

Capacity to Connect: Scenarios and Responses

The following six scenarios offer suggestions on how to respond of students who are in distress. The responses in these scenarios are starting points, not scripts, for discussions and continued thought about how to respond with empathy to students while recognizing and honouring their strengths and capacity to achieve balance.

SCENARIO 1

Indigenous Student Needing Leave Time

Jordan, an Indigenous student, comes into your office and is very upset. They disclose that a close relative has just died unexpectedly, and they are stressed about how to ask their instructors for leave to go home for the ceremony and funeral, which are elaborate and can take up to a week or more to complete. They feel overwhelmed and express feelings of hopelessness during the conversation.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Connect the student with Indigenous services for additional support.
- Explain the process for requesting leave and help the student get started on it.
- Keep listening empathetically and see if the student can figure out the next steps.
- See if they are open to visiting counselling services for support.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- “Dealing with grief while trying to manage other responsibilities can be so challenging.”
- “Can I connect you with Indigenous services for cultural or emotional support?”
- “I can help you navigate the process of asking for extensions for coursework.”

(Scenario 1 continued)

SCENARIO 1: Continued

Indigenous Student Needing Leave Time

Unhelpful responses:

- “Good luck with getting extensions. My colleagues aren’t always very sympathetic.”
- “Sorry about your loss, but can’t you do some of your coursework while you’re away?”

Making a Difference

Students may feel so overwhelmed at times by the stresses and demands in their lives that they lose sight of their own capacities to problem solve. Helpful responses for this scenario focus

on acknowledging the feelings expressed and suggesting support services. It’s less helpful to say that colleagues won’t be sympathetic. As well, try not to question the need for an extension or leave – the student knows best their own situation, abilities, and limits. Jordan might need a reminder of the Indigenous services available on campus. In addition, if you know the process for requesting leave, it might be helpful to explain it to them.

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SCENARIO 2

Student Worried About Disappointing Their Family

Cobie is the first member of their family to attend a post-secondary program and their parents and grandparents have invested most of their money to pay the tuition. Cobie visits your office in a panicked state and on the verge of crying. Cobie explains they've failed a major assignment that counts for most of their grade. They're quite sure they'll fail the class now. Cobie says that they feel guilty for wasting their family's money and are embarrassed to tell them that they failed. They say they feel helpless and stuck, with no way out of the situation.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Listen and validate Cobie's feelings; maybe they can start to figure out some options available to them.
- Reassure Cobie that their parents and grandparents care about them; that's why they have helped them with school fees.
- Help them with strategies for talking to the instructor about redoing the assignment.
- As this student is expressing a lot of hopelessness, suggest they visit counselling services for additional support.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- You are a hardworking student, and this one grade does not define you.
- Could you talk to the instructor? Maybe they'll let you redo the assignment?
- If you're feeling overwhelmed, there are counselling services for support.

Unhelpful responses include:

- Of course your family will be disappointed, but they'll get over it.
- If you're failing, you should be looking at your time management skills.

Making a Difference

Students often feel pressure to achieve high grades, and they may not have developed skills for coping with setbacks. Listening and validating their feelings is an important first step. Helpful responses for this scenario focus on reminding the student that one grade doesn't define them and offering ideas for accessing support services. It's less helpful to minimize the student's worries or to suggest they aren't managing their time well.

It's possible that Cobie may be able to develop their own solutions, especially if you can provide suggestions for support services. However, if a student seems quite overwhelmed, you may want to suggest they talk to a counsellor.

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Student Who is Homeless and Missing Classes

Kyle, a student in your seminar, has stopped attending class regularly. When Kyle does show up, their appearance is dishevelled, and they seem to have a hard time concentrating. Kyle stops by your office, and you take that opportunity to ask how they are doing. Kyle confides that they have been evicted from their apartment and must live in their car for a few weeks until they can afford a deposit on a new place. They explain that it's hard to find a quiet and comfortable place to study or sleep. They also tell you that they feel a lot of stress and shame about the situation.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Reassure them that you won't judge them.
- Say you'll maintain confidentiality about their situation.
- Tell them about different support services available, including financial aid, as well as community services like the local food bank.
- Suggest a few quiet places on campus where they could go to study.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- "I understand it must be a stressful situation, and I will respect your privacy."
- "You have nothing to be ashamed of; financial hardships can happen through no fault of our own."
- "Can I try to connect you with services, like financial aid, that might help you at this time?"

Less helpful responses

- "Oh my gosh, I can't believe you're homeless! That must be so scary!"
- "Have you thought about selling some of your stuff on eBay to raise money?"

Making a Difference

If a student is blaming themselves and feeling stigmatized, they are less likely to get support and find solutions. Helpful responses for this scenario focus on acknowledging the shame and loneliness Kyle is feeling and reassuring them that it is not their fault. Kyle may also need to hear that you will respect their privacy. It's less helpful to express shock at their situation or to suggest they should be selling their belongings.

Because lack of housing can affect so many parts of a student's life, Kyle may need to access several different support services including financial aid for scholarships, bursaries, and assistance programs that could help financially or counselling services for managing the stress. Kyle may also need to know about food bank programs and shelters in the community.

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SCENARIO 4

Transgender Student Facing Discrimination and Isolation

Jamie, a student who has disclosed to you in the past that they are transgender, approaches you in tears. They explain that during a recent visit home, they came out to their family. Jamie tells you their parents made hurtful and derogatory comments during the discussion. Jamie makes statements like “This is so difficult. I can’t keep going like this,” and “I don’t know why I even try anymore; my own parents don’t love me or accept me for who I am.” Jamie also mentions that they are feeling lonely and hopeless.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Suggest they visit the pride centre for more support on living as their authentic, transgender self.
- Ask if they need help connecting with a counsellor.
- Offer to find out what community services are available so they can find other connections and support.
- Let them know that they are a valued member of our community.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- “Can I walk you over to the LGBTQ2S+ centre if you haven’t visited it before?”
- “It sounds very hard to not have the support or acceptance of your family.”
- “Would you be open to talking with a counsellor?”

Less helpful responses include:

- “Just don’t talk to your parents about being transgender. Problem solved!”
- “I’m curious if you are taking hormones or considering surgery?”

Making a Difference

Transgender students may face rejection and ridicule when they live openly. Faculty and staff can play a role in validating and supporting their gender identity as well as helping them to connect to culturally safe services.

Helpful responses for this scenario focus on addressing Jamie’s feelings of sadness and lack of hope as well as offering to connect them to LGBTQ2S+ friendly services. You could also suggest Jamie consider counselling services, especially as they are expressing such hopelessness and distress. It’s not helpful to ask questions about their transition process or suggest that Jamie hide their authentic self.

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Single Parent Struggling with Studies and Childcare

Alex, a student who is a single parent, drops by your office. Alex looks unkempt and has dark circles under their eyes; they look like they are about to cry and seem very stressed. Alex explains they have been unable to find reliable childcare for their toddler. Alex has no family in the area, and friends are unable to help as they either work or go to school themselves. Final exams are coming up, and Alex tells you they have been trying to study while their toddler sleeps but cannot keep it up for much longer because they are so sleep deprived.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Focus on their problem-solving abilities and the resilience they've shown raising their daughter as a single parent.
- Discuss ways to approach other instructors for more flexibility for assignments and tests.
- Suggest brainstorming ideas together about where to search for childcare on campus or in the community.
- Offer to help them explore the available options.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- "I admire your resilience and ability to balance your studies and parenting."
- "I know you've tried to find childcare, but could we brainstorm ideas together?"
- "Can I help you map out ways to discuss this challenge with your instructors?"

Less helpful responses include:

- "Being a single parent is so hard; I don't know why people do it."
- "It's too bad your friends aren't more willing to help you."

Making a Difference

Whether you know much or very little about the childcare options available, you can still support Alex by listening with empathy and showing that you understand why they are feeling so overwhelmed. Helpful responses for this scenario focus on recognizing Alex's resilience as well as giving them opportunities to consider alternatives. It's less helpful to speculate how people cope or to criticize the social support available to the student.

Just having someone listen and validate their challenges may be enough to remind Alex that they have the capacity to make decisions about their next steps. However, you could offer suggestions about campus services that might be able to offer help.

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International Student Overwhelmed by Studies and Work

Salem is an international student who drops by your office visibly distressed with dark circles under their eyes. You know that Salem arrived in Canada three months ago and is struggling with the English course materials. They explain that grades in their culture play a large role in defining one's self worth and status. Salem says they are working three jobs to support their family back home, so have limited study time. A big exam is coming up and Salem is frightened they will do poorly. They mention a lack of appetite and add they aren't communicating with their loved ones right now.

What Would You Do?

To support this student, you could:

- Tell Salem that you see and admire their resilience and strength in managing life and studying far away from home.
- Help them figure out ways to approach their instructors about extensions on coursework.
- Suggest they reach out to the international student services for more support.
- Suggest tapping into some community resources like food banks.

What Would You Say?

Helpful responses include:

- "I admire your resilience and perseverance in this difficult situation."
- "I'd be happy to help you navigate the many student services on campus."
- "I can help you with ways to request an extension on assignments."

Less helpful responses include:

- "Maybe cut back on your spending and then stop working three jobs."
- "You don't have to support your family; they'll manage without you."

Making a Difference

International students often face many challenges as they complete their post-secondary degrees. They are far from home and community, may struggle with English, and often don't know of the services available to them. Helpful responses for this scenario focus on emphasizing Salem's resilience and suggesting support services and ways to request an extension. It's less helpful to suggest that they aren't managing their money well or questioning the student's complex relationships to family living outside Canada.

It might be helpful to let Salem know about international student services, financial aid, and local food banks. Salem may also need help approaching other instructors about flexible deadlines for submitting coursework.

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