

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

Helping Students in Emotional Distress

Many college students encounter academic, personal, and social stress during their educational experience. Most students cope successfully with the demands of college life and the interpersonal experiences that go along with it. For some students these difficulties can become overwhelming and unmanageable.

Faculty and staff are frequently in the most direct position to identify students in distress. Moreover, students often perceive staff and faculty as the first point of contact in obtaining advice and support. Your expression of interest and concern may be critical in helping a student reestablish the emotional equilibrium necessary for academic success.

This guide is designed to assist you in working with students in distress. VJC Wellness Center is available for further consultation.

Recognizing Distressed Students

A referral for counseling can be made when you believe a student's problems go beyond your experience and expertise, or when you feel uncomfortable helping a student with an issue. A referral may be made if the student's problems are interfering with academics or with your teaching, or observation of the student's personal behavior raises concerns apart from academic work.

At one time or another, everyone feels upset. However, when some of the following are present, the student is probably in distress:

Behavioral Changes

- ❖ Suddenly becoming much quieter or more aggressive, withdrawing
- ❖ Deterioration in quality of work
- ❖ A negative change in classroom, athletic or other performance
- ❖ Missed assignments
- ❖ Missed appointments
- ❖ Repeated absences from class, athletic practice, work, or other important activities
- ❖ Disorganized or erratic performance

- ❖ Continual seeking of special accommodations (late papers, extensions, postponed examinations, and the like)
- ❖ Essays or other creative works which have themes of hopelessness, social isolation, rage, or despair

Physical Changes

- ❖ Lack of personal hygiene
- ❖ Decrease in Physical Appearance
- ❖ Excessive fatigue
- ❖ Visible changes in weight
- ❖ Coming to class or other activities bleary-eyed, or smelling of alcohol
- ❖ Sleeping much more or less
- ❖ Lack of or greatly increased appetite

Personality Changes

- ❖ Direct statements indicating distress, family problems, or other difficulties
- ❖ Unprovoked anger or hostility
- ❖ Irritability, constant anxiety
- ❖ Exaggerated personality traits: more withdrawn or more animated than usual
- ❖ Excessive dependency
- ❖ Constant sadness, tearfulness
- ❖ Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness

Safety Risk Changes

- ❖ Any written note or verbal statement which has a sense of finality or a suicidal flavor to it
- ❖ Essays or papers which focus on despair, suicide, or death
- ❖ Severe depression
- ❖ Statements to the effect that the student is "going away for a long time"
- ❖ Giving away of prized possessions
- ❖ Self-injury or self-destructive behaviors
- ❖ Threats against other people
- ❖ Any other behavior which seems out of control

Other Factors to Consider

- ❖ Personal losses, such as death of a family member or loved one, break-up of a relationship, failures in class or athletics, rejection
- ❖ Expressions of concern about a student by peers
- ❖ A hunch or gut-level reaction on your part that something is wrong

Any one of the above signs present in a student does not **ABSOLUTELY** indicate the student is in serious distress; however, when multiple signs above are present a referral might be needed. Many disturbances during college are relatively transient. However, you may become alarmed by changes, which are extreme, or by significant changes that last longer than is typical. If there is doubt about the seriousness of the problem, consult a Wellness Staff member.

How Do You Make a Referral?

When you decide a student will benefit from counseling express your recommendation in a matter-of-fact manner. Make it clear that this represents your best judgment based on your observations of the student. Be specific regarding the behavior that has raised your concerns and avoid attributing anything negative to the individual's character.

Once the student has agreed that counseling might be useful, there are several possible steps to take, depending on the urgency of the situation and how committed the student is to following through on the referral. You can give the student information about the Wellness Center and urge the student to call for an appointment and let them know that you will complete a **student mental health referral form** and notify the Wellness Center. Another option is to accompany the student to the Wellness Center. Calling ahead is appreciated so plans can be made to handle the emergency and make sure a counselor is available. **IF YOU BELIEVE THIS IS AN EMERGENCY PLEASE DON'T WAIT; CALL SECURITY AT 443-352-4500 or x. 4500 IMMEDIATELY OR REFER TO THE EMERGENCY PROCEDURE LINK ON OUR WEBSITE.**

You can give the student information about the Wellness Center and have the student and/or you (with their permission) make the call from your office for an appointment. **Please refer to the Student Mental Health Referral Form link on the left hand side of the page – please complete the form as soon as possible.**

What Happens at the Wellness Center?

Once the student contacts the Wellness Center or a referral is made an appointment is scheduled for an initial interview. This is usually within a few days from the time of contact, but often the same day. In an emergency, the student will be seen that day.

All counseling services are confidential. Faculty and staff will not be contacted unless the student signs a release form; however, if you send us a referral we will notify you that we received it and that appropriate actions will be taken.