

A UCEAP Study Center's Toolbox

Practical Skills for Helping Students in Distress

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Signs of Emotional Distress: When to be concerned about a student

The following behaviors may be indicators that a student is experiencing significant psychological distress:

- Student feeling overwhelmed: everything is a problem
- Crying excessively.
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Sleeping impaired: too much or insomnia
- Eating problems
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Irritability—frequent arguments, physical acting-out
- Feeling extreme fatigue or having no energy
- Debilitating anxiety or agitation
- Having mood swings or irritability
- Looking dirty and disheveled
- Alluding to suicide or life being over soon
- Not attending class or missing assignments/exams
- Disrupting class or group
- Sending suicidal or threatening emails
- Hearing voices or seeming extremely paranoid
- Coming to class intoxicated or high

When to refer to Counseling

When you and/or Study Center staff become the main source of support to a troubled student, it can be overwhelming, frightening and/or tiring. It is important to know your own limitations, to consult with the Regional Director, and to be aware of times when the best option is a referral to a professional counselor.

When to refer to professional counseling:

- If any of the signs of emotional distress seem to be impairing the student.
- If you have concerns about the student's or others' safety.
- The problem is more serious than you feel comfortable handling.

- The student’s problem is beyond your level of understanding or training.
- The student admits a problem, but doesn’t want to talk to you or anyone else at the Study Center about it.

How to suggest Counseling

- **Set a time to talk.** Set aside a private time to talk with the student where you can discuss your concern in a caring and honest way.
- **Communicate your concerns.** Share your concerns. Share behavioral examples of times when you felt concerned for the student, “I heard that you have been missing a lot of classes lately”
- **Ask the student to explore these concerns.** Explain to the student that many students experience some difficulty during college/graduate school, and that counseling is a “safe” place where they can talk openly about their concerns with a professional therapist.
- **Avoid power struggles/battles of the wills.** If the student is resistant about obtaining counseling, restate your feelings/concerns.
- **Avoid being judgmental/analyzing their problems.** State your concern in a non-judgmental manner. Instead of saying, “You’re not taking your academic work seriously,” better to say: “I understand you are having difficulty getting your assignments done and I’m concerned about you.”
- **Bring up the idea of counseling.** For example, you might say: “Have you thought about talking to a counselor?” or “You seem very upset; perhaps it might be useful to speak to someone. There are counselors available who can help you with this”

How to make a referral

- Verify that Study Center staff members are knowledgeable, and become knowledgeable yourself, about counseling services that are available to students; learn how students can access them. The better you or Study Center staff can describe them; the more likely students will trust referrals.
- Make sure that addresses to websites that provide psycho-educational materials (including self-help screening tools that students can access directly) are easily available at the Study Center. These resources are also included in the students’ *UCEAP Guide to Study Abroad*, the *Director’s Manual*, and the *Study Center Emergency Handbook* (which is password protected).
- Inform the student that counseling is confidential and the student will see a therapist in a private office.
- If the concern is urgent, walk the student to an appointment or arrange for a Study Center staff member to do so.
- Get consultation for yourself (e.g. your Regional Director) when concerns are urgent, severe, or complicated.

What to do when a student is reluctant to seek counseling

Students often have a number of concerns about counseling. It is best to acknowledge and discuss a student’s real fears about seeking help.

- Normalize the process of seeking help. Remind a student that successful students seek support and use resources to help them succeed; problems need not reach crisis proportions in order to “require” counseling. Suggest that it is easier to make progress on a problem before it gets too big.

- Remind the student that UCEAP's accident and health insurance plans will cover the cost for psychological care (no co-pays; no deductibles). Provide student with information that details benefits and any related costs. Contact the UCEAP Principal Analyst for additional guidance before talking to the student.
- Remind the student about confidentiality. Students can be relieved to hear that any contact and information shared by the student is kept strictly confidential and will not be disclosed to parents, faculty or other University personnel who don't need to know, except with the student's written permission.
- Tell the student what you know about the referral person or service that you are recommending. Give them a brochure or website if you can.
- Look for leverage—sometimes students will not seek counseling for personal issues but will consider making an appointment for career, academic, or health-related issues.

Multicultural considerations in making a referral

A student's cultural background affects their attitude toward professional counseling. Some factors that may make it difficult to seek counseling include: stigma, lack of information about counseling, fears of family knowing, fear of being misunderstood.

When multicultural issues arise, consider the following:

- Acknowledge family or cultural norms that make it difficult for the student to share personal information with a stranger, but reiterate the value that can be gained.
- Discuss what counseling involves and how this service operates in the host country.
- Remind a student about confidentiality and that family will not know they were seen.
- Assure the student you, or trusted Study Center staff, will help them find a counselor who speaks their native language.

What to do if the student refuses help?

While it is important to care about the emotional well-being of students, seeking counseling is always a personal choice. If the student refuses a referral, unless it is an emergency situation, it is best not to push the issue or get into an argument that could jeopardize your relationship with the student.

- Some students need time to think over the decision to seek counseling. You might want to leave the door open to discuss the issue again at a later date.
- Remember, whenever you have serious concerns about someone's safety, be sure to get timely consultation.

Tips for dealing with a student you suspect is suicidal:

Do's and Don'ts:

- Listen to the student. Do not be afraid to address suicide directly.
- Take a student seriously. Ask directly if the student has been considering suicide and if the student has a plan or means to carry out.
- Contact the Regional Director immediately.
- Show interest and support by being available.
- Consult with a mental health professional as needed.
- Provide the student with information for accessing 24-hour urgent care.

- Do not leave the person alone if he/she is in imminent danger; call the police if the student is in immediate need of the safety of a hospital.
- Do not be sworn to secrecy.
- Seek support for yourself after meeting with the student.
- Keep an accurate and detailed written record (meetings, phone calls, etc)

Dealing with a student who seems dangerous

Students who seem hostile, suspicious or threatening can be frightening. *Always call for help if you or others are immediately endangered.* As you assess the situation, consider the following three levels of response. Be sure to trust your intuition and when a situation feels potentially violent consider “higher levels” of intervention.

- **Level One: Attempt to defuse situation**

- Be aware of your feelings
- Stay as calm as you can.
- Show empathy and concern. (e.g., try saying something like: “I can see you’re frustration and I’m frustrated too. Unfortunately, the rules are...”
- Don’t insist you are right or contradict the student. Instead, let the person know you see the situation differently.
- *If someone is threatening or verbally abusive*, tell them you would be able to help them better if they calmed down, lowered their voice and stopped attacking you. Set limits; don’t tolerate abuse.
- Call the Regional Director immediately to inform him/her about the situation.
- Keep an accurate and detailed written record (meetings, phone calls, etc)

- **Level Two: Get assistance from others nearby.**

- Tell the student: “Let me see if I can find someone who can help.”
- Talk about your concerns with Study Center staff, a consultant or peers.
- Have a plan in place for communicating to others in your office for times when you feel threatened and need them to come to you (e.g. use a code phrase when telephoning for help such as “I need the green file.”).
- Call the Regional Director immediately to inform him/her about the situation.
- Keep an accurate and detailed written record (meetings, phone calls, etc)

- **Level Three: Get yourself to a safe location.**

- Call the police or ask someone else to do so
- Retreat to a locked office or other safe space while waiting
- Call the Regional Director immediately to inform him/her about the situation.
- Keep an accurate and detailed written record (meetings, phone calls, etc)

- **Helpful Tip: Plan for future contacts**

Plan how you and Study Center staff will deal with future contacts with a student who is predictably difficult or threatening. For example, you might decide that during meetings with student, the door will be left open with someone standing nearby. Also, consider having the student deal with only one designated person in the Study Center for all communications.

Follow-up with students after referral

- If you are concerned about a student, you, or trusted SC staff, may wish to set a time to check back with the student within a few days. At that time, you can ask how the student is doing to confirm whether he/she saw a counselor.
- This follow-up also might be helpful feedback on referral resources you and SC staff might use with other students in the future.