HELPING DISTRESSED

OR

DISTRESSING STUDENTS

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

Provided by the University Counseling Center

http://www.rochester.edu/ucc/
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The Anxious/Shy Student

Anxiety is a normal response to a perceived danger or threat to one's well-being. For some students, the cause of their anxiety will be clear; but for others, it is difficult to pinpoint the source of stress. Regardless of the cause, the resulting symptoms may include rapid heart palpitations; chest pain or discomfort; dizziness; sweating; trembling or shaking; and cold, clammy hands. The student may also complain of difficulty concentrating, obsessive thinking, feeling continually "on the edge," having difficulty making decisions, or being too fearful/unable to take action. In rarer cases, a student may experience a panic attack in which the physical symptoms occur so spontaneously and intensely that the student may fear s/he is dying. The following guidelines remain appropriate in most cases:

**Do:**
- Encourage the student to discuss his/her feelings and thoughts, as this alone often relieves a great deal of pressure.
- Provide reassurance without being unrealistic.
- Remain calm.
- Be clear and directive about expectations.
- Provide a safe and quiet environment until the symptoms subside.
- Be patient.

**Don't:**
- Minimize the perceived threat to which the student is reacting.
- Take responsibility for the student's emotional state.
- Overwhelm the student with information or ideas to "fix" his/her condition.
- Be judgmental / cynical.
- Get caught up and lost in their anxiety.
- Disregard the feelings.
The Grieving Student

During the course of most college student's academic careers, it is likely he or she will have someone close to him or her die (e.g., sibling, parent, grandparent, close friend, boy/girlfriend). Each person will grieve in slightly different ways.

Do:

- Ask the student if he/she would like to talk about the person who has died (e.g., "Would you like to tell me about your friend?").
- Listen carefully and compassionately (e.g., "I am so sorry you have lost your grandmother, and I feel sad as I listen to you talk about her").
- Have Kleenex available.
- Consider the option of allowing students to postpone turning in assignments or taking exams.
- Share similar experiences you have had so the student doesn't feel alone or "crazy" (e.g., "When my mother passed away, I couldn't concentrate on anything either").
- Be on the alert for signs that the student is feeling a need to harm him/herself as a way to cope with the pain. (See section on "The Suicidal Student.")

DON'T:

- Be afraid of tears. Tears are a natural, healthy way to release very intense emotions.
- Avoid discussing the deceased person with the student. He/She is often grateful to find someone who will listen.
- Say, "It's not that bad," "Things will get better," "Crying won't help," or "I know exactly what you are feeling."
The Demanding Student

Typically, the time and energy you give to the demanding student is never enough. They often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe the amount of time received is a reflection of their worth.

**DO:**
- Offer limited but positive feedback
- Acknowledge your time commitments and tell them upfront
- Set limits on your time and keep to them (e.g., “I have only 10 minutes” or “Excuse me, I need to attend to other things”)
- Maintain clear boundaries in relationship
- Offer them other possibilities of places to get support/attention

**DON’T:**
- Let him/her use you as his/her only source of support.
- Get trapped into being bullied out of your comfort zone (time, role)
- Make exceptions, special “deals” bargains
- Let them give you a “guilt trip”
The Dependent/Passive Student

You may find yourself feeling increasingly drained and responsible for this student in a way that is beyond your normal involvement. It may seem that even the utmost time and energy given to these students is not enough. They often seek to control your time and unconsciously believe the amount of time received is a reflection of their worth. It is helpful if the student can be connected with proper sources of support on-campus and in the community in general.

Do:
- Let students make their own decisions
- Validate when they take independent action
- Set firm and clear limits on your personal time and involvement
- Offer referrals to other resources

Don't:
- Get trapped into giving continual advice, special conditions/treatment, etc.
- Avoid the student as an alternative to setting and enforcing limits
- Over commit
The Depressed Student

Depression, and the variety of ways it manifests itself, is part of a natural emotional and physical response to life's ups and downs. With the busy and demanding life of a college student, it is safe to assume that most students will experience periods of reactive depression during their college careers. It is when the depressive symptoms become so extreme or are so enduring that they begin to interfere with the student's ability to function in school, work, or social environments, that the student will come to your attention and be in need of assistance.

Due to the opportunities that faculty and staff have to observe and interact with students, you are often the first to recognize that a student is in distress. Look for a pattern of these indicators:

- Tearfulness/general emotionality or a marked lack of emotion
- Dependency (a student who makes excessive requests for your time)
- Markedly diminished performance
- Lack of energy/motivation
- Infrequent or sporadic class attendance
- Increased anxiety/test anxiety/performance anxiety
- Irritability
- Deterioration in personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug use

Students experiencing depression often respond well to a small amount of attention for a short period of time. Early intervention increases the chances of the student's rapid return to optimal performance.

Do:
- Let the student know you've noticed that s/he appears to be feeling down and you would like to help
- Reach out and encourage the student to discuss how s/he is feeling
- Offer options to further investigate and manage the symptoms of depression (e.g. referral to UCC)
- Listen for suicidal thoughts or intentions
- If concerned, ask.

Don't:
- Minimize the student's feelings, e.g. "Don't worry. Everything will be better tomorrow."
- Bombard the student with "fix it" solutions or advice
- Chastise the student for poor or incomplete work
- Be afraid to ask whether the student is suicidal if you suspect s/he may be (e.g. "Have you had thoughts of harming yourself?" See page entitled "The Suicidal Student" for further information.)
- Also don't assume they are suicidal.
The Student in Poor Contact with Reality

These students have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, the dream from the waking state. Their thinking is typically illogical, confused, or irrational; their emotional responses may be incongruent or inappropriate; and their behavior may be bizarre or disturbing. They may experience hallucinations, often auditory, and may report hearing voices. While this student may elicit alarm or fear from others, they are generally not dangerous and are more frightened and overwhelmed by you than you are by them. If you cannot make sense of their conversation, they may be in need of immediate assistance.

Do:
- Respond with warmth and kindness, as well as with firm reasoning.
- Remove extra stimulation from the environment (turn off the radio, step outside of a noisy room).
- Acknowledge your concerns and state that you can see they need help.
- Acknowledge their feelings or fears without supporting the misperceptions, e.g., "I understand you think someone is following you, but I don't see anyone and I believe you're safe."
- Acknowledge your difficulty in understanding them and ask for clarification or restatement, e.g., "I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to tell me, can you try to explain it more clearly?"
- Focus on the "here and now." Ask for specific information about the student's awareness of time, place, and destination.
- Speak to their healthy side, which they have. It's OK to laugh and joke when appropriate.

Don't:
- Argue or try to convince them of the irrationality of their thinking as this commonly produces a stronger defense of the false perceptions.
- Play along with or encourage further discussion of the delusion processes, e.g., "Oh yes, I hear the voices (or see the devil)."
- Demand, command, or order.
- Expect customary emotional responses.
The Student Suspected of Substance Abuse/Addiction

Alcohol is the preferred drug on college campuses and is the most widely used psychoactive drug. Alcohol abusers in college populations tend to abuse other drugs, both prescription and illicit. Patterns of use are affected by fads and peer pressure.

The effects of alcohol on the user are well known. Student alcohol abuse is most often identified by faculty and staff when irresponsible, unpredictable behavior affects the learning, work, or living environment (i.e. drunk and disorderly in class, or office), or when a combination of the health and social impairments associated with alcohol abuse sabotages student performance. Because of the denial that exists in most substance abusers, it is important to express your concern about the student not in terms of suspicions about alcohol and other drugs, but in terms of specific changes in behavior or performance.

Do:

- Confront the student with his/her behavior that is of concern
- Address the substance abuse issue if the student is open and willing
- Offer support and concern for the student’s overall well-being
- Make a referral to an appropriate helping department or agency (e.g., Counseling Center)
- Maintain contact with the student after a referral is made

Don’t:

- Convey judgment or criticism about the student’s substance abuse
- Make allowances for the student’s irresponsible behavior
- Ignore signs of intoxication in the classroom or workplace
- Assume problem is temporary – minimize symptoms
The Student Who Has Been Sexually Harassed (Assaulted)

Sexual harassment involves unwelcome and unwanted sexual attention and/or advances, requests for sexual favors, and other inappropriate verbal or physical conduct. It is often found in the context of a relationship of unequal power, rank, or status. It does not matter that the person’s intention was not to harass. It is the effect that counts; as long as the conduct interferes with a student's academic/work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive learning environment, it is considered sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment usually is not an isolated one-time only case but a repeated pattern of behavior that may include:

- Comments about one’s body or clothing
- Questions about one’s sexual behavior
- Demeaning references to one’s gender
- Sexually-oriented jokes
- Conversations filled with innuendoes and double meanings
- Displaying of sexually suggestive pictures or objects
- Repeated non-reciprocated demands for dates or sex
- Inappropriate and unwelcome touch

Common reactions by students who have been harassed is to doubt their perceptions, wonder if it was a joke or question whether they have brought it on themselves in some way. A student may begin to participate less in the classroom, drop or avoid classes, or even change majors.

Do:
- Separate your personal biases from your professional role
- Listen carefully to the student and assure the student that you understand and support him/her
- Encourage the student to keep a log or find a witness
- Direct the student to UR’s Code of Student Conduct and to the Student Conduct officer or Student Services on their respective campus to file a complaint
- Inform the student that informal discussions (or support/counseling) can begin in the Counseling Center to help clarify what further steps s/he may want to take
- Maintain the student’s privacy rights and share the information ONLY with appropriate persons and with the student’s knowledge

Don’t:
- Ignore the situation. Taking no action reinforces the student's already shaky perception that s/he has been wronged. Ignoring the issue also can have legal implications.
- Overreact. Instead, listen, support, and guide the student to appropriate channels.
- Take control – already feels loss of control.
- Believe myths (particularly: fault the victim.)
- Let feelings override victim.
The Student Who May Have an Eating Disorder

Eating disorders represent complex physiological and psychological difficulties, which are typically characterized by unhealthy and/or obsessive thoughts and behaviors linked to food, eating habits, and body image. Although, many college students struggle with disordered eating patterns and body image concerns, dancers and athletes are especially at risk. The two most serious eating disorders, Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia, can be health and/or life threatening. Anorexia can best be characterized by voluntary self-starvation; whereas Bulimia is a disorder in which the individual becomes entrapped in a vicious cycle of alternating food binges and purges (i.e. vomiting, laxative abuse, excessive exercise). While individuals struggling with Anorexia are usually severely underweight, those struggling with Bulimia are often normal weight, or even overweight. These disorders often become the major preoccupying theme in an individual's life, causing numerous interpersonal and medical problems, and often interfering with his/her academic and/or work performance.

Due to the opportunities that faculty and staff have to observe and interact with students in classrooms and the student lounge, you are often the first to recognize that a student may be struggling with an eating disorder. Look for a pattern of indicators, such as:

- Obsession with food/dieting
- Low self-esteem
- *Ritualistic behavior around food
- Distorted body image
- Extremely regimented life
- Excessive exercise
- Perfectionist expectations of self
- Binging/purging
- Excessive dental/medical problems
- Compulsive behavior
- Difficulty concentrating/focusing
- 15% weight loss (Anorexia)
- Isolation/withdrawal from friends
- Secretive eating
Do:
- Let the person with an eating disorder know that you are concerned about him/her
- Remember a person with an eating disorder is just that – first a person, and secondarily, one who has trouble with food
- Be available to listen – one of the best ways to help someone gain control over eating is to reach out as a friend instead of focusing on his/her eating behavior
- Be supportive and encourage the person to get help
- Call the Counseling Center to discuss the best way to help this person

Don’t:
- Spy on the person or nag about eating/not eating
- Hide food to keep the person from binging
- Let yourself be convinced that the person really doesn’t have a problem
- Be afraid to let the person know that you are concerned about him/her
The Suicidal Student

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. It is important to view all suicidal comments or behavior as serious and make appropriate referrals. High risk indicators include: feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and futility; a significant loss or threat of loss; a suicide plan; a history of a previous attempt or knowledge of someone who has attempted suicide; history of alcohol or drug abuse; feelings of alienation and isolation; and preoccupation with death.

Do:
- Take the student seriously --- 80% of suicides give warning of their intent
- Be direct --- ask if the student is suicidal, if s/he has a plan and if s/he has the means to carry out that plan. Exploring this with the student may actually decrease the impulse to commit suicide
- Be available to listen, but refer the student to the Counseling Center for additional help. Do your best to make sure the student actually receive help.
- Take care of yourself. Allow yourself to receive support from those close to you or those trained to provide it. Suicide intervention is demanding and draining work

Don't:
- Minimize the situation
- Leave the student alone if s/he has a plan
- Be afraid of planting the idea of suicide in an already depressed mind by inquiring about it (the person will very likely feel relieved that someone has noticed and cared enough to discuss it with him/her).
- Over commit yourself. Doing so may leave you eventually feeling overwhelmed or unable to deliver on what you promised
- Ignore your limitations
The Suspicious Student

Typically, these students complain about something other than their psychological difficulties. They are generally tense, anxious, mistrustful, isolated, and have few friends. They tend to interpret minor oversights as significant personal rejection and often overreact to insignificant occurrences. They see themselves as the focal point of everyone's behavior and view everything that happens as having special meaning to them. They are overly concerned with fairness and being treated equally. Feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy underlie most of their behavior, though they may seem capable and bright.

Do:
- Express compassion without intimate friendship. Remember, suspicious students have trouble with closeness and warmth
- Be firm, steady, punctual, and consistent
- Be specific and clear regarding the standards of behavior you expect

Don't:
- Assure the student that you are his/her friend. Instead, acknowledge that although you are not a close friend; you are concerned about him/her
- Be overly warm and nurturing
- Flatter or participate in his/her games. You don't know his/her rules.
- Be cute or humorous
- Challenge or agree with any mistaken or illogical beliefs
- Be ambiguous
The Verbally Aggressive Student

Students may become verbally abusive when they encounter frustrating situations which they believe are beyond their control. They can displace anger and frustration from those situations onto the nearest target. Explosive outbursts or ongoing belligerent, hostile behavior become this student’s way of gaining power and control in an otherwise out-of-control experience. It is important to remember that the student is generally not angry at you personally, but is angry at his/her world. You may have become a convenient object for his/her pent-up frustrations. This behavior is often associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Do:

- Acknowledge their anger and frustration, e.g., "I hear how angry you are."
- Rephrase what they are saying and identify their emotion, e.g., "It appears you are upset because you feel your rights are being violated and nobody will listen."
- Reduce stimulation; invite the person to a quiet place if this is comfortable. However, do not invite the person to a quiet place if you fear for your safety. In all instances, ensure that another person is easily accessible to you in the event that the student's behavior escalates.
- Allow them to tell you what is upsetting them.
- Be directive and firm about the behaviors you will accept, e.g., "Please stand back; you're too close," and/or "I cannot listen to you when you are yelling."
- Help the student problem-solve and deal with the real issues when they become calm, e.g., "I'm sorry you are so upset; I'd like to help if I can."
- Be honest and genuine; do not placate aggression.

Don't:

- Get into an argument or shouting match.
- Become hostile or punitive yourself, e.g., "You can't talk to me that way."
- Press for explanations for their behavior.
- Ignore the situation.
- Touch the student, as this may be perceived as aggression or otherwise unwanted attention.
The Violent Student

Violence due to emotional distress is rare and typically occurs when the student's level of frustration has been so intense or of such an enduring nature as to erode all of the student's emotional controls. The adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" best applies here. Violent behavior is often associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Do:

• Prevent total frustration and helplessness by quickly and calmly acknowledging the intensity of the situation, e.g., "I can see you're really upset and may be tempted to lash out."
• Explain clearly and directly what behaviors are acceptable without denying his/her feelings, e.g., "You certainly have the right to be angry, but breaking things is not OK."
• Get necessary help (send someone for other staff, security, etc.)
• Stay safe: have easy access to a door; keep furniture between you and the student; keep door open if at all possible/appropriate; make certain that a staff, faculty, or another person is nearby and accessible; in some instances, you may wish to see the student only with another person present --- do not see the person alone if you fear for your safety.

Don't:

• Ignore warning signs that the person is about to explode, e.g., yelling, screaming, clenched fists, threats.
• Threaten or corner the student.
• Touch the student.
The Absent/Disappeared From Class Student

You may notice a student that has been missing/absent from class and has not made contact with you or a student who is missing significant work or assignments.

Do:
- Initiate contact with the student: Get in touch with Academic Support or his/her advisor.
- Share observations / facts: “I noticed you missed X# of classes” or “I haven’t seen or heard from you in 3 weeks.”
- Share concern: “Sorry you are having difficulties.”
- Offer to talk: “Would you like to talk.”
- Be clear and direct about your expectations and the consequences for not meeting expectations
- Be open/listen to the students’ perspective about why they missed class or assignments.
- Ask how the student believes he/she can better meet expectations for attendance or work.
- Find out how he/she is doing in other classes.

Don’t:
- Disregard/invalidate the student’s feelings.
- Minimize concerns.
- Feel pulled to change expectations and make accommodations immediately. It’s ok to say “I’ll consider an alternative.”
- Lecture/scold: “You know you really should come to class.”
- Use scare tactics, threats/bribes: “If you don’t come to class you might fail” or “I might fail you” said in a threatening way.