

Identifying and Responding to Students in Distress

Attending University is a stimulating and dynamic experience that can include making lifelong friends, engaging in exciting intellectual pursuits, and joining groups and clubs. It is a time to grow in self-awareness, and develop a sense of adult identity; however, it may also be a time of distress. Students may have to deal with physical or mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety), financial stress, illness or death of a loved one, and/or the end of important relationships. Because of their frequent contact with students, faculty, staff and student leaders are often in a position to assist students.



This pamphlet describes common signs of students in distress and ways in which you can help. Simple things that you can do will make a positive difference to students in difficulty.

Signs of Students in Distress

- Significant changes in academic performance, including deterioration in quality of work, frequently missed assignments, excessive procrastination, or avoidance of classroom participation
- Increased class absences or tardiness
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Unusual or bizarre behavior, (e.g unexplained crying, laughing to self, very rapid speech, disorganized thinking, suspiciousness)
- High levels of irritability, including angry outbursts or unruly behaviour
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Complaints about physical symptoms (e.g nausea, stomach aches, headaches, or problems with eating or sleeping)
- Marked changes in personal hygiene or dress
- Direct or indirect references to either suicide or intention to harm or kill another person
- Changes or disturbances in personal relationships
- Visible signs of anxiety or depressed mood
- Difficulty concentrating, or carrying on normal conversation
- Social isolation, withdrawal or excessive dependency on Dons, Professors, or TA's
- Excessive sleeping, internet use/gaming
- Significant changes in personal, sexual or cultural identity.

Important Things You Can Do

1. **Approach**
If you think a student is having difficulty, know that it is OK to ask.
2. **Listen**
Listening non-judgmentally can be a very powerful way to help students in distress.
3. **Support**
Reassure the student that you are concerned about them and want to help.
4. **Refer**
Know your resources; provide the student with contact information – even make the call if they can't.



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Things to remember:

- 1) It's alright to ask
Provided you are coming from a place of concern, you are likely to get a good response; it is better to be embarrassed about asking or about the response than be remorseful or regretful about not having asked.
- 2) Pick a good place and time to have the conversation
If you are going to have a conversation, choose a quiet, private moment to talk to the student. If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.
- 3) Say what you see and express your concern
Talk to the student about what you have seen and let them know that you care about them
- 4) Be prepared for denial or difficulty and accept it if it happens
Students are not always ready to talk about what is bothering them. If this happens, it means "not now". Respect that.
- 5) Trust your instincts
Even if a student does not acknowledge difficulty, keep on trusting yourself. You might say "OK, please know that I am concerned". Let the student know that you want to be of support and if they want to come back and talk again, that would be fine.
- 6) "Keep the door open"
If at all possible, the student should leave the interaction feeling safe to approach you again in the future.
- 7) Remember your resources
If you are uncomfortable or uncertain after your interaction with a student, and you wonder whether you did the "right thing", remember there are resources on campus to help you. In situations like these, call the Counselling Services (613-533-6000 x 78264) and ask to speak to Mike Condra, Arunima Khanna, or Chuck Vetere.

Situations Requiring Immediate Response

Direct or Indirect Reference to Suicide

- Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to suicide should be taken seriously and a mental health professional should be contacted for a consultation or advice.
- Warning signs of suicide may include:
 - o Expressed feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or helplessness
 - o Expressed thoughts that the world, family, friends would be better off without them
 - o Expressions of powerful feelings of guilt
 - o Expressions of a desire to die by suicide

If you are concerned about a student who has shown any of these signs, call Counselling Services immediately; services open between 8:30am and 4.30pm (613-533-6000 x 78264).

In the event of an actual suicide attempt immediately call the Emergency Report Centre for assistance (613-533-6111).

Threats and Disruptive Behaviors

- Any threat should be taken seriously; contact Campus Security immediately (613-533-6111) for advice about what to do. Please also speak to your department head or manager.
- Physical violence causing bodily harm and specific threats must be reported immediately to Campus Security (613-533-6111).
- Contact Health, Counselling and Disability Services (613-533-6000 x 78264) and ask to speak to a counsellor about what else you can do.

Useful Tips

LISTEN to the student in private when both of you have time. Be patient and give them your undivided attention, and let them talk with minimal interruption. Often just a few minutes of effective listening is enough to help the student feel cared about and more confident about what to do. If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.

ACKNOWLEDGE the student's thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, compassionate way. Let the student know you understand what they are trying to communicate by reflecting back the essence of what they've said. For example, "It sounds like you're not used to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things."

EXPRESS CONCERN without making generalizations or assumptions about the student. Be specific about the behaviour which gives you cause for concern. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately?" Or "You should be more concerned about your grades."

OFFER HOPE by reassuring the student that things can get better. Help them realize they have options and resources, and that things will not always seem hopeless.

BE OPEN by having a culturally worldview. Remember, there are differences in students' communication styles, personal and family situations, experiences with living independently, help-seeking styles, comfort with referral to counselling, etc. Students sometimes find it difficult to admit to problems and may present them in an indirect way. It is wise to respond to stated concerns while listening actively for others which may be more difficult for the student to express.



TAKE CARE of yourself by using whatever strategies you usually employ when you feel stressed. Being a support person to a student in pain can be very rewarding, but it may also take a toll on you. If you feel you would like some additional support, call your [Employee Assistance Program](#) and make an appointment for free, confidential counselling. The toll-free number is 1-800-387-4765. Student leaders may want to seek assistance from the [Alma Mater Society \(AMS\) Peer Support Centre](#) – 613-533-6000 x 75111 or the [Society of Graduate & Professional Students \(SGPS\) Advisors](#) – 613-533-3169.



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Support Services for Students in Distress

On-Campus Resources

Health, Counselling & Disability Services (HCDS)-613-533-2506

- Call for an appointment with a doctor, counsellor or nurse
- Emergency appointments can be arranged

Counselling Service at HCDS – 613-533-6000-78264

- Call for an appointment with an experienced professional counsellor for confidential crisis support or 1:1 counselling

University Chaplain – 613-533-2186

- For non-denominational support and service

Queen's University International Centre (QUIC) – 613-533-2604

- Personal support and referral for international and exchange students

Alma Mater Society (AMS) Peer Support Centre- 613-533-6000-75111

- For social and personal support from a trained peer support person – simply drop by Room 32, JDUC or call for an appointment. Open from 3 pm to 1 am, 7 days a week

Society of Graduate & Professional Students (SGPS) Advisors – 613-533-3169

- Call for advice, advocacy and referrals on issues of well-being

Campus Security- 613-533-6080

- For after-hours access to support

Employee Assistance Program – 1-800-387-4765

- Call to set up a free appointment for confidential counselling

If you live in Residence, talk to your Don

- Dons will listen, support and refer you to appropriate services



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