

### RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DISTRESS A Guide for Faculty/Staff

#### Resource for More Information

[go.geneseo.edu/howtohelp](http://go.geneseo.edu/howtohelp)

This page of the Health & Counseling web site provides further details on all of the information contained below.

#### Definitions of Distress Levels

For a **student in distress**, intervention may or may not be necessary depending on the situation.

- Examples:
- a formerly conscientious student begins missing classes regularly
  - a student informs you that he has been struggling with depression
  - a previously well-groomed student begins attending class in a disheveled state

A **crisis and/or disruptive event** is a situation which requires *prompt* attention and intervention.

- Examples:
- a student has just told you that she was raped
  - a student comes to your office and is unable to stop crying
  - a student in your class acts out in a belligerent, inappropriate manner

An **emergency** is a situation which requires an *immediate* response in order to ensure student safety.

- Examples:
- you are told that a student has just swallowed a handful of pills
  - you discover a student unconscious and unable to be aroused
  - a student informs you that he has a weapon and immediate plans to hurt someone else

#### Characteristics of Distressed Students

- a change in appearance (e.g., poor hygiene, weight gain/loss)
- increased anxiety, irritability, or agitation
- increased sadness, crying spells, or mood swings
- consistently inappropriate, illogical, or unrelated questions
- distracted or preoccupied thought processes
- withdrawal from social interactions with peers, family, and significant others
- fearful responses, such as avoidance or apprehension about being alone
- frequent class absences and/or a drop in academic performance
- increased alcohol/other drug use
- occurrence of a recent loss or other crisis (e.g., relationship breakup, death of a friend or family member, academic failure, physical illness, rape/sexual assault)
- expressions of hopelessness (statements such as "there's no use trying" or "what's the point?")
- indirect statements/essays about death or suicide ("I want to disappear," "there's no way out," or "I can't go on") as well as more direct suicidal statements ("I've had thoughts about hurting myself")
- additional warning signs of suicide include a history of past attempts, a sudden improvement in mood (appears less depressed, calmer), and apparent preparations for dying (e.g., giving away possessions)

#### Responding to Students in Distress

In the case of an **emergency** situation, the **ONLY** appropriate response is to contact someone who is trained to intervene, which would almost always be University Police at x5222 (or 911 if off-campus).

In the case of a **crisis, disruptive event, or a distressed student**, it is important to obtain more information to ensure that there is no immediate danger to self or others. You have several options here:

- 1) You can contact University Police at x5222 and ask them to intervene with the student.
- 2) You can contact the Dean of Students office at x5706 to request that the Dean intervene and/or provide guidance on how to proceed with the student.
- 3) You can contact Counseling Services at x5716 to request guidance on how to proceed with the student; our “on call” counselor will receive or return your call Monday through Friday during business hours.
- 4) You can question the student yourself to obtain more information. See below for some examples; also use the “**ACT now to stop a suicide**” form for additional guidance.

### **Basic Questions for More Information**

The purpose of these questions is to assist you with obtaining information about how to proceed only (e.g., crisis versus emergency); they are NOT meant as a suicide assessment or evaluation. If you feel uncomfortable asking any of the questions or uncertain about how to proceed at ANY point, don’t hesitate to involve others by taking any one of Steps 1-3 above. Remember, University Police should always be contacted *first* if there is an uncertain or perceived risk of immediate harm to the student.

1. Ask directly if the student is thinking about suicide.

Examples: “Do you have any plans to hurt yourself?”  
“Have you thought about killing yourself?”

*If you get ANY response other than a firm negative/no (e.g., “yes,” “sometimes,” “I’m not sure,”), proceed to #2; for a negative/no response, follow the “Guidelines for Further Intervention” section below.*

2. Ask about whether the student has a plan and/or means.

Examples: “Have you thought about what you might do?”  
“Do you have a time frame in mind?”  
“Do you have pills you could take (or a knife, gun, etc.)?”

*If YES, proceed to #3; if NO, follow the “Guidelines for Further Intervention” section below.*

3. Ask if the student has a time frame for carrying out plan.

Examples: “Have you thought about when you might carry out your plan?”  
“Have you set a date for your attempt?”  
“When do you think you might try to hurt yourself?”

*If response is immediate or within near future, initiate emergency protocol; if not, follow the “Guidelines for Further Intervention” section below.*

### **Guidelines for Further Intervention**

If the situation is definitely *not* an emergency or a crisis, you have additional options for intervention. If it is a **disruptive** situation, follow the guidelines provided by the Dean of Students. In the case of a **student in distress**, it is up to you to determine whether or not you feel comfortable intervening further with the student yourself. If you do choose to speak with the student, the following are some guidelines for your interaction:

- Talk to the student in private.
- Express your concern for the student in a direct, straightforward manner, staying focused on the specific behaviors which are causing your concern (e.g., student is not attending class, student appears unkempt, etc.).
- Listen carefully, asking open-ended questions; avoid criticizing or sounding judgmental.
- Try not to make agreements or bargains with the student that could potentially isolate you in dealing with the problem (e.g., promising to keep what they have said a secret).
- If appropriate, discuss a possible referral to Counseling Services. Our services are confidential and free of charge for all students. The student can make an appointment by calling our office at 585-245-5716.
- If the student resists seeking help and you are still concerned, it might be helpful for you to discuss the student with a Counseling Services professional staff member; call our office at 585-245-5716 to request a consultation.

**For more specific information on Making a Referral to Counseling Services as well as What to Do if a Student is Reluctant to Seek Help, visit [go.geneseo.edu/howtohelp](http://go.geneseo.edu/howtohelp).**