A Guide for Helping Students in Distress

Counseling and Psychological Services

www.umich.edu/~caps
do something: how to help a student

do something is a campaign aimed at increasing college student mental health awareness. do something is also about strengthening the University of Michigan’s “community of caring” and creating a “web of support” for students who may be in distress. As faculty members, teaching assistants, or staff members particularly involved with student services, you may encounter students who may be in need of your assistance. College students at the University of Michigan are likely to experience stressful events during the course of their academic experience. Your role can be a positive and crucial one in identifying students who are in distress and assisting them in finding the appropriate resources.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you recognize some of the symptoms and to provide concrete suggestions and steps for assisting a student with appropriate campus and community resources.
Tips for recognizing students in distress

All of us experience life’s “ups and downs,” but significant distress experienced over a period of time may suggest a more serious problem. There are different levels of distress and these can be represented through a continuum. How you go about helping a student will depend on several factors: their level of distress, the nature of your relationship, the type of setting you are in and your comfort level. The following pages include what to look out for and suggestions on how to help.

Students in mild distress may exhibit behaviors that do not disrupt others but may indicate something is wrong and that assistance is needed. Behaviors may include:

• Serious grade problems or a change from consistently passing grades to unaccountably poor performance.
• Excessive absences, especially if the student has previously demonstrated consistent attendance.
• Unusual or markedly changed patterns of interaction, i.e., avoidance of participation, excessive anxiety when called upon, domination of discussions, etc.
• Other characteristics that suggest the student is having trouble managing stress successfully (e.g., a depressed, lethargic mood; very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; falling asleep during class).
**Students in moderate distress** may exhibit behaviors that indicate significant emotional distress. They may also be reluctant or unable to acknowledge a need for personal help. Behaviors include:

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

**How to provide assistance to a student experiencing mild/moderate distress**

For these behaviors or problems you can choose to handle them in the following ways:

- Deal directly with the behavior/problem according to classroom protocol.
- Allow the student to speak freely about their current situation and the variables that may be affecting their distress.
- Consult with a colleague, department head, Dean of Students Office professional, or a campus counseling professional.
- Refer the student to one of the University resources. See referral phone numbers, page 8.

**Students in severe distress** exhibit behaviors that signify an obvious crisis and that necessitate emergency care. These problems are the easiest to identify. Examples include:

- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g. hostility, aggression, violence, etc.).
- Inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech; unconnected, disjointed, or rambling thoughts).
• Loss of contact with reality (seeing or hearing things which others cannot see or hear; beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability).
• Stalking behaviors.
• Inappropriate communications (including threatening letters, e-mail messages, harassment).
• Overtly suicidal thoughts (including referring to suicide as a current option or in a written assignment).
• Threats to harm others.

**How to provide assistance to a student experiencing severe distress**

For these behaviors or problems you can choose to handle them in the following ways:

• Remain calm and know whom to call for help, if necessary. Find someone to stay with the student while calls to the appropriate resources are made. See referral phone numbers, page 8.
• Remember that it is NOT your responsibility to provide the professional help needed for a severely troubled/disruptive student. You need only to make the necessary call and request assistance.
• When a student expresses a direct threat to themselves or others, or acts in a bizarre, highly irrational or disruptive way, call the Department of Public Safety 734 763-1131.

**Guidelines for talking with a student with any level of distress**

• Accept and respect what is said.
• Try to focus on an aspect of the problem that is manageable.
• Avoid easy answers such as, "Everything will be all right."
• Help identify resources needed to improve things.
• Help the person recall constructive methods used in the past to cope; get the person to agree to do something constructive to change things.
• Trust your insight and reactions.
• Let others know your concerns.
• Attempt to address the person's needs and seek appropriate resources.
• Do not swear secrecy or offer confidentiality to the person.
• Encourage the person to seek help.
• Respect the student's value system, even if you don't agree.

If you are worried about the student’s safety:

• When called for, let the person know you are worried about their safety and describe the behavior or situation that is worrisome to you.
• If you are concerned the student may be feeling hopeless and thinking about ending their life, ask if she/he is contemplating suicide. It is important to remember that talking about suicide is a cry for help and is not to be ignored. Seek help from one of the resources listed in this booklet.
• Offer yourself as a caring person until professional assistance has been obtained.
• After the student leaves your office, make some notes documenting your interactions.
• Consult with others on your experience.

Warning signs for when to refer a student for further assistance

• Manifests a change in personality (goes from being actively involved to quiet and withdrawn, or goes from being quiet to more agitated or demanding).
• Begins to display aggressive or abusive behavior to self or others; exhibits excessive risk-taking.
• Shows signs of memory loss.
• Shows loose or incoherent thought patterns, has difficulty focusing thoughts, or displays nonsensical conversation patterns.
• Exhibits behaviors or emotions that is inappropriate to the situation.
• Displays extreme suspiciousness or irrational fears of persecution; withdraws, does not allow others to be close; believes she/he is being watched, followed, etc.
• Exhibits signs of hyperactivity (unable to sit still, difficulty maintaining focus, gives the impression of going "too fast," appears agitated).
• Shows signs of depression (no visible emotions or feelings, appears lethargic, weight loss, looks exhausted and complains of sleeping poorly, displays feelings of worthlessness or self-hatred, or is apathetic about previous interests).
• Talks about unusual patterns of eating, not eating, or excessively eating.
• Shows signs of injury to self, cuts, bruises, or sprains.
• Experiences deteriorating academic performance (incapacitating test anxiety, sporadic class attendance, or extended absences from class).
• Begins or increases alcohol or other drug use.
• Makes statements regarding suicide, homicide, feelings of hopelessness, or helplessness.

CAPS as a Resource

At Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), we have a diverse staff of mental health professionals providing confidential, solution-focused individual, couples and group therapy to currently enrolled U of M students at no charge. CAPS’s main focus is providing college student mental health services. CAPS regularly provides immediate advice to concerned faculty and staff through the Counselor on Duty service.

Making a Referral

While many students seek help on their own, your exposure to students increases the likelihood you will identify signs or behaviors of distress in a student, or that a student will ask you for help. What can you do?
You can help by telling the student that they can go to CAPS on the 3rd floor of the Michigan Union. They will need to fill out intake information and then make an appointment for as soon as possible. If the student is in crisis and needs to see someone on the same day, they can indicate their need to see the “Counselor on Duty.”

Other tips:

- Recommend campus services to the student.
- Determine the student's willingness to go to a helping resource. Reassure the student that it is an act of strength to ask for help.
- Dispute the myth that only "weak or crazy" people go for counseling or use others for help.
- Remind them that campus counseling resources are free and confidential services.
- Offer to help make the initial contact with the helping resource.

**Whom to call for assistance**

If you have questions or are uncertain about a student, please call one of the resources listed below. Each of these agencies serves as consultants and resource persons to faculty and staff.

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<th>Counseling and Psychological Services</th>
<th>Dean of Students</th>
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<tr>
<td>734.764.8312</td>
<td>734.764.7420</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.umich.edu/~caps">www.umich.edu/~caps</a></td>
<td><a href="http://www.umich.edu/~dofs">www.umich.edu/~dofs</a></td>
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<th>UM Psychiatric Emergency Services (24 hrs)</th>
<th>Psychological Clinic</th>
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<tr>
<td>734.996.4747</td>
<td>734.764.3471</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.psych.med.umich.edu/pes">www.psych.med.umich.edu/pes</a></td>
<td><a href="http://www.psychclinic.org">www.psychclinic.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center (24-hrs)</th>
<th>Department of Public Safety</th>
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<tr>
<td>734.936.9333</td>
<td>734.763.1131 or 911</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.umich.edu/~sapac">www.umich.edu/~sapac</a></td>
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Graduate Student Instructors, for more support:

- www.rackham.umich.edu/current_students
- www.rackham.umich.edu/student_life/advice_support/mental_health

Faculty and Staff, for additional resources on graduate student concerns:

- www.psychclinic.org/events/resources/resource_guide_fac_staff.html
**CAPS: Just the Facts**

- CAPS provides confidential, solution-focused therapy including individual, couples and group therapy to currently enrolled U of M students at no charge
- Faculty, staff and parents can consult with a CAPS therapist about their concerns regarding a distressed student
- CAPS services for U of M students are three-pronged: to provide clinical services, outreach and education, and training
- Crisis walk-in services are available for students in distress
- Students requesting services represent all levels of education and cultural backgrounds
- Around 3,000 students request services every year
- Nearly 750 students receive crisis intervention services every year
- Approximately 75 new student clients are scheduled each week for initial appointments
- Top 5 student concerns include: depression, anxiety, self-esteem, academic role and relationship issues
- Gain tools to help yourself or a friend through [www.mitalk.org](http://www.mitalk.org), an interactive mental health website created exclusively for U-M students
- CAPS website is an excellent resource for more information: current group offerings, on-line screenings and more detailed information about our services
Join the “Web of Caring”

CAPS continues to provide for the University of Michigan the “Question, Persuade and Refer (QPR)” nationally-recognized suicide prevention program that has the overall goal of helping us, within our varied roles on campus, to help students. We know from research that early detection of mental health issues gives a much greater prognosis for recovery and that early intervention can sometimes be critical. This is why there is such an emphasis on “warning signs” and help-seeking behavior. We all want students who need help, to get help, and there are many resources on campus to accomplish this. However, it’s hard at times to know exactly HOW to encourage students to get this help.

We invite you to participate in a 2-hour training session which focuses on getting a distressed individual/student referred for professional help. It is intended to teach front-line people (e.g. faculty/staff, resident advisors, academic advisors, graduate student instructors, physicians, friends, religious professionals, etc.) how to recognize the warning signs of suicide, including verbal, behavioral and situational clues. QPR provides direction as to how to Question a person about suicidal thoughts, how to Persuade them to get help and how to Refer the person for help.

If you are interested in learning more about how to help distressed students, and would like a QPR training for your department or unit, please go to www.umich.edu/~caps and fill out a QPR request form.
For Further Information:
Counseling and Psychological Services
3100 Michigan Union
530 S. State St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1308
www.umich.edu/~caps
www.mitalk.org
734.764.8312
or contact
Dr. Todd Sevig, Director
tdsevig@umich.edu

Hours:
Monday-Thursday 8am-7pm (during academic year)
Friday 8am-5pm

Content adapted from the University of Florida.
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