

## The Student in Distress: Intervention and Referral A Guide for Faculty and Staff

### *Signs of Distress*

In general, consider referring students for counseling if their problems are compromising their ability to take pleasure in life or to function academically, personally, or socially. Students may give signs of their distress in a number of ways. The following examples may be useful in assessing a student's situation:

- Significant changes in the student's observed or reported behavior
  - Excessive absences from class
  - Noticeable deterioration in quality of class participation or academic work
  - Inability to concentrate
  - Social withdrawal or isolation
  - Impulsive behaviors
  - Excessive sleep or insomnia
  - Significant change in appetite
  - Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Significant changes in the student's emotional state
  - Sadness, depression or weepiness
  - Extreme emotional reactivity
  - Anxiety or panic attacks
  - Outbursts of anger
  - Mood swings
- Recent stressful event or trauma
  - Death of a loved one
  - Break-up of romantic relationship
  - Physical or sexual assault
  - Change in family relationships
  - Serious illness
- Suicidal risk factors
  - Expressed feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or lack of control
  - Someone close to the student has committed suicide
  - Disturbing material in academic assignments
  - Reckless behavior
  - Giving away possessions
  - History of previous suicide attempt(s)
- Poor contact with reality
  - Irrational conversations
  - Obsessive ruminations
  - Exaggerated suspiciousness or paranoia
  - Disorientation to time or place
  - Auditory or visual hallucinations

### *If a Student is Reluctant*

Many people believe that only very disturbed people seek counseling. Reassure the student that people with a wide range of concerns seek counseling, and their contact is kept confidential. In some cases you may find the student has already sought counseling and was unsatisfied with the experience. Please encourage the student to consider giving counseling another try, perhaps with a different counselor.

### *Guidelines for Intervention*

If you choose to approach a student about whom you are concerned or if a student approaches you for help, the following suggestions might help you feel more comfortable and facilitate a helpful intervention with the student.

- Talk to the student in private when you are not rushed and are able to give your undivided attention.
- Express your concerns directly, specifically, and honestly. (e.g. “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately and I’m concerned.”) Listen carefully to the student’s thoughts and feelings. Try to convey your understanding by repeating the essence of what the student has said. Avoid judging or criticizing even if the student asks your opinion.
- Respect the student’s perspective even if you do not agree with it.
- Convey the hope that things can get better in the future.
- Refer the student to resource persons on campus, or to family, friends, or clergy.
- Offer to call the **St. Olaf Counseling Center (ext. 3062)** on behalf of the student to help arrange an appointment, or offer to accompany the student to our office.
- Trust your instincts, if you believe a student is in crisis, and immediate professional assessment is needed.
- Tell resource persons if you have concerns about a student’s safety.

### *Consultation Services*

If you are unsure of how to proceed in a specific situation involving a student in distress, we encourage you to consult with a Counseling Center staff member. A brief conversation may help you sort out the relevant issues, explore ways to approach the student, and identify appropriate resources.

We are available to speak with you hypothetically without compromising a student’s confidentiality with you or us. With students’ written permission we can discuss their situation with you in specific terms. You may ask the student whom you are referring to grant written permission for us to acknowledge to you their contact with us.

(Original handout prepared by Lawrence University Counseling Services, Appleton, WI)