Responding to Students in Distress

Because of your frequent contact with many students, you are in an excellent position to recognize students who are in distress and to offer assistance and resources. Your listening, care, concern and support will often be enough to help the student. At other times, you can play a critical role in referring a student for appropriate professional assistance and in motivating him/her to seek such help. A few guidelines for responding to distressed students are summarized here. You are welcome to contact CAPS 24 hrs (831-459-2628) for guidance and support in how to assist a student.

Observe

The first important step in assisting distressed students is to be familiar with the signs of distress and attend to their occurrence. A careful observer will pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings. If you have a general sense of someone’s behavior, you will be more sensitive to changes which may indicate trouble.

Initiate Contact

Don’t ignore strange, inappropriate or unusual behavior. Don’t minimize or ignore your own concerns. Arrange to talk with the student privately and in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, share your concerns and willingness to help. Early feedback, intervention, and/or referral can prevent a crisis or more serious problems from developing.

Clarify Your Role

It’s not unusual for role conflicts to arise when we attempt to offer assistance. Some students may see you as a figure of authority and this perception may influence how helpful you can be. You may feel friendly with your student, which may make it difficult for you to act objectively in the academic or classroom management role. Sometimes you may need to place limits on the amount of support you can provide and to refer the student to other resources.

Listen Objectively

Listening has been called an art, but it is also a set of skills that can be acquired with practice. To listen to someone is to refrain from imposing your own viewpoint, to withhold advice unless it is requested, and to concentrate on the feelings and thoughts.
of the person you are trying to help. Listening is probably the most important skill used in helping and can be facilitated by allowing the student enough time and permission to express thoughts and feelings as fully as possible. Some things to listen for include a student’s view of him/herself; view of his/her current situation or environment and the view of the future. Negative comments about these issues indicate a student may be in trouble.

**Offer Support and Assistance**

Among the most important helping tools are genuine interest, concern, and attentive listening. Avoid criticism or judgmental comments. Take the student’s concerns seriously. Summarize the essence of what the student has told you as a way to clarify the situation. Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem and generate coping strategies. Suggest resources that the student can access: friends, family, clergy, or professionals on campus.

**Know Your Limits**

As a help-giver, only go as far as your expertise, training, and resources allow. If you are uncertain about your ability to help a student, it is best to be honest about it. Trust your feelings when you think an individual’s problem is more than you can handle.

When a student needs more help than you are able or willing to provide, it is time to make a referral to a professional. It’s a good idea to refer when:

- You find yourself feeling responsible for the student
- You feel pressure to solve their problems
- You feel you are over-extending yourself in helping the student
- You feel stressed-out by the student’s issue(s) or behavior
- You see a behavioral pattern repeating itself in your interaction with the student
- You feel that the problems a student brings to you are more than you can handle
- You feel anxious when the student approaches you

**Consult With CAPS Staff**

The Counseling and Psychological Services staff can suggest possible approaches to take with students or provide you with support. Call CAPS (831) 459-2628 and tell the receptionist that you wish to speak with the on-call services. Consultation is available 24hrs, including weekends, by selecting “After Hours Crisis Service” from the phone menu. **If your situation is an emergency, call 911.**

(Adapted from UCD and OCCDHE guidelines)