

## ***Guide to Helping the Emotionally Distressed Student***

### **Recognizing Students in Distress**

Stress is a natural part of life and no stranger to university students. Many students successfully cope with the realities of college life, but for some, the stressors are overwhelming and unmanageable. And, unfortunately, a small number of students will be subjected to sexual assault, discrimination and hate crimes, and sexual harassment. Whatever the cause of students' distress, the emotional and behavioral consequences are often played out on campus in classrooms, residence halls, or offices. Faculty and staff members will not be able to spot every such student, and not every student you approach will be willing to accept your assistance. Still, just by being available and ready to listen, you may play an important role in helping a student regain the emotional balance needed to cope with his or her circumstances and get back on track.

#### **1. What to Look For:**

- Marked changes in academic performance or behavior, poor performance, or lack of preparation
- Excessive absences or tardiness
- Repeated requests for special consideration, especially when this represents a change from previous behavior
- Unusual or changed pattern of interaction
- Avoiding participation
- Domination of discussions
- Excessive anxiety when called upon
- Disruptive behavior
- Exaggerated emotional responses obviously inappropriate to the situation

#### **Unusual Behavior or Appearance**

- Depressed or lethargic mood
- Hyperactivity or very rapid speech
- Unexplained crying
- Irritability or angry outbursts
- Swollen or red eyes
- Change in personal hygiene or dress
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Strange or bizarre behavior indicating loss of contact with reality

#### **References to Suicide, Homicide or Death**

- Expressed thoughts of helplessness or hopelessness
- Overt references to suicide
- Isolation from friends or family
- Homicidal threats

#### **2. What You Can Do:**

If you choose to approach a student you're concerned about or if a student reaches out to you for help with personal problems, here are some suggestions for helpful response:

##### **Talk**

- Talk to the student in private when both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.
- Give the student your undivided attention.
- It is possible that just a few minutes of patient listening on your part may be enough to help the

student feel cared about as an individual and more confident about what to do.

### **Listen**

- Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way.
- If you have initiated the contact, express your concern in behavioral, non-judgmental terms. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately? You should be more concerned about your grades."

### **Communicate**

- Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you.
- Try to include both content and feelings ("It sounds like you're not accustomed to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things.")
- Let the student talk.

### **Give Hope**

- Assure the student that things will get better.
- Help the student realize that there are options and that things will not always seem hopeless.
- Suggest resources: friends, family, clergy or professional help on campus.

### **Maintain**

- Maintain clear and consistent boundaries and expectations.
- Maintain the professional nature of the faculty/student or staff/student relationship and the consistency of academic expectations, exam schedules, etc.

### **Refer**

Refer to other resources when:

- The problem is more serious than you feel comfortable handling.
- You are extremely busy, stressed, and cannot find the time to deal with the student.
- You have helped as much as you can and further assistance is needed.
- You think your personal feelings about the student will interfere with your objectivity.
- The student admits that there is a problem but doesn't want to talk to you about it.
- The student asks for information or assistance that you are unable to provide.

### **Special Considerations: *How to Respond to Alcohol/Drug Abuse, Sexual Assault, Discrimination & Hate Crimes, and the Potentially Violent Student***

All of the previous recommendations are applicable for these special circumstances, but there are some additional considerations to keep in mind if a student shows signs of distress in the following areas:

#### **1. When Alcohol/Drugs are the Problem:**

Many of the signs and symptoms of alcohol and drug abuse are similar to the signs of distress listed previously. In addition, you might observe:

- Smell of alcohol or marijuana on breath or clothes
- Hand tremors
- Watery or blood-shot eyes
- Bruises, cuts or other injuries
- Increased frequency of missed classes
- Continuous excuses for turning in work late or not at all
- Extreme negativism – "don't care" attitude
- Bragging about the amount of alcohol or other drugs they use

**If you are concerned that a student is abusing alcohol or drugs, here are some helpful strategies:**

- **Care:** Meet privately with the student to discuss your concerns in a non-judgmental, respectful fashion, showing the individual you care.
- **Confront behaviors:** You should take care to avoid making a judgment about the person and focus on behaviors instead. Connect your observations with the student's class performance (test scores, attendance issues), and let them know you want them to succeed.
- **Know the basic facts:** Use facts to substantiate your concern. Know that alcohol and drug use impairs mental alertness (loss of short-term memory and impairments in concentration), mood, motor behavior, interpersonal relationships, academic and work performance. Take some time to educate yourself about alcohol and drug problems.
- **Use referral resources:** It is not your job to diagnose or to "chase" a student to get help, but you can refer the student to campus resources such as **The Counseling Center (882-6601)** or **B.A.S.I.C.S. (Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students, 882-4634)** to help them address a possible problem. **The Wellness Resource Center (882-4634)** can help students educate themselves about alcohol and drug abuse issues or community resources.

**You should expect to encounter:**

- a lot of excuses, promises to change, attempts to challenge you, attempts to change the conversation to other subjects, and attempts to pass the behavior off as "no big thing."

**If Your Confrontation Does Not Result in a Referral For Treatment:**

- DO expect to feel helpless.
- DO expect denial of the problem by the user.
- DO continue to offer caring and behaviorally specific confrontations about the drinking problem.
- DON'T be discouraged. Seek support.
- DON'T nag, preach or lecture.
- DON'T make threats unless you intend to carry them out.
- DON'T try to protect the individuals from drinking situations.
- DON'T enable a person's negative behavior by minimizing what has happened.

**2. Helping A Sexually Assaulted Student:**

If a student tells you she or he was sexually assaulted, here are specific tips to guide your response:

- Provide support and comfort. Let the student know that you are concerned for his/her physical and emotional safety. Communicate clearly that what happened was wrong and not the student's fault. Ask them what they need. Let the student talk and validate his/her emotional reactions.
- Assure the student's confidentiality. Don't tell others without permission.
- Encourage them to get medical care. The student may have injuries or infections of which they are not aware. Immediately after the assault, most people are shocked and uncertain of what to do. If the assault was recent, encourage the student to get an evidence-gathering exam at the emergency room at Boone Hospital. This will preserve evidence should the student decide to report the assault. Although they do not perform evidentiary exams, the Student Health Center has providers who are sensitive to the needs of students who have been assaulted or abused. Call 882-7481 and tell the nurse the situation to ensure the student gets appropriate care. Even if the assault is occurred some time ago, it is important to have a medical exam.
- Encourage the student to talk to others whom she/he trusts. Encourage the student to seek the

support and help of a trained counselor. Let him or her know that there are people on campus who have helped many other individuals through similar situations. The Counseling Center (882-6601), The Student Health Center (882-7481), and The Women's Center (882-6621) all provide free and confidential crisis management and counseling services to University students.

- Accept the student's choices about how he or she wants to deal with the assault. Even if you disagree with the student, it is the student's choice whether or not to report the assault, and whether or not to tell family members or others.

### **3. Responding to Discrimination / Hate Crimes:**

Sadly, university campuses are not immune to discrimination and hate crimes. Hate crimes are defined as violent acts against people, property, or organizations because of the group to which a person belongs. The violence can range from verbal harassment, threats, assault, and vandalism, to murder. Victims of hate crimes are likely to recover more quickly when they are given support and access to appropriate resources as soon as possible after the incident occurs.

**If a student tells you about any incident (verbal attacks or more serious assaults or incidents) that singles them out due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, or disability:**

- DO offer the student your full attention and support.
- DO encourage, but don't pressure, the student to report the incident to the MU Police.
- DO help him or her think about a safety plan to respond to further incidents.
- DO refer the student to appropriate support agencies, for example, the Counseling Center (882-6601), the Women's Center (882-6621), or the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center (884-7750).

### **4. Responding to Threatening or Potentially Dangerous Students:**

A student whose behavior has become threatening, disruptive, or violent requires a different kind of approach. A very small number of students become aggressive when they are extremely frustrated by a situation that seems beyond their control. Students rarely become violent, but it does occur, and it is important to know how to respond. Here are some guidelines.

**If you feel uneasy about a student's behavior:**

- DON'T ignore your feelings of unease, but discuss them with a colleague, your department chair, or someone from the Counseling Center. Identify exactly what is making you feel uneasy: maybe the student is rude, speaks in a loud or threatening manner, or makes veiled threats.
- DO meet with the student and ask him or her to change the behaviors that are causing a problem.
- DO make sure that other staff or faculty members are nearby when you meet with the student.
- DO refer the student for help with whatever might be causing the problem (e.g., stress, learning difficulties, or personal problems).

**If a threatening or violent situation occurs during class:**

- DO ask the student to come with you to discuss the situation in the department office or somewhere where help is available.
- DON'T be alone or isolated with the student.
- DO seek help from the MU Police Department and consult with the Counseling Center staff as needed.

**If you are alone with an angry, verbally abusive, or physically threatening student:**

- DO acknowledge the student's anger and frustration calmly; "I can see how upset you are because you feel your rights are being violated and no one is listening to you."
- DO allow the student to vent his or her feelings and frustrations.
- DO calmly tell the student that verbally abusive behavior is unacceptable: "When you yell and scream at me, I find it hard to listen to you."
- DON'T get into an argument or shouting match.
- DON'T become hostile or threatening (e.g., "I'll have you expelled from school.>").
- DON'T touch the student.
- DO leave, if possible.
- DO get help. MU Police are available around the clock.

### **Who Can Help?**

*This is a brief list of resources available to assist students with their physical, emotional, and academic well-being. You are encouraged to call and consult about your concerns and how to make a successful referral.*

#### **• University Counseling Center 882-6601**

Provides free and confidential services to students: crisis intervention; individual, couples, and group counseling; stress management; and testing services. Hours are 8-5, Monday to Friday. 119 Parker Hall, on 6th Street.

#### **• Student Health Center 882-7481**

Provides medical services, psychiatric and counseling services, and health education. After-hours nurse hotline provides 24-hour assistance to students who need medical services or advice. Hours are 8-6 on Monday-Thursday, and 8-5 on Friday.

#### **• The Wellness Resource Center 882-4634**

Offers information and resource library materials, workshops, and referral services for students with alcohol or drug use concerns.

#### **• B.A.S.I.C.S. (Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students) 882-4634**

This program, which has been demonstrated by research to reduce harmful drinking behavior in college students, is administered by the Wellness Resource Center. Students referred to the BASICS attend an interactive workshop with a group of their peers, receive personalized feedback, and meet for an hour with a counselor to discuss their alcohol use and related issues.

#### **• Psychological Services Clinic 882-4677**

Offers therapy and outpatient psychiatric services on a sliding-fee basis. Hours are Monday 10-5, Tuesday 9-9, Wednesday 12-9, Thursday 12-9, and Friday 9-5. Psychology Building, 8th Street entrance.

#### **• MU Women's Center 882-6621**

Offers educational programming, resource lending library, counseling, crisis intervention, referrals, with special expertise in sexual assault and violence. 229 Brady Commons.

#### **• MU Police Department 882-7201, also 911.**

Offers emergency response for any crisis or safety concern.

### **What Students May Expect at the University Counseling Center:**

- Students should make their own appointments if possible. You may assist by offering the student immediate use of your phone. The receptionist will arrange for the student to meet with a staff member as soon as possible, usually within a week of the request.
- NOTE: In urgent situations and during regular daytime hours, there are counselors on call who

will assist the student immediately. For help with crises after hours, a student may call 911 or go to directly to the University Hospital ER.

- At the first visit, the student completes information forms before meeting with a counselor (these will be waived temporarily in emergencies). This will take about 10 minutes. The student will then talk to a counselor for an assessment interview. A Counseling Center clinical team meets every morning to determine how the Counseling Center can best meet every new client's needs.

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