



# Helping Students in Distress

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

## Purpose of Guide and Role of Faculty and Staff

Although many students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. The emotional and behavioral consequences are often played out on campus in classrooms, residence halls, or offices.

### The purpose of this guide is to:

- Help you recognize students who may be experiencing emotional, physical, or developmental academic difficulties;
- Provide basic guidelines for addressing a wide range of student behaviors;
- Assist you in facilitating appropriate referrals to campus resources.

### Your Role as Faculty and Staff

As a faculty or staff member interacting with students, you play a central role in responding to student issues. First, you are in a direct position to observe students and be aware of their behavior. Often before seeking professional help, students frequently turn to informal guides like you to obtain advice and support.

Although you are not expected to provide counseling, it is helpful for you to understand the critical role you play in:

- Prevention of student distress
- Recognizing the signs that indicate a student needs help
- Responding to distressed students
- Understanding the steps in making appropriate on-campus referrals

Because you are likely to be the first person a student reaches out to for help, your ability to recognize the signs of emotional distress and potential health issues and to provide an initial intervention can have a significant impact on a student's future well-being.

## Signs and Symptoms of Distressed Students

Sometimes it is very clear when a student is having difficulties coping, and at other times distress is masked with less obvious symptoms. Some obvious and not-so-obvious signs of distress may include:



## **CHALLENGES or DIFFICULTIES WITH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

- Poor academic performance and preparation, particularly if such behavior represents a change in previous functioning
- Chronic indecisiveness or procrastination
- Repeated requests for special considerations
- Increased concern about grades despite satisfactory performance
- Increased dependence – student hangs around you or makes excessive appointments to see you during office hours

*\* Faculty should intervene first if they observe the above behavior. Engage the student in a conversation, name the observed behavior and offer appropriate resources. As the professor and the individual making the direct observation, you are in the best position to intervene first.*

## **UNUSUAL BEHAVIOR**

- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Marked changes in personal hygiene
- Impaired speech or disjointed, confused thoughts
- Aggressive or threatening behavior
- Extreme mood changes or excessive, inappropriate displays of emotions
- Hyperactivity, irritability, or heightened anxiety
- Prolonged or extreme emotionality
- Dramatic weight loss or weight gain with no apparent physical illness/reason
- Bizarre or strange behavior indicating a loss of contact with reality
- Use of mood-altering chemicals (e.g., alcohol or drugs)

## **TRAUMATIC CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIPS**

- Death of family member or close friend
- Difficulties in marriage or close relationships
- Problems at home with family or roommates

## **REFERENCES TO SUICIDE OR HARM/THREAT TO OTHERS**

- Overt (or veiled) references to suicide – verbally or in writing
- Statements of helplessness or hopelessness
- Indications of persistent or prolonged unhappiness
- Isolates self from friends and family
- Pessimistic feelings about the future
- Harm/threat to others – verbally or in writing

# What You Can Do: Responding to Students in Distress

Because you come in frequent contact with many students, you are in an excellent position to observe students, identify those who are in distress, and offer assistance. Your care, concern, and assistance will often be enough to help the student. At other times, you can play a critical role in referring students for appropriate assistance and in motivating them to seek such help. A few guidelines for responding to distressed students are summarized below.

**OBSERVE:** The first important step in assisting distressed students is to be familiar with the signs and symptoms of distress and attend to their occurrence. An attentive observer will pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings.

**INITIATE CONTACT:** Don't ignore strange, inappropriate, or unusual behavior – respond to it! Talk to the student privately, in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern. Early feedback, intervention, and/or referral can prevent more serious problems from developing.

**OFFER SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE:** Among the most important helping tools are interest, concern, and attentive listening. Avoid criticism or sounding judgmental. Summarize the essence of what the student has told you as a way to clarify the situation; provide hope that things can get better. Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem and generate coping strategies. Suggest other resources that the student can take advantage of such as friends, family, clergy, or professionals on campus.

## SUGGESTIONS:

- “I’m so sorry you’re having difficulties. Would you like to talk about them?”
- “I’m so sorry you’re having difficulties. What support would be helpful at this time?”
- “I noticed you missed some classes/ assignments and I’m concerned. Can we talk about it?”
- “Sounds like you are really struggling with \_\_\_\_\_. Many people find it helpful to talk with someone who is outside the situation.”
- “We have some excellent counseling professionals on campus who can provide you with assistance. Would you like to speak with someone at the counseling center?”

## DISCUSS OPTIONS TO HELP THE STUDENT:

- First clarify: What is the stressor or issue causing distress?
- What has the student done to try to resolve the problem?
- What solutions can you and the student brainstorm?
- What type of support or resource would the student find most helpful?

## WHAT IF I'M UNEASY ABOUT MEETING WITH A STUDENT?

Sometimes a student's behavior is more troubling or worrisome and this causes the faculty/staff member to feel uneasy about meeting with them (i.e. aggressive in tone, highly emotional, perceived threat). If you are reluctant or uneasy about meeting with the student, please consider the following:

- Consult with appropriate staff: In your attempt to help a student, you may need input from a professional. Staff from various departments including but not limited to Counseling and Psychological Services (657) 278-3040, Student Conduct (657) 278-4436, University Police (657) 278-2515, or the Dean of Students Office deanofstudents@fullerton.edu can suggest possible approaches, provide you with support, or intervene directly with students.
- After consulting and before meeting with the student consider these tips:
  - Don't confront the person, but don't give in to inappropriate behavior. Set boundaries and be assertive immediately, e.g. "I'd like you to lower your voice."
  - Stay in a public place or keep the door slightly open and make sure colleagues are around.
  - Involve a third party; request to have an observer such as an assistant dean, associate dean, department chair, or supervisor.
  - Use your office or departments protocol for responding to emergencies.

## Identifying and Assessing Distressing Behavior: Descriptors and Interventions

### **Distressing Behavior** (low to mild level of concern)

*Distressing behavior from a student can usually cause us to feel worried or uneasy.*

When faculty or staff members encounter distressing behavior, they should feel concerned about the student's well-being. Student's exhibiting distressing behavior may have difficulties in and out of the classroom. Some examples include students who:

- Express hopelessness, fear or worthlessness.
- Report feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable transitioning to campus.
- Experience feelings of isolation, loneliness, or disconnection from peers.
- Experiences family problems, relationship problems/break-up.
- Experiences grief due to the loss of a loved one.
- Lack a social support network.

## Interventions for Distressing Behavior

Faculty and staff have options for responding to student behavior that they find distressing. Here are some suggestions:

- Initiate a discussion with the student in private about the concerning behavior—remember, you are the first point of contact.
- Offer support and assistance: Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem (what is the source of the distress?) and generate coping strategies.
- Discuss options: refer the student to campus departments or offices that have the necessary expertise and personnel to help them.
- If you're uneasy about meeting with the student, consult with your department chair, supervisor, or appropriate staff in CAPS (657) 278-3040 or Dean of Students Office via email at deanofstudents@fullerton.edu.
- If the student continues to display distressing behavior after your initial intervention, submit a *Report A Student in Distress* [online referral form](#).

## Identifying and Assessing Troubling Behavior: Descriptors and Interventions

**Troubling Behavior** (moderate level of concern; greater or more pronounced than distressing behavior)

*Troubling behavior causes us to feel upset or frustrated. It is conduct that interferes with or interrupts the educational process of other students or the normal operations of the university. Troubling behavior can sometimes lead to a disruption.*

A student who displays troubling behavior might resist interventions or corrective action. Some examples include a student who:

- expresses current thoughts to harm self in a paper, email, text, etc.
- displays intense emotion (anxiety, panic, paranoia) or inappropriate emotional outbursts (unprovoked anger/aggression, or hostility).
- is verbally disrespectful when disagreeing with peers and/or instructor.
- verbally abuses or intimidates others.
- curses at peers and/or instructor.
- appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- whose writing contains themes and threats of violence.

## Interventions for Troubling Behavior

You may find the following procedures helpful when dealing with troubling behavior:

- Speak with the student privately. Addressing the troubling behavior in a timely manner, when you first notice it, is critical.
- Inform the student of the problem behavior (name the behavior). It's important to focus on the behaviors and to avoid anything that might sound judgmental.
- Receive and consider the student's response - they might share problems or issues that explain the behavior. They may simply not be aware of the impact the specific behavior has on the instructor or other students.
- Inform the student of your expectations for their behavior going forward. Reiterate that the behavior described cannot continue and redirect the student towards appropriate behavior. For example, "Going forward, it will be important for you to save some of your comments until we have an opportunity for group discussion."
- Tell the student the behavioral expectations/policies of the class or whatever way you engage with the student.
  - Name those expectations clearly.
  - Inform the student that all students must abide by these expectations and how they relate to academic success.
- Ask the student if they can abide by your expectations going forward.
  - This question can be used to ensure the student received the message and understands that you plan to hold them accountable.
  - An example might be: "Does what I'm sharing sound reasonable to you? Do you think you can continue in class without [describe behavior]?"
- Inform the student if they are unable or unwilling to meet these expectations the described behavior could result in a referral to Student Conduct.
- You may want or need to refer the student to campus departments or offices that have the necessary expertise and resources to help them based on the issues or challenges they self-disclose during this conversation.
- Afterwards, document the content of the meeting in writing. It is helpful and necessary to provide the student with a written copy of the expectations, requirements, and the consequences discussed.

- If you're uneasy about meeting with the student, consult first with your department chair, supervisor, or appropriate staff in CAPS (657) 278-3040 or Dean of Students Office via email at deanofstudents@fullerton.edu.
- If you intervened and the behavior continued or if the incident is especially troubling after you addressed it, per your discretion, submit a *Student in Distress* [online referral form](#).

## Identifying and Assessing Threatening Behavior: Descriptors and Interventions

**Threatening Behavior** (high, serious level of concern; student behavior has escalated to require immediate attention/response)

*Threatening behavior from a student typically causes us to feel alarmed and to fear for our personal and physical safety. These behaviors should be taken very seriously.*

Examples of threatening behavior include a student who:

- displays a firearm or weapon.
- sends threatening correspondence to another person.
- who physically confronts or attacks another person.
- who implies or makes a direct threat to harm self or others.

**\*Please note:** the behaviors listed above should be referred to [Student Conduct](#). The only exception is a student who makes a direct threat to harm self. Making a threat to harm self is not a policy violation. Students who display this behavior should be referred to Care Services via the *Report a Student in Distress* [online referral form](#).

### Interventions for Threatening Behavior

The safety and well-being of the campus community is the top priority when a student exhibits threatening or potentially violent behavior. **If you believe the student poses an imminent threat to you or others, call University Police at (657) 278- 2515.**

If a student expresses thoughts of self-harm Faculty and Staff can also refer to the [Virtual Walk Over Instructions](#) and [Welfare Check Request](#) for support.

If the observed behavior does not pose an imminent threat, other interventions include:

- Immediately notify your department chair or supervisor for advice and support.



- Consult with staff in University Police (657) 278-2515, Counseling and Psychological Services (657) 278-3040, or the Dean of Students Office via phone (657) 278-3211 or email deanofstudents@fullerton.edu.
- After initial intervention, submit a Student Conduct or a *Report a Student in Distress* [online referral form](#) (if self-harm).

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