity to support students who are struggling with issues that affect their mental health and well-being.

This handout will help you recognize some signs and symptoms of students in distress. It provides tips on how to refer a student in distress for further assistance through Counselling Services or other appropriate resources.

Recognizing Signs of Distress

A common indicator of distress is change – behaving or reacting in ways that are not typical for an individual.

ACADEMIC SIGNS

- Significant decline in the quality or quantity of classroom/research work
- Change in attendance
- Repeated lateness, missed appointments or deadlines
- Missed assignments or exams
- Repeated requests for extensions or deferrals
- Repeated help seeking or requests for reassurance
- Difficulty listening, processing information, or problem-solving
- Working hard but struggling to meet demands

EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Exaggerated emotional response (e.g., intense anger, sobbing, persistent worry)
- Overly confident and enthusiastic
- Absence of emotion – appearing flat, disengaged
- Lack of motivation or interest
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Talking about giving up or not caring anymore
- Talking or writing about hopelessness, death, or suicide
- Mistrust or sense of being persecuted
- Persistent blame, lack of ownership



BCcampus. Capacity to Connect:
Supporting Students' Mental
Health and Wellness.



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PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Falling asleep in class
- Noticeable decline in hygiene or looking unkempt
- Significant weight change
- Significant change in energy level
- Appearing drunk or high
- Visible bruises, cuts, or injuries

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- Describing difficult circumstances or experiences (e.g., loss, conflict, trauma, assault)
- Ranting emails
- Excessive time spent on the Internet or engaged in fantasy games
- Expressing contempt toward others or a wish to seek revenge
- Disregard of rules or authority
- Peer reports of concerns about, or discomfort with a student
- Actions or gestures that threaten or intimidate

How to Respond to a Distressed Student

APPROACH

- It's okay to ask and express concern.
- Be specific about the behaviour that concerns you.
- Be aware of cultural and/or gender norms.

"I noticed you were tearful in class today."

"I noticed that your grades have dropped."

"Is everything okay?"

I noticed that your grades have dropped and wondered how you are doing.

LISTEN

- Listen in non-judgmental fashion.
- Be patient and give your undivided attention.
- Be clear about your concerns and how you can/cannot help.

"Is there something I can do to help you?"

Is there something I can do to help you?

SUPPORT

- Acknowledge the student's thoughts and feelings in a compassionate way.
- Offer support and reassurance that you want to help.

"It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed."

"What you're feeling is normal. Other students are having similar experiences."

It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed.

Refer

Provide students with information on campus services such as:

- Counselling Services
- Student Health Clinic
- International Student Services
- Services for Indigenous Students
- Disability Services
- Health and Safety
- Campus Security
- Safe Walk Program
- Sexual Violence Support
- Human Rights and Respectful Workplace Office

If possible, walk the student to the support services if you have a serious concern.

"Would you like me to help you connect with resources on campus?"

"Would you like to call together and book an appointment?"

"Seeking help through Counselling Services is confidential."

"Would you like me to walk with you to the support services?"

Seeking help through Counselling Services is confidential.

What if a Student Won't Seek Help?

Accessing services is voluntary, unless the situation is urgent and the student is not safe on their own.

Assess for Danger

Is anyone at risk of immediate harm? If yes, call 911 and then Campus Security.

If there is no risk of harm, ultimately it is the individual's right to choose whether to seek help. Individuals are resilient and often come to their own solutions.

Limits and Consultation

Know Your Limits

You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can offer. Below are some signs to look for that may suggest the assistance of a professional is warranted:

- You feel overly responsible for the student.
- You feel the problems the student brings are more than you can handle.
- You feel stressed out by the student's issues or behaviour.
- You see a pattern repeating itself in your interactions with a student.
- You find yourself avoiding the student.
- You feel anxious or angry when the student approaches.

Boundaries and Balance

Your ability to respond to students who need help will be influenced by your personal style and the role you play at your institution. When helping students, it is important to remember to maintain your own boundaries. Recognize what you can and can't do given the limitations of your role. Refer students as appropriate and access your own support when needed.

Consultation

Staff of the various Student Services on campus can meet with staff and faculty who are concerned about a student and are unsure how to handle the situation. You are encouraged to consult when:

- You are concerned about a student's well-being or academic performance but unsure how or whether to intervene.
- You are uncertain how to respond to a student's approach for help.
- You continue to be concerned about a student who has declined help.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS and respond if a student situation leaves you feeling worried, alarmed, or threatened. If you are unsure, please consult. Once the student is supported, ensure that you are supported, while maintaining the confidentiality of the student. Talk to friends, family, Elders, colleagues.

Scenarios

The following six scenarios offer suggestions on how to respond to situations of students in distress. We encourage you to use these scenarios as starting points, not scripts, for discussions and continued thought about how to respond with empathy to students while recognizing and honouring their strengths and capacity to achieve balance.

- **Scenario 1:** Student who failed an exam
- **Scenario 2:** Indigenous student needing leave time for a family death
- **Scenario 3:** International student who failed an exam
- **Scenario 4:** Student who didn't receive financial aid (loan)
- **Scenario 5:** Transgender student who is facing discrimination and isolation
- **Scenario 6:** Student who is showing major changes in behaviour

Scenario 1: Student who failed an exam

A student has just found out they failed an exam and starts to cry while talking to their instructor.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing capacity of student
- Set a boundary
- Facilitate a referral

Possible staff/faculty response

I can see that you are upset about the exam. I can hear the disappointment in your voice. You've said that you don't feel that you can stay to attend the class, and I'm concerned about having you leave like this. I want to support you, but I have to teach this class right now. I wonder if you'd be willing to talk to a counsellor? It's confidential. Would it help you to have someone from class or a friend walk over with you? Who will you ask? Let me call Counselling Services and tell them to expect you.

Scenario 2: Indigenous student needing leave time for a family death

An Indigenous student comes into your office upset. They disclose to you that a close relative has just died unexpectedly, and they are stressed about how to ask their instructors for leave time from classes to go home for the ceremony and funeral. They explain to you that cultural protocols regarding the death of a family member are elaborate and can take up to a week or more to complete. They feel overwhelmed because they want to be home with their family and community, but they also have upcoming projects due in many of their courses. They express feelings of hopelessness during this interaction.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student
- Connect the student with staff from Indigenous Services (or Student Services if your campus does not have Indigenous Services. Student Services can connect the student with local Indigenous supports)
- Provide referral to campus and community supports
- Provide student support in their advocacy to instructors

Possible staff/faculty response

I am so sorry to hear about your loss; dealing with grief while trying to manage other responsibilities can be so challenging. I commend you for your resilience in such a difficult time; you are actively looking for support and that is important to honour in yourself.

Are there any cultural supports here that I can assist you in connecting with? Have you spoken with the staff in the Indigenous Services? As for advocating for your needs with your instructors for leave time, I am happy to help you navigate that process – there are ways to make a request to your instructors for an extension on any class work or assignments. Shall we map out how you can email your instructors? Would you like me to connect you with Indigenous Services? I can introduce you to the staff there if you don't already know them. I think they'll be really receptive to supporting you in your request to the instructors as well and might have community or cultural supports that you can use.

Scenario 3: International student who failed an exam

An international student who is on probation has just failed an exam. The student fears they will be suspended and forced to go back to their home country, but they would be a disgrace to their family and they couldn't face them. The student says that they can't see any other option but to end it all.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing capacity of student
- Ask about suicide
- Facilitate a referral or follow-up

Possible staff/faculty response

I can see that you are upset about the exam. I can hear the disappointment in your voice and understand the fear about what will happen for you. When you say you might end it, I wonder if you mean you are thinking about suicide? I want to support you to be safe and to have a good outcome from this challenging time. I wonder if you'd be willing to talk to a counsellor? It's confidential and I think it's a wise thing to do. I can call them for you or walk over to Counselling Services with you.

If the student refuses, you could say, "Another option is for us to call the crisis line together right now so you can talk with them and find out about some resources."

If the student says no, you could say, "I care about you and am worried about you, so for me to feel comfortable, I need to have someone contact you to see how you're doing and help support you."

Scenario 4: Student who didn't receive financial aid (loan)

A student presents as agitated and tearful. The student just found out they didn't get a student loan. They talked to their parents who are clear about not giving them money. They have paid their fees for courses but will not have enough money to get through the semester and are considered dropping out.

Key points

- Highlight support and empathy while recognizing capacity of student
- Facilitate a referral or follow-up

Possible staff/faculty response

I'm sorry that you are having such a difficult time. I can see how upsetting this is to you and how much you want to take these classes. Have you spoken about your concerns with someone at the Financial Aid office? Are you aware of where they are located? Have you spoken to the chair of your department or to Academic Advising?

Do you have anyone to talk to about this? Perhaps you'd find it helpful to talk with someone in Counselling Services about making a plan for next steps. They are just down the hall. I can walk you there if you like. If you need support after hours you can also call the crisis line for support; here is their number.

Scenario 5: Transgender student who is facing discrimination and isolation

A student who has disclosed to you in the past that they are transgender approaches you in tears. When you ask what is happening, they tell you that they were home with their family over the holiday break and they “came out” to their family. The family’s response was not supportive, and the student tells you their parents said hurtful and derogatory comments during the discussion. The student makes statements like “this is so difficult. I can’t keep going like this.” “I don’t know why I even try anymore; my own parents don’t love me or accept me for who I am.” “I am tired of having to validate myself and who I am.” They share other more general feelings of loneliness and hopelessness.

Key points

- Give support and show empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student
- Thank them for confiding this difficult incident to you and explain you can refer them to resources in the institution or community as appropriate
- Validate their experience and recognize (if appropriate) that while you do not personally know what this experience is like for them that you can see this is extremely difficult for the student
- Ask the student if they have connected with their student union or the LGBTQ2S+ community on campus or in the surrounding community for additional support
- Ask about suicide or self-harm
- Highlight the student’s strengths and resilience that they have demonstrated so far and that their identity is valued. Tell them they are seen, heard, and celebrated at your institution

Possible staff/faculty response

Thank you for sharing this with me, I can appreciate this is such a difficult time for you and this has a significant impact on your well-being. While I don’t personally know what it’s like to identify in the LGBTQ2S+ community and not have the support or acceptance of your family, I can appreciate that this is a fundamentally important aspect of your well-being. Do you have any ideas on how I might be able to support you through this?

Have you connected with our Pride Centre or Student Union office on campus? I am happy to walk you over there now if you would like.

I have heard you make some statements around feeling hopeless and losing a sense of purpose in your life generally. Are you having any thoughts of self-harm or suicide? We have Counselling Services on campus that are confidential and free for all students; can I walk you down to their office so you can meet them and see if it would be a good fit to talk with one of their team?

If the student says no you could say: “Another option is for us to call the crisis line together right now so you can talk with them and find out about some resources.”

I want you to know that I support you, and you are a valued and important member of our campus community. I would like to support you in any way that I can to know that you are seen, valued, and celebrated here on campus.

Scenario 6: Student who is showing major changes in behaviour

You noticed a student in class who has been wearing the same clothes on a few occasions and looks somewhat dishevelled. They appear tense at times and other times they've seemed sleepy in class. Last class you walked by them and wondered if you smelled alcohol. They have been handing in their assignments but doing mediocre and their grades have been dropping. The most recent assignment wasn't handed in. You feel concerned but not sure if all of these observations are enough reason to act.

Key points

- Consult with colleagues – talk with the chair/dean
- Consult with Counselling Services. Phone to talk through situations and find out about possible resources. Talk through how they might structure the conversation with the student
- If you're ready to take on this role, request a meeting with the student. In that conversation, show support and empathy while recognizing the capacity of the student. Then, facilitate a referral or follow-up

Possible staff/faculty response

Thank you for meeting with me. I've been feeling concerned about how you are doing. I can see that you are motivated to be here as your attendance has been good. At the beginning you seemed enthusiastic about the material and discussions. However you seem tense and tired. Your grades have been going down and your last assignment was late. Last class I wondered if I smelled alcohol. I wonder how you are doing and I'm concerned you are going through a challenging time that is interfering with your ability to do as well as you can at school.

I'm glad that we are talking although I feel that it's beyond my scope/role to talk to you in detail about what's happening. I've found that in times of challenge it's helpful to get support for myself. Seeking help is courageous, not weak, and shows you are committed to working through the hard times. Do you have someone you can talk to? Have you considered accessing Counselling Services to talk or find out about resources? It's confidential.

There are other supports on campus, and I wonder if you are aware of them and if anything would be useful to you. The campus website lists all of the student resources in one place: I'm happy to show it to you. The crisis line is also good to know about as they can provide support and ideas of community resources.