Guide for Faculty

College students typically encounter a great deal of stress - academic, social, family, work, financial - during their educational experiences. While most students cope successfully with the demands of college life, for some the pressures can become overwhelming and unmanageable. Students having a difficult time 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 times of trouble.

As a faculty or staff member who interacts daily with students, you are in an excellent position to recognize behavior changes. A student's behavior, especially if it is inconsistent with your previous observations, could constitute a "cry for help."

The following information offers straightforward advice, techniques and suggestions on how to cope with, intervene and assist troubled students.

At one time or another, everyone feels depressed or upset. But, we can identify three general levels of distress which, when present over a period of time, suggest that the problem the individual is dealing with is more than the "normal" ones.

Level 1
These behaviors, although not disruptive to others, may indicate that something is wrong and that help may be needed:

- Serious grade problems or a change from consistently good grades to poor performance
- Excessive absences, especially if the student had previously demonstrated good, consistent class attendance
- Unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction, i.e., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, dominating discussions, etc.
- Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully include a depressed, lethargic mood, being excessively active and talkative (very rapid speech), swollen, red eyes, marked change in personal dress and hygiene, sweaty (when room is not hot) and falling asleep inappropriately.

Level 2
These behaviors may indicate significant emotional distress, but also a reluctance, or inability to acknowledge a need for more personal help.

- Repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions, especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the circumstances prompting the request
- New, or regularly occurring behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with the effective management of the immediate environment
- Unusual or exaggerated emotional response which is inappropriate to the situation

**Level 3**
These behaviors usually show a student is in obvious crisis and needs emergency care:
- Highly disruptive - Hostile, aggressive, violent, etc.
- Inability to communicate clearly - garbled, slurred speech, disconnected, or disjointed thoughts
- Loss of contact with reality - Seeing/hearing things that "aren't there," beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability
- Suicidal thoughts - referring to suicide as a current option
- Homicidal threats

**What Can You Do?**
- Talk to the student in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel confident about what to do next.
- If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, nonjudgmental terms (e.g., "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? Goofing off, again?").
- Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings ("It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things.") Let the student talk.
- Avoid judging, evaluating, or criticizing even if the student asks your opinion. Such behavior is apt to close the student off from you and from getting the help needed. It is important to respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree with it.

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**Student Personal Counseling Service**
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