Challenging Conversations:
Tips for Making a Successful Referral to CAPS

You’re concerned about a student and think that he or she might benefit from talking to a counselor. Now what?

1. **Express concern based upon your own observations.** When possible, start a conversation with simple observations of things you’ve noticed personally. This can minimize incorrect assumptions and reduce defensiveness. For example, “I’ve noticed you haven’t been out of your room much lately and I was feeling a bit concerned,” is a better opening than “You seem really depressed lately,” or “Everyone on your floor is really worried about you.”

2. **Be ready to listen.** Ask open ended questions and be prepared to listen without jumping to advice-giving too quickly. The problem may be very different than you understand it to be going into the conversation. Also, active listening communicates genuine concern.

3. **Have current, accurate information available.** Students are more likely to accept a referral if they are provided with contact numbers, our website, or other relevant information. The better informed you are, the more helpful you can be.

4. **Help facilitate the first contact if necessary.** For some students, coming to CAPS can be a difficult and intimidating process. You can help facilitate the first contact by offering to accompany distressed students to their first meeting with a counselor, or helping them call the center to set up a phone appointment.

5. **Be prepared for a brush off.** To some students, talking to a counselor seems like a normal, healthy response to dealing with stress or other problems. Others may feel offended or defensive despite your most sensitive and supportive efforts to make the referral. Don’t be disheartened – many students think about visiting CAPS for months or years before actually making the decision to come in. You’ve expressed concern and hopefully planted a seed that will encourage the student to come in down the road.

6. **Examine your own attitudes about counseling.** If you believe that counseling is a sign of weakness or failure, the student is likely to pick up on that. Are there subtle ways that you’re communicating that counseling is shameful? If you’ve been raised to believe that counseling is “only for crazy people,” or that people “shouldn’t air their dirty laundry,” consider challenging yourself to come into CAPS for a session or two next time you’re going through something stressful or difficult.