

Helping Students in Distress—Tips for Faculty

Mental health concerns in college students have increased nationwide. It is important for faculty, staff, and other students to be aware of the possible signs and symptoms of a student in distress. Bradley University's Center for Health Services is prepared to help students who exhibit the following behaviors:

Academic Signs of a Student in Distress

- repeated absences from class, tardiness, or frequent missed appointments
- repeated requests for unusual accommodations for papers, exams, or other class work
- submission of papers that have themes of hopelessness, despair, paranoia, or anger
- significant decline in academic performance

Physical and Psychological Signs of a Student in Distress

- recent increase or decrease in weight or a deterioration in personal hygiene
- anxiety or panic such as sweating, hyperventilating, or the need to suddenly flee from the classroom or office setting
- signs of alcohol or drug use including slurred or garbled speech, dilated or bloodshot eyes, obvious smell of alcohol
- poor concentration or low motivation in class
- a significant change in energy level behavior that is inappropriate for a classroom such as aggressiveness, irritability or abrasiveness, crying, euphoria, or non-stop talking

Other Signs of a Student in Distress

- disclosures of problems with family, peers or significant other, or a recent personal loss
- written or verbal statements that indicate hopelessness, depression, or show a preoccupation with death or violence
- references to harming oneself including self injury such as cutting or burning
- isolation from peers, faculty, or staff
- peers express multiple concerns about a student

In some instances, students may exhibit behaviors that require immediate attention. These behaviors would consist of:

- highly disruptive behavior such as severe hostility or aggression in the classroom or on campus
- signs of loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things not seen or heard by others, paranoia, or beliefs that are at odds with reality)
- overt suicidal thoughts expressed verbally or in written format; student sees suicide as an option or has a specific plan
- homicidal threats or threats to seriously harm someone

Violent behavior is difficult to predict, but possible warning signs include:

- expressions of feeling persecuted, disrespected, or rejected by others
- failure to consider the feelings and rights of others
- history of being the victim of bullying
- history of threatening others, fighting, or aggressive behavior
- known gang involvement or desire to join a gang
- preoccupation with weapons or known access to firearms or other weapons
- known problems with authority and a history of discipline or legal infractions

Responses by faculty or staff:

In an emergency situation:

- Call 911
- Call Campus police at 677-2000 and report the situation, your location, and location of the student you are concerned about

Options for response to a non-emergency situation:

- If you receive an e-mail or voicemail that suggests a student needs assistance, attempt to contact the student directly and schedule a meeting with the student. If you would like consultation prior to contacting the student, call Health Services at 677-2700 and ask to speak with the Director of Counseling or the Medical Director.
- Meet with the student in a quiet place so that you may listen and express concern. Discuss your observations of the student in a non-judgmental or critical manner. For example, "I have noticed that you have missed class lately. Is everything alright?"

- Listen in an open way and do not underestimate the importance of listening. Be aware that some students will present a concern about a “peer” when in fact they may be talking about themselves. Regardless, have the same open listening and suggest the same referral process.
- Do not promise the student that you will keep all information confidential, especially as it relates to information of potential harm to self or others.
- Suggest and encourage the student to obtain counseling. Encourage the student to contact Health Services at 677-2700 and schedule with a counselor or with one of the physicians in Health Services. Consider allowing the student to call Health Services from your office.
- Encourage the student to go to the Counseling Services website to learn more about various mental health problems and to also access a free confidential online screen for multiple mental health problems.
- Recognize that some students may refuse help. Because of laws of confidentiality, Health Services may not confirm if a student is receiving care unless the student has signed a release of information form allowing for the communication.

How to respond to situations of potential harm to a student or others:

- If you have a concern that the student may be violent or a student has made a direct or indirect threat, contact your Department Chair and immediately call or have the Department Chair call Dr. Alan Galsky, Associate Provost for Student Affairs, at 677-3140. If Dr. Galsky is not available, ask to speak with Ms. Barbara Carraway, Interim Executive Director of the Center for Student Support Services, at 677-3658.
Do not meet with the student alone.

- If you have concerns that a student you are meeting with is suicidal or in acute distress, offer to walk the student over to Health Services or call the campus police to assist in escorting the student. Do not leave the student alone. If campus police are notified first, call Health Services at 677-2700 and inform the staff that you are sending a student over to be assessed. If it is after hours you may reach Health Services through 677-3200 and ask the nurse to page the Director of Counseling or the on call physician. The student may require an assessment at a local emergency department and would be transported by campus police or ambulance if deemed appropriate by the doctor on call.
- If you have concerns about a student or would like to make a direct referral, contact Health Services at 677-2700 during working hours, or at

677-3200 after hours, and request to speak with the Director of Counseling or the Medical Director. Confidential information may be left with nursing staff if the physician is not immediately available. If the situation requires immediate attention, inform the nursing staff of the urgency of the situation and they will immediately consult with the Director of Counseling or the Medical Director.

Sources: American Psychological Association. "Warning Signs of Youth Violence" Jan 2008
Washington University Mental Health Services. "What Can I Do? Recognizing and Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty, Administrators, and Staff" 2008
< <http://shs.wustl.edu/attachments/Health&wellrevisedpublication.pdf>>