

## IDENTIFYING & REFERRING STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

### **An Information Booklet for Faculty and Staff**

PRODUCED BY: STUDENT COUNSELLING CENTRE  
CAW STUDENT CENTRE, ROOM 293  
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Adapted from information provided by:

Queen's University - Health, Counselling and Disability Services  
University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT) - Health Centre (Counselling Services)  
University of California Davis - Counselling and Psychological Services

### **Student Counselling Centre's (SCC) Role in Assisting Students**

#### Counselling & Psychological Services

SCC supports the mission of the University by helping students gain the most from their education. We offer a variety of counselling and psychological services such as crisis intervention, individual and group psychotherapy, psychological assessment, referrals to campus and off-campus resources. In addition, we offer educational workshops and consultation to the campus community regarding mental health issues.

#### Who is Eligible for SCC Services

All registered students are eligible, from those with typical developmental needs to those with complex serious psychological problems. Students are assisted with managing individual concerns and encouraged to develop personal insight, improve coping skills, and enhance interpersonal relationships.

#### Confidentiality

With exceptions, such as in cases of imminent harm to self or others, suspected child or senior abuse, SCC staff are required by law and by professional ethics to protect the confidentiality of all communication between staff and clients. Consequently, staff cannot discuss with others the details of a student's situation or even indicate whether the student is in counselling. In order

for information about a student to be released to you or others, the student must provide written permission.

### Consultation

Faculty, staff, or students who are concerned about a student or desire consultation or assistance in making a referral are encouraged to contact SCC at (519) 253-3000 Ext. 4616. A consultation can assist individuals who are concerned about a student, employee, colleague, friend, or family member. During a consultation, strategies for dealing directly with the person of concern or making referrals for further help may be explored.

### **Your Role in Assisting Students in Distress.**

Attending university is an exciting and dynamic experience that can include making lifelong friends, engaging in exciting intellectual pursuits, playing on a team, joining groups and clubs. It is a time to grow in self-awareness, and to develop a sense of adult identity. It may also be a time of turmoil and distress. Students may have to deal with stresses such as physical or mental illness (e.g. depression, anxiety) financial stress, illness or death of a loved one, and the end of important relationships.

You play a central role in a student's help-seeking efforts because you are often in a direct position to observe students and be aware of their behaviour. Students frequently turn to faculty and staff like you to obtain advice and support. Although you are not expected to provide psychological counselling, it is helpful for you to understand the critical role you play in supporting students in need of help. At different times in your career you may find yourself having to advise students on issues other than purely academic matters.

### **How you can Identify Characteristics of Students in Distress.**

#### PROBLEMS WITH ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- Significant changes in academic performance, including deterioration in quality of work, frequent missed assignments.
- Excessive procrastination, or avoidance of classroom participation.
- Increased class absences or tardiness.
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class.
- Repeated requests for special consideration.
- Increased concern about grades despite satisfactory performance.
- Increased dependence – student hangs around or makes excessive appointments to see you.
- Academic probation or academic dismissal.

## UNUSUAL BEHAVIOUR

- Unexplained crying, laughing to self, very rapid speech, suspiciousness.
- High levels of irritability, including angry outbursts or unruly behaviour.
- Significant weight loss or weight gain with no apparent physical illness/reason.
- Complaints about physical symptoms, including nausea, stomach aches, headaches, or problems with eating or sleeping.
- Marked changes in personal hygiene or dress.
- Aggressive or threatening behaviour.
- Extreme mood changes or excessive, inappropriate displays of emotions.
- Disruptive classroom behaviour.
- Impaired speech or disjointed, confused thoughts.

## REFERENCES TO SUICIDE OR HOMICIDE

- Direct or indirect references to either suicide or intention to harm or kill another person – verbally or in writing
- Statements of helplessness or hopelessness
- Indications of persistent or prolonged unhappiness

## OTHER COMMON STRESSORS THAT STUDENTS EXPERIENCE

- Isolated from friends and family; issues with roommates.
- Loss of close relationship (e.g., death of family friend, break-up with partner, etc.)
- Identity confusion.
- Academic pressure or failure.
- Acculturation and/or discrimination.
- Outside work or family pressures.
- Financial difficulties or working many hours outside of classes to support studies.
- Low motivation or inability to establish goals.
- Serious illness.
- Excessive use of mood altering chemicals (e.g., alcohol or drugs).
- Hyperactivity, irritability, or heightened anxiety.

## **How to Respond to Students in Distress**

### 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.

### Pick a good place and time to have the conversation

If you are going to have a conversation, choose to do so when and where the barriers to opening up are fewest. Seek a quiet, private moment to talk to the student. If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.

### Say what you see

Talk to the student about what you have seen and express concern (“I’ve noticed that you seem to be less interested in eating these days; is everything ok?”) Don’t work on the basis of assumptions about the student’s behaviour or feelings.

### Be prepared for the possibility of denial of difficulty

Students (like the rest of us) are not always ready to talk about their concerns. If this happens, it means “not now”. Respect that.

### Trust your instincts

Even if a student denies that there is a difficulty, keep on trusting yourself. You might say “OK, please know that I am concerned about the way that you seem these days”. Let them know that you are concerned and that you want to be of support.

### “Keep the door open”

If at all possible, the student should leave the interaction feeling it is safe to approach you again in the future.

### Remember your resources

If you are uncomfortable or uncertain after your interaction with a student, remember there are resources on campus that you can call on. In situations like these please call the Student Counselling Centre (4616) and ask to speak to one of the therapists for consultation. For assistance outside of regular business hours, please refer to *Resources Available* on the last page.

## **Making a referral to the Student Counselling Centre.**

Faculty and staff are not expected to provide psychological counselling. That is the role of the SCC staff. SCC's professional staff are trained to assess and intervene with emotional problems and psychological disorders.

### **When you have decided that professional counselling is indicated...**

Inform the student in a direct, concerned, straightforward manner. Because many students initially resist the idea of counselling, it is useful to be caring but firm in your judgement that counselling will be useful; to be clear and concrete regarding the reason you are concerned; and to be familiar with the resources available on campus. Except in emergencies, it is important to allow the student to accept or refuse counselling.

**Suggest that the student call or come in to make an appointment.** Give them SCC's phone number (519) 253-3000 Ext. 4616 and location (Rm. 293 CAW Student Centre). Remind the student that our services are free and confidential. If they would like more information before calling, they can visit the SCC website at /scc

### **Sometimes it is useful and necessary to help the student more directly...**

to make an appointment. In these instances, you can offer the use of your phone or call SCC yourself, while the student is in your office. Occasionally, you may think it wise to actually walk the student over to the SCC. This can be especially helpful to students who are unsure about the location and/or are intimidated about meeting a counsellor for the first time.

### **Please note:**

If you are concerned about a student but unsure about the appropriateness of the referral, feel free to call the SCC at (519) 253-3000 Ext. 4616 and ask for a consultation with a professional staff member.

### **Know your limits.**

Only go as far as your expertise, training, and resources allow when extending assistance to students. If you are uncertain about your ability to help a student, it best to be honest about it. Trust your feelings when you think an individual's problem is more than you can handle and utilize the resources available to you both on- and off-campus (see last page). Below are some signs to look for in your feelings that may suggest the assistance of a professional is warranted:

- You feel responsible for the student
- You feel that the problems a student brings to you are more than you can handle

- You feel you are over-extending yourself
- You feel stressed-out by the student's issues or behaviour
- You feel pressure to solve their problems
- You see a behavioural pattern repeating itself in your interaction with the student
- You find yourself avoiding the student
- You feel anxious when the student approaches you

### **Situations Requiring Immediate Response.**

#### Direct or Indirect Reference to Suicide

Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to committing suicide should be taken seriously and a mental health professional should be contacted (for a consultation or for advice). Contact Student Counselling Centre (4616) or Student Health Services (7002).

Indirect references to suicide may include the following:

- Expressed feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or helplessness
- Expressed thoughts that the world, family, friends would be better off without them
- Expressions of powerful feelings of guilt

**In the event of an actual suicide attempt immediately call the emergency number for Campus Community Police (911) to request assistance**

#### Threats and Disruptive Behaviours

- Any threat should be taken seriously; contact Campus Community Police (1235) for advice about what to do; please also speak to your department head or manager
- Physical violence causing bodily harm and specific threats must be reported immediately to Campus Community Police (911)

#### Disordered Eating or Excessive Exercise

If a student shares (or you observe) concerns regarding excessive exercise or disruptive eating patterns such as excessive dieting, uncontrolled binge eating, and self-induced vomiting after eating, it is important that professional treatment be accessed as soon as possible. Contact SCC (4616) and ask to speak to a counsellor about what to do.

## Drug and Alcohol Misuse

If a student appears to be inebriated or you suspect drug use, it is important to attempt to refer the student for counselling. In the case of an apparent drug overdose or severe drug reaction call Campus Community Police (911) and ask them to call an ambulance.

### **Important Tips for Faculty and Staff.**

**LISTEN** to the student in private when both of you have the time. Give the student your patient, undivided attention and let them talk with minimal interruption. Often just a few minutes of effective listening is enough to help the student feel cared about and more confident about what to do. If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.

**ACKNOWLEDGE** the student's thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, compassionate way. Let the student know you understand what they are trying to communicate by reflecting back the essence of what they've said. ("It sounds like you're not used to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things.")

**EXPRESS CONCERN** without making generalizations or assumptions about the student. Be specific about the behaviour which gives you cause for concern. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately"? Or "you should be more concerned about your grades."

**OFFER HOPE** by reassuring the student that things can get better. Help them realize they have options and resources, and that things will not always seem hopeless.

**HAVE A CULTURALLY OPEN WORLD VIEW.** Remember, there are differences in student's communication styles, experiences with living independently, help-seeking styles, comfort with referral to counselling, etc. Students sometimes find it difficult to admit to problems and may present them in an indirect way. It is wise to respond to stated concerns while listening actively for others which may be more difficult for the student to express.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** Being a support person to a student in pain can be a very rewarding experience. There can also be a significant "cost to caring". Bearing witness to a person in pain can be a heavy responsibility that may cause you to feel some distress or sadness.

## **Resources Available.**

### On-Campus Resources:

- Student Counselling Centre – Ext. 4616
- Student Health Services – Ext. 7002
- Campus Community Police
- Emergency - Ext. 911
- Non-Emergency – Ext. 1235
- Student Disability Services – Ext. 3463
- Emergency Response Team – Ext. 3940

### Off-Campus Resources:

- Community Crisis Ctr (24 hrs/day) – 519-973-4435

Also have a mobile crisis team that will respond on campus.

- Hotel Dieu Hospital Emergency Room (24 hours)

Crisis Walk In 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

- Jeanne Mance Bldg.

1086 Ouellette Ave., 1st. Floor