

DEALING WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS

A Guide for Suffolk University Faculty and Staff

Any member of the Suffolk University community may come into contact with a distressed student. Being aware of distress signals, methods of intervention, and sources of help for the student can help you feel more in control of situations that may arise. The staff of the Counseling Center is available to faculty and staff for consultation regarding any of the following issues. Please contact us at 617-573-8226 or at 73 Tremont Street, 5th floor, if you have any concerns that you would like to discuss with us.

DISTRESS SIGNALS

Listed below are some of the more prevalent signs of students who may be in distress. This list is intended to provide basic information only.

1. **Depression.** While we all may feel depressed from time to time, "normal" depressions may consist of only one or two symptoms and usually pass within days. Clinically depressed students will exhibit multiple symptoms for longer periods of time. Some of these symptoms include sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, irritability, and preoccupation with death.
2. **Agitation or Acting Out.** This would represent a departure from normal or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, restlessness or hyperactivity, being antagonistic, and increased alcohol and/or drug abuse.
3. **Disorientation.** Some distressed students may seem "out of it." You may witness a diminishment in awareness of what is going on around them, forgetting or losing things, misperception of facts or reality, rambling or disconnected speech, and behavior that seems out of context or bizarre.
4. **Drug and Alcohol Abuse.** Signs of intoxication during class or interaction with University officials are indicative of a problem that requires attention.
5. **Suicidal Thoughts.** Most people who attempt suicide communicate early messages about their distress. These messages can range from "I don't want to be here", to a series of vague "good-byes", to "I'm going to kill myself." Non-verbal messages could include giving away valued items, and putting legal, financial, and University affairs in order. All of the above messages should be taken seriously.
6. **Violence and Aggression.** You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. This may be manifested by physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material.

INTERVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is not expected that you be a "watchdog" or that you provide a thorough assessment, you may be the first contact for a student in distress and in a position to ask a few questions. Following these guidelines can lead to a positive outcome for all parties.

1. **Safety First!** Always keep safety in mind as you interact with an agitated, aggressive or potentially violent student. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call Campus Police & Security at 617-573-8111, or call 911.

2. **Avoid Escalation.** Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. It is usually not a good idea to "pull rank" and assert authority unless you are certain of the student's mental health status. Distressed students are in need of listening and support. One can always remind them of rules at a later time.
3. **Ask Direct Questions.** Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask students directly if they are drunk, confused or if they have thoughts of harming themselves. You need not be afraid to ask these questions. You will not be "putting ideas in their heads" by doing so. Most distressed students are relieved to know that someone has noticed and is paying attention.
4. **Do Not Assume You Are Being Manipulated.** While it is true that some students appear distressed in order to get attention or relief from responsibility, it is rare and only a thorough assessment can determine this. Attention-seekers may have serious problems and can feel in danger themselves.
5. **Know Your Limits.** You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can provide. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting them the assistance they require. You can do this by being accepting and nonjudgmental, working collaboratively in identifying the problem area, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive and responsible thing to do. We also encourage you to sit with the student to facilitate a call to the Counseling Center or to come with the student to the Counseling Center.

Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself include:

- ✚ Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by the situation
- ✚ Feeling angry at the student
- ✚ Feeling afraid
- ✚ Having thoughts of "adopting" or otherwise rescuing the student
- ✚ "Reliving" similar experiences of your own

REFERRAL SOURCES

SU Campus Police & Security:

Emergency: 617-573-8111

Dispatch Center: 617-573-8333

SU Counseling Center: 617-573-8226

Fax: 617-227-3685

SU Dean of Students Office: 617-573-8239

SU Dean of Students, Law: 617-573-8157

SU Health Services: 617-573-8260

Boston Emergency Services Team (BEST):

1-800-981-4357

911 (for police, fire and medical emergencies only)

COUNSELING CENTER: HOURS & APPOINTMENTS

Regular Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:00-4:30

Daily Emergency Walk-in Hours: 11am & 2pm

After business hours, requests for assistance or for information are logged in to the Counseling Center's voicemail system. Messages are responded to as soon as possible, but no later than the following morning.

COUNSELING CENTER STAFF

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* With appreciation to the University of Alabama Counseling Center