Encountering a Student in Distress or Personal Crisis

Faculty teaching in the classroom often have the first opportunity to observe if a student is in some kind of personal distress or crisis. As such, you may be in the position to be the first to extend a “helping hand” to a troubled student. These suggestions are intended to guide you in extending that helping hand. As an Instructor, you may become aware of student’s anxiety, depression, loneliness, marital and family adjustment situations, sexual concerns, feelings of low self-worth, career dilemma, or other situations that are causing the student to be personally distressed or in a troubled mental state. While this distress results from the student’s personal situation, the effects of a troubled personal life sometimes becomes evident in the classroom and may affect not only the student’s ability to succeed in the class, but may affect you and other students in the class as well.

Consult with Student Counseling Services to Determine How You Can Help

As a consultant, our role is to help you determine the best course of action for addressing your concern. We accomplish this by discussing with you your concerns and brainstorming ways in which you can help. Call 662-325-2091 and ask to consult with the Counselor-on-Duty.

Indicators that a Student May be in Distress

Students in crisis may exhibit the following early warning indicators:

- Missed assignments
- Deterioration in quality of work
- A drop in grades
- Repeated absences from class
- A negative change in classroom performance
- Verbal aggressiveness in class meetings
- Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed examinations, etc.)
- Essays or creative work that indicate extremes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair
- Tearfulness
- Unprovoked anger or hostility
- Exaggerated personality traits (e.g., more withdrawn or animated than normal)
- Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- Expressions of concern about a student in the class by his/her peers
- Lack of personal hygiene
- Any written note or verbal statement that has a “sense of finality” (suicidal)
- Self-injurious or self-destructive behaviors
- Out-of-control behavior
- Verbal or written (email) threats of harm to self or others

None of these warning indicators alone is sufficient for predicting mental health problems, aggression and/or violence. When presented in combination, they may indicate the need for documentation and further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention. This documentation and further analysis is something that should be undertaken with the support of MSU Student Counseling Services and the MSU Dean of Students Office.
How to Help

Try to talk with the student in a private location, mention you are concerned, and cite a specific reason why you have concern.

- Give the individual time to talk about their situation, just listen.
- Use a calm voice when talking to the student.
- Strike the balance between encouraging the student to express vital information and respecting your student’s (and your own) boundaries.
- Give hope.

How to Refer

- Ask student if he would like to talk with a SCS Counselor who has expertise in helping students to “cope” with a variety of matters that can be troubling.
- Ask “Are you talking to someone about this?”
- Express your concerns directly to the student and focus on objective behaviors versus personality characteristics or diagnostic labels
- Let the student know that the issues they are discussing with you are not your area of expertise
- Normalize seeking help; don’t say “you need help”
- Mention that Counseling is free and is confidential (unless harm is likely).
- **If the student is in crisis (their concern is urgent)** offer to walk to the student to SCS, located in Hathorn Hall, and make sure to fill out the form to tell SCS why you are referring this student.
- **If the student is NOT in crisis**, encourage the student to call the Student Counseling Services and make his or her own appointment at 662-325-2091. Perhaps they could call right now, while you are meeting.
- When you have had an interaction with a distressed or troubled student, report this to the Dean of Students by completing the web-based Incident Report Form, found on http://www.students.msstate.edu/reportincident/

Example Statements

- “I wanted to touch base with you because I’ve noticed ________ and I wanted to see how you’re doing”
- “Maybe one of the things we can do is get you some support, to help you with what you’re going through right now”
- “I’ve seen some changes in you over the past couple of weeks and I’m worried that you don’t seem like yourself”
- “I know that there are free counseling services here on campus that can help you sort out your feelings and help you deal with whatever personal problems you’re struggling with. Would you be interested in talking with someone who works with these kinds of concerns all the time?”

After Referral

- Follow up with the student to check on status and follow-through.
- Expect to remain involved. We will help you help the student. You still have a role to play and we can work with you to help the student.
- In order to protect confidentiality, the Student Counseling Services can only provide information about a client with that client’s written permission, though we can always take in information from you and make sure it gets through to those who can help (e.g., the student’s counselor).

**THANK YOU FOR ALL THAT YOU DO FOR MSU STUDENTS!**