

# **What You Should Know About Responding to Distressed or Distressing Students**

Because you come in frequent contact with many students, you are in an excellent position to observe students, identify those who are in distress, and offer assistance. Your care, concern, and assistance will often be enough to help the student. At other times, you can play a critical role in referring a student for appropriate assistance and in motivating him/her to seek such help. A few guidelines for responding to distressed or distressing students are summarized below:

## **Observe**

The first important step in assisting distressed students is to be familiar with the symptoms of distress and attend to their occurrence. An attentive observer will pay close attention to direct communications as well as implied or hidden feelings.

## **Initiate Contact**

Don't ignore strange, inappropriate or unusual behavior- respond to it! Talk to the student privately, in a direct and matter-of-fact manner, indicating concern. Early feedback, intervention, and/or referral can prevent more serious problems from developing.

## **Clarify Your Role**

When you assume or are placed in the helper role, role conflicts are possible and must be understood. Some students may see you as a figure of authority and this perception may influence how helpful you can be. You may feel friendly with your student, which may make it difficult for you to act objectively in the academic or classroom management role.

## **Listen Objectively**

Listening has frequently been called an art, but it is also a skill that can be acquired with practice. To listen to someone is to refrain from imposing your own point of view, to withhold advice unless it is requested, and to concentrate on the feelings and thoughts of the person you are trying to help, instead of own. Listening is probably the most important skill used in helping and can be facilitated by allowing the student

enough time and latitude to express thoughts and feelings as fully as possible. Some things to listen for include a student's view of him/herself; view of his/her current situation or environment and the view of the future. Negative comments about these issues indicate a student may be in trouble.

### **Offer Support and Assistance**

Among the most important helping tools are interest, concern, and attentive listening. Avoid criticism or judgmental comments. Summarize the essence of what the student has told you as a way to clarify the situation. Encourage positive action by helping the student define the problem and generate coping strategies. Suggest resources that the student can assess: friends, family, clergy, or professionals on campus.

### **Know Your Limits**

As a help-giver, only go as far as your expertise, training, and resources allow. If you are uncertain about your ability to help a student, it is best to be honest about it. Trust your feelings when you think an individual's problem is more than you can handle.

When a student needs more help than you are able or willing to provide, it is time to make a referral to a professional. Below are some signs to look for in you feelings that may suggest the assistance of a professional is warranted:

- You find yourself feeling responsible for the student
- You feel pressure to solve their problems
- You feel you are over-extending yourself in helping the student
- You feel stressed-out by the student's issue(s) or behavior
- You see a behavioral pattern repeating itself in your interaction with the student
- You feel that the problems a student brings to you are more than you can handle
- You feel anxious when the student approaches you

### **Consult With CAPS Staff**

In your attempt to help a student, you may need to talk with a professional. The Counseling and Psychological Services staff can suggest possible approaches to take with students or provide you with support. Call CAPS (831) 459-2628 and tell the receptionist that you wish to speak with the on-call services. If your situation is an emergency, call 911.

(Adapted from UCD and OCCDHE guidelines)  
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)  
831-459-2628