

Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty and Staff

You are on the front lines, witnessing the early signs of distress as they are played out on campus and in the classrooms. Students are also likely to initially seek assistance from faculty and staff members, particularly when they see you as available and willing to listen. Beyond the support you can provide, there are also professional support services available to students through the Counseling Center. The Center staff are available to meet with students and to consult with Staff and Faculty about providing the help that students may need.

If you would like a downloadable document with tips specific for CSU, please read the [Tips for Helping Stressed Students for Staff and Faculty](#).

Additionally, you may also find [Addressing Students' Needs: Dealing with Disruptive Behavior in the Classroom](#) (by Vanderbilt University) useful.

Identifying a Student in Distress

Many students have difficulty **asking** for help. Instead, they will show visible signs that they are struggling. Cause for concern should arise when symptoms of distress occur for extended periods of time or begin to interfere with a student's academic responsibilities or social/personal relationships. Following is a list of signs that might indicate a student is in distress.

Note: *This list is not meant to serve as a comprehensive list as students may exhibit other behaviors that are just as serious but are not listed.*

Academic Signs

- Significant decline in quality of work
- Repeated absence(s) from class and/or lab
- Not handing in homework or assignments
- Coursework that expresses signs of anger/hopelessness/isolation/depression/despair
- Inappropriate disruptions or verbalizations in class
- Lack of participation during in-class group activities

Psychological or Physical Signs

- Deterioration in physical appearance or hygiene
- Exaggerated behaviors or personality traits (e.g., agitation, withdrawal)
- Constant irritability, anxiety, or tearful behavior
- Overt suicidal thoughts/behavior, referring to suicide as an option or manner of coping
- Unwarranted anger, hostility, or outbursts
- Significant changes in concentration or motivation
- Evidence of alcohol or other drug dependence or abuse
- Visible increases or decreases in weight
- Extreme fatigue or sleepiness in class
- Evidence of cutting behavior (e.g., knife-like cuts on arms)

Additional Factors to Consider:

- Candid statements indicating family problems or personal losses such as the death of a family member or the breakup of a significant relationship.
 - Expressions of concern about a student by peers, lab partner(s), or classmates.
 - Written or verbal statements that have a sense of finality or hopelessness.
 - Your sense that something is seriously amiss (no matter how vague this might be).
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Helping a Distressed Student

The following recommendations can be used if a student approaches you with a problem and/or if you decide to approach a student about any of the previous signs.

- **Privately talk to the student about your concerns.**
Provide the student with your undivided attention. A few minutes of you listening may be enough to assist the student in solving the problem. Encourage the student to talk with a professional in the Counseling Center.
 - **Express your concerns in nonjudgmental terms.**
Be direct and specific when expressing your concerns. For example, say something like, "I have noticed that you have not been handing in your work lately and I am concerned."
 - **Listen to their thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, nonthreatening manner.**
By repeating or paraphrasing the essence of what the student has conveyed to you, you communicate empathy and understanding. For example, "It sounds like you are having difficulty transitioning to your senior year and you feel anxious about the future". But remember, it is important to *let the student do most of the talking*.
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Making a Referral

If you believe the student is not a harm to themselves or others, suggest to them, in a caring manner, that they make an appointment in the Counseling Center. *Reminder:* If the student IS a threat to themselves or others, it is best to contact the University Police at [706-507-8911](tel:706-507-8911).

Below is some additional information to offer when making the referral:

1. **Sessions are confidential!** This means that information about students cannot be released to family, friends, faculty, or other offices *without the student's written permission*. There are limitations to this confidentiality which will be explained to the student in their first session.
 2. Counseling records are kept separately from academic records and *are protected by law*.
 3. Counseling services are free to CSU students.
 4. The Center is staffed by qualified therapists.
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Procedure for Referring a Student

If you have concerns about a student, please call the Counseling Center at [706-507-8740](tel:706-507-8740) during business hours to refer them. Please be prepared to provide us with their name, any contact information you have, and a brief description of what is causing your concern. Please be aware that we cannot make the referral anonymous, as it is often distressing to students to receive a call from the Counseling Center without warning.

If you have a concern about a student after hours, please fill out a [Create Care report](#). You are also welcome to do this rather than calling, if you prefer. If you have an immediate concern about the student's safety, please call University Police at [706-507-8911](tel:706-507-8911). Please be prepared to provide the student's location, if you have it.

Please do not email a staff member directly! Staff may be out of the office for various reasons and unable to attend to your email.

Please understand that after your referral we may not be able to give you information about whether or not the student has accepted services from the Counseling Center. This is because we are bound by HIPAA laws to protect confidentiality.

If you are interested in Suicide Prevention Training for your department or your students, please visit the [Cougars End Suicide](#) page for more information.