TIPS FOR RECOGNIZING AND ASSISTING STUDENTS IN EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

By:
Counseling Center
3rd Floor Dezel
UW-Stevens Point
715-346-3553

FACULTY/STAFF AS HELPING RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

University students often encounter a great deal of stress (academic, social, family, work, financial) during the course of their educational experience. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students in difficulty have a number of resources available to them. These include close friends, relatives, clergy, and coaches. In fact, anyone who is seen as caring and trustworthy may be a potential resource in time of trouble.

When a student requests help either directly or indirectly (i.e., missing classes, changes in performance, tearfulness), it is helpful for the faculty/staff to step out of the role of an evaluator and become a "concerned mentor." Many students may feel uncomfortable with communicating vulnerability or uncomfortable emotions to faculty, so presenting as a "concerned mentor" can help the student feel more comfortable in asking for assistance.

Students have only a certain amount of mental energy. If this energy is consumed in attempting to cope with various problems a student is facing, little energy is left over for the student to apply to learning. The student, therefore, loses motivation for learning. A good example of this is an international student struggling to learn the English language. He becomes frustrated and discouraged. Energy that he puts into dealing with this problem saps away his energy toward his academic studies.

This brochure will help you assess students feeling emotionally overwhelmed and help you choose productive options for assisting students in distress.

LEVEL 1
These behaviors, although not disruptive to others, may indicate that something is wrong and help is needed:
- serious grade problems or a drop from good grades to unaccountably poor grades
- excessive class absences, especially if good attendance had been the norm
- unusual or markedly changed pattern of classroom interaction, such as participation avoidance, excessive anxiety when singled out, and the need to dominate discussions
- other behaviors suggesting stress - a depressed, lethargic posture, excessive motor activity and very rapid speech, marked change in dress and hygiene, and falling asleep in class.

LEVEL 2
Behaviors at this level may signify emotional distress as well as reluctance to seek personal help:
- repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions - especially if the student is uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing circumstances prompting the requests
- new or regularly-occurring behavior which strains the boundaries of decorum and interferes with effective classroom management, such as the persistent but nonproductive interruption of lectures
- unusual or exaggerated emotional response inappropriate to the situation.

LEVEL 3
These behaviors identify students needing emergency care:
- highly disruptive behavior (hostile, aggressive, violent, etc.)
- disorganized/unclear communication (garbled, slurred speech, disconnected or disjointed thoughts)
- loss of contact with reality (seeing/hearing things which "aren't there," beliefs or actions at odds with reality/probability)
- overtly suicidal thoughts (suicide viewed as viable option)
- homicidal threats.

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
Counseling Center
"Mental Health Matters"
WHEN IS REFERRAL THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION?

After you have identified a student experiencing difficulties that may impede their academic progress, the next step is to help them find the most appropriate resource to get help. Let your level of comfort guide whether you think a campus referral should be made. If you feel uncomfortable in talking about your student’s problem with him or her — such as believing personal differences will interfere, having limited experience in dealing with certain types of problems, or experiencing your own high level of stress — then a referral is likely an appropriate course of action. Referrals are easier to make when you have knowledge of the various helping agencies on campus. Please note the CAMPUS REFERRALS section of this handout for potential referral sources. It is generally helpful to follow-up with the student by checking in with him or her to determine if he/she made contact with the support service.

THE ART OF MAKING REFERRALS

Although most people accept referrals easily, others feel rejected. The best policy is to be frank with students about the limits of your ability to help — limits of time, energy, training, or objectivity. Assure them that you respect their willingness to talk with you about concerns and that you will support them fully in acquiring assistance. Explain that being referred doesn’t mean they have a serious problem. Their concerns might be among the more common reasons students seek help — such as changes in motivation, difficulties in relationships, anxiety or depression, and worries about the future. Troubled students have a number of resources available to them. If you can, prepare students for the change in helpers by sharing what you know about the referral person or agency they have chosen. Let the student talk.

Avoid giving advice or evaluating unless asked for your opinion. Providing easy and quick answers may indicate that the problem is not important or meaningful. Respect the student’s value system, even if you don’t agree with it.

CAMPUS REFERRALS

Please familiarize yourself with the following campus referrals that can assist you in helping the student feel more comfortable emotionally and academically:

PROTECTIVE SERVICES
Telephone: 715-346-3456
Services: 24 hour transportation and/or protection

COUNSELING CENTER
Telephone: 715-346-3553
Services: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm — emergency consultation, evaluation, treatment and referral

TUTOR-LEARNING CENTER
Telephone: 715-346-3568
Services: Call for open hours — tutors for many campus classes, assistance with writing papers

ACADEMIC ADVISING CENTER
Telephone: 715-346-3361
Services: Call for appointment — assistance for undeclared majors, establishing educational plans

CAREER SERVICES
Telephone: 715-346-3226
Services: Call for appointment — exploring careers, job searches, locating jobs, graduate school pursuits

DISABILITY SERVICES
Telephone: 715-346-3365
Services: Call for appointment — academic accommodations for disabled students

FINANCIAL AID
Telephone: 715-346-4771
Services: 7-45 am to 4:30 pm — financial assistance regarding appropriate loan options

HEALTH SERVICES
Telephone: 715-346-4646
Services: 7-45 am to 4:30 pm — prompt and high quality medical services, wellness approach to health

24 Hour Crisis Assistance (Off-Campus Referral)
Telephone: 1-866-317-9362
24-hour phone assistance