

Supporting Students in Distress

Student life is a period of unique change filled with challenging events. As a member of the post-secondary community, you may identify and have the opportunity to support students who are struggling with issues that affect their mental health and well-being. This handout will help you recognize some signs and symptoms of students in distress. It provides tips on how to refer a student in distress for further assistance through counselling services or other appropriate resources.

On-Campus and Community Resources

Campus Security: _____

Counselling Services: _____

Indigenous Services: _____

International Student Services: _____

Academic Advice: _____

Accessibility Services: _____

Student Services: _____

Pride Centre: _____

Health Services: _____

Financial Aid: _____

Sexualized Violence Support: _____

Equity and Human Rights: _____

If it's an emergency, call 911 and then contact campus security (if the student is on campus). If the student is not on campus, call 911 and tell the operator the student's current location as soon as possible.

Crisis Lines

If you or someone you know needs immediate help, call one of the numbers below:

- **Mental Health Support Line:** 310-6789 (no need for area code)
- **Here2Talk:** 1-877-857-3397 – a 24-hour phone and chat counselling support service for B.C. post-secondary students that offers free, confidential counselling and community referral services via app, phone, and web (<https://here2talk.ca>)
- **BC Suicide Line:** 1-800-784-2433 (1-800-SUICIDE) – A crisis line for anyone considering suicide or concerned about someone who may be
- **KUU-US Crisis Response Services:** 1-800-588-8717 – provides culturally safe support, 24/7, for Indigenous people in B.C. (www.kuu-uscrisisline.com/24-hour-crisis-line)

This resource is adapted from Vancouver Island University, Counselling Services. *Capacity to Connect: Supporting Students in Distress*. This handout is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0 license\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recognizing Signs of Distress

A common indicator of distress is change – behaving or reacting in ways that are not typical for an individual.

ACADEMIC SIGNS

- Significant decline in the quality or quantity of classroom/research work
- Change in attendance
- Repeated lateness, missed appointments or deadlines
- Missed assignments or exams
- Repeated requests for extensions or deferrals
- Repeated help seeking or requests for reassurance
- Difficulty listening, processing information, or problem-solving
- Working hard but struggling to meet demands

EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Exaggerated emotional response (e.g., intense anger, sobbing, persistent worry)
- Overly confident and enthusiastic
- Absence of emotion – appearing flat, disengaged
- Lack of motivation or interest
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Talking about giving up or not caring anymore
- Talking or writing about hopelessness, death, or suicide
- Mistrust or sense of being persecuted
- Persistent blame, lack of ownership

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Falling asleep in class
- Noticeable decline in hygiene or looking unkempt
- Significant weight change
- Significant change in energy level
- Appearing drunk or high
- Visible bruises, cuts, or injuries

BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- Describing difficult circumstances or experiences (e.g., loss, conflict, trauma, assault)
- Ranting emails
- Excessive time spent on the Internet or engaged in fantasy games
- Expressing contempt toward others or a wish to seek revenge
- Disregard of rules or authority
- Peer reports of concerns about, or discomfort with a student
- Actions or gestures that threaten or intimidate

How to Respond to a Distressed Student

APPROACH

- It's okay to ask questions and express concern.
- Be specific about the behaviour that concerns you.
- Be aware of cultural and/or gender norms.

*I noticed you were
tearful in class today.*

*I noticed that your grades
have dropped and wondered
how you are doing.*

Is everything okay?

LISTEN

- Listen in non-judgmental fashion.
- Be patient and give your undivided attention.
- Be clear about your concerns and how you can/cannot help.

*Is there something
I can do to help you?*

SUPPORT

- Acknowledge the student's thoughts and feelings in a compassionate way.
- Offer support and reassurance that you want to help.

*It sounds like you're
feeling overwhelmed.*

*What you're feeling is
normal. Other students are
having similar experiences.*

REFER

Provide students with information on campus services such as:

- Counselling services
- Student health clinic
- International student services
- Services for Indigenous students
- Disability services
- Health and safety
- Campus security
- Safe walk program
- Sexual violence support
- Human rights and respectful workplace office

If possible, walk the student to the support services if you have a serious concern.

*Would you like me to help you connect
with resources on campus?*

*Would you like to call together
and book an appointment?*

*Counselling services provides
confidential help.*

*Would you like me to walk with
you to the support services?*

What if a Student Doesn't Want to Seek Help?

Accessing services is voluntary, unless the situation is urgent and the student is not safe on their own.

Assess for Danger

- Is anyone at risk of immediate harm? If yes, call 911 and then campus security.
- If there is no risk of harm, ultimately it is the individual's right to choose whether to seek help. Individuals are resilient and often come to their own solutions.

Limits and Consultation

Know Your Limits

You will be able to assist many distressed students on your own by simply listening and referring them for further help. Some students will, however, need much more than you can offer. Below are some signs to look for that may suggest the assistance of a professional is warranted:

- You feel overly responsible for the student.
- You feel the problems the student brings are more than you can handle.
- You feel stressed out by the student's issues or behaviour.
- You see a pattern repeating itself in your interactions with a student.
- You find yourself avoiding the student.
- You feel anxious or angry when the student approaches.

Boundaries and Balance

Your ability to respond to students who need help will be influenced by your personal style and the role you play at your institution. When helping students, it is important to remember to maintain your own boundaries. Recognize what you can

and can't do given the limitations of your role. Refer students as appropriate and access your own support when needed.

Consultation

Staff of the various student services on campus can meet with staff and faculty who are concerned about a student and are unsure how to handle the situation. You are encouraged to consult when:

- You are concerned about a student's well-being or academic performance but unsure how or whether to intervene.
- You are uncertain how to respond to a student's approach for help.
- You continue to be concerned about a student who has declined help.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS and respond if a student situation leaves you feeling worried, alarmed, or threatened. If you are unsure, please consult. Once the student is supported, ensure that you are supported, while maintaining the confidentiality of the student. Talk to friends, family, Elders, and colleagues.