

**RECOGNIZING AND
ASSISTING THE
EMOTIONALLY TROUBLED
STUDENT**

Guidelines for Faculty and Staff

**Prepared By
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(815) 455-8765, A262**

Table of Contents

Faculty and Staff as Helping Resources for Student 1

Recognizing Emotionally Troubled Students..... 2

What Can You Do?..... 5

When In Doubt, Consult 7

How To Make A Referral..... 8

What Happens When A Student Goes To Counseling 10

How To Follow Up After A Referral..... 11

Directory..... 12

Faculty and Staff as Helping Resources for Students

The emotional and academic pressure of college life, while manageable and even exhilarating for most students, can be overwhelming for others. Such students may not yet have attained the maturity level necessary to develop adequate coping skills or they may be struggling with longstanding emotional issues that they bring with them to college life.

Due to your position on campus, students experiencing emotional distress may turn to you for help. Or, because of your role, you may find yourself confronted by a disturbed or disturbing student who needs assistance. How you respond in these situations could impact significantly on the student's ability to deal constructively with his/her emotional conflicts.

In this brochure we offer specific, concrete guidelines that you can utilize for recognizing, intervening with, and referring emotionally troubled students so they can get the help they need.

RECOGNIZING EMOTIONALLY TROUBLED STUDENTS

At one time or another, everyone feels stressed, depressed, or anxious. However, some behaviors occurring over a period of time can suggest that the problems with which the student is dealing are more than the expected one. The following are three levels of behaviors indicating this kind of distress.

Level 1. Although not disruptive to others, these behaviors may indicate that help is needed.

- Serious grade problems or a change from consistently good grades to unaccountably poor performance;
- Excessive absences, especially if the student previously demonstrated consistent class and/or work attendance;
- Unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction, i.e., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, dominating discussion, etc.;
- Other characteristics that may indicate a problem, including depressed mood and lethargic behavior; excessive activity and very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; anxious behavior; and falling asleep in class.

Level 2. These behaviors may indicate significant emotional distress and also a reluctance or inability to acknowledge a need for personal help:

- Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions (especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the circumstances prompting the request);
- New or consistent behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with the effective management of your class or work setting;
- An unusual or exaggerated emotional response that is obviously inappropriate to the situation;

Level 3. These behaviors usually show students in obvious crisis who need emergency care:

- Highly disruptive behavior (hostile, aggressive, violent, etc);
- Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech, unconnected or disjointed thoughts);
- Loss of contact with reality (seeing/hearing things that aren't present, beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability);

- Overtly suicidal thoughts (referring to suicide as a current option);
- Homicidal threats.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Level 3 problems are the easiest to identify and handle in that there are specific procedures for helping students in crises. Basically, you need to stay clam and know who to call for help. The information is outlined in the section of the booklet entitled “How to make a Referral”.

In dealing with a student who exhibits Level 1 or Level 2 behavior you may choose to approach the student or the student may seek your help with a problem. Below are some suggestions which might be helpful for you in dealing with a troubled student.

- Demonstrate your respect for the student by talking to the student when both of you have sufficient time and are in a private place free from disturbance from others.
- Be matter-of-fact. Control your emotions and it may help the student to do the same.
- Give the student your undivided attention. Express concern for the student in clear, direct, behavioral, nonjudgmental terms (i.e., “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and I’m concerned,” rather than “Why haven’t you been in class?” or “Where have you been lately?”)

- Listen to the student's description of the problems, which are interfering with his/her academic work in a respectful, non-threatening way. Let the student talk. Convey support and understanding by summarizing what you hear the student saying by including both content and feelings ("It sounds as if the experience of moving away from home was a big change and now you're feeling lonely and isolated.")

WHEN IN DOUBT, CONSULT

If you have specific questions about a student, or are unsure about whether or how to approach this individual to make a referral, call the Counseling Department at 455-8765.

Indicate that you are concerned about a student and that it is an emergency and ask to speak to a counselor. The counselor can help you:

- Assess the seriousness of the situation;
- Learn about resources, both on and off campus so that you can provide the student with potential options for obtaining assistance;
- Decide how best to initiate the referral process;
- Clarify your own feelings regarding the student and consider how you can be most effective.

HOW TO MAKE A REFERRAL

Once you have decided to refer a student to the Counseling Department, you can proceed in any of the following ways;

- Suggest that the student call for an appointment during office hours (Level 1 severity).
- Suggest that the student use your telephone to arrange an appointment while the student is still in your office. When the call is made from your office, you know that at least an appointment has been made. By making the call him/herself, however, the student is exercising personal responsibility and is more likely to follow through to get help. In addition, your willingness to let him/her handle this part of the process is a vote of confidence and affirms his/her positive coping capacities (Level 1 or 2 severity).
- Call the Counseling Department yourself, while the student is still in your office, and arrange an appointment for the student. If you feel this is an emergency please indicate this when you contact us. Indicate your willingness to the student to provide the Counseling Department with information about the nature of the problem and the reason for your referral (Level 2 or 3 severity).

- In an immediate emergency (i.e., Level 3 severity), you may decide to accompany the student to Counseling in person so that he/she may be seen immediately by a counselor. (Monday through Thursday 8:00am – 7:30pm and Friday 8:00 – 4:00) If possible a call that you are bringing a student in would be appreciated.
- If a Level 3 emergency occurs after hours during the semester, you may call college security at 455-8733.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A STUDENT GOES TO COUNSELING

Students should be encouraged to make their own appointments by calling 455-8765 or stopping by the Counseling Center located in A262. There may be a wait of several hours or several days before an initial appointment can be arranged. In emergency situations, however, a student will be seen immediately. During the initial appointment the counselor will assess the student's concerns and needs and decide if the Counseling Department is the most appropriate place for the student to receive assistance. Students need to know that communication with us is confidential. We cannot discuss a student, his/her situation, or even the fact that counseling is being received without the student's permission. The only exceptions to this are imminent suicide, homicide, or suspected child abuse.

HOW TO FOLLOW UP AFTER A REFERRAL

Once a referral has been initiated, it is reasonable and prudent to follow up with the student to determine if he/she actually has attended counseling. Depending on the nature of your relationship with the student, you may also find yourself wondering, “How is it going?” If this is done in a non-intrusive way, such a question may be well received. The student’s right to privacy, however, should always be respected.

If you wish to give us information about a student you referred, you may do so. Please remember that the counselor-client relationship is confidential, so we will not be able to release information about a specific student without permission from the student unless we determine that the student or someone else is in physical danger.

The information in this guide was adapted, with permission, from the Counseling and Mental Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Directory

(Do not leave crisis messages on voicemail)

Counseling Office, A262455-8765

Counseling Center Office Hours Monday through Thursday 8-7:30, Friday 8-4

Luisa Lauf..... 455-8918

Amy Taylor..... 455-8907

Pat Zokal..... 455-8906

Dory Thompson..... 455-8574

Flecia Thomas, Dean of Student Success 479-7620

***Crisis* Phone Numbers when Counseling Dept. is closed:**

MCC Security.....455-8733

McHenry County Crisis Line1-800-892-8900