DEALING WITH DISTRESSED STUDENTS

Any member of the Western community may come into contact with a distressed student. Being aware of distress signals, methods of intervention, and sources of help for the student can help you feel more in control of situations that may arise. The staff at the Counseling & Testing Center are available to faculty and staff for consultation regarding these issues. Feel free to call us at 745-3159 if you would like to discuss these matters further.

DISTRESS SIGNALS

Listed below are some of the more prevalent signs of someone in distress. This list is intended to provide basic information only.

1. Depression. While we all may feel depressed from time to time, “normal” depressions may consist of only one or two symptoms and usually pass within days. Clinically depressed students will exhibit multiple symptoms for a longer period of time. Some of these symptoms are sleep disturbances, poor concentration, change in appetite, loss of interest in pleasurable activities, withdrawal, poor hygiene, loss of self-esteem, and preoccupation with death.

2. Agitation or Acting Out. This would represent a departure from normal or socially appropriate behavior. It might include being disruptive, restlessness or hyperactivity, being antagonistic, and increased alcohol and/or drug abuse.

3. Disorientation. Some distressed students may seem “out of it.” You may witness a diminishment in awareness of what is going on around them, forgetting or losing things, misperception of facts or reality, rambling or disconnected speech, and behavior that seems out of context or bizarre.

4. Drug and Alcohol Abuse. Signs of intoxication during class or interaction with University officials are indicative of a problem that requires attention.

5. Suicidal Thoughts. Most people who attempt suicide communicate early messages about their distress. These messages can range from “I don’t want to be here”, to a series of vague “goodbyes”, to “I’m going to kill myself.” Non-verbal messages could include giving away valued items, and putting legal, financial, and University affairs in order. All of the above messages should be taken seriously.

6. Violence and Aggression. You may become aware of students who may be dangerous to others. This may be manifested by physically violent behavior, verbal threats, threatening e-mail or letters, harassing or stalking behavior, and papers or exams that contain violent or threatening material.

INTERVENTION GUIDELINES

While it is not expected that you be a “watchdog” or that you provide a thorough assessment, you may be the first contact for a student in distress and in a position to ask a few questions. Following these guidelines can lead to a positive outcome for all parties.

1. Safety First! Always keep safety in mind as you interact with a distressed student. Maintain a safe distance and a route of escape should you need it. If danger to you or the student seems imminent, call WKU Police Department at 745-2548.

2. Avoid Escalation. Distressed students can sometimes be easily provoked. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses. It is usually not a good idea to “pull rank” and assert authority unless you are certain of the student’s mental health status. Distressed students are in need of listening and support. One can always remind them of rules at a later time.

3. Ask Direct Questions. Take a calm and matter-of-fact approach. Ask students directly if they are drunk, confused or if they have thoughts of harming themselves. You need not be afraid to ask these questions. You will not be “putting ideas in their heads” by doing so. Most distressed students are relieved to know that someone has noticed and is paying attention.

4. Do Not Assume You Are Being Manipulated. While it is true that some students appear distressed in order to get attention or relief from responsibility, only a thorough assessment can determine this. Attention-seekers can have serious problems and be in danger, too.
5. **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 provide. Respect any feelings of discomfort you may have and focus on getting them the assistance they require. You can do this by reinforcing them for confiding in you, being accepting and nonjudgmental, trying to identify the problem area, and indicating that seeking professional help is a positive thing to do.

Some signs that you may have over-extended yourself include:
- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed by the situation
- Feeling angry at the student
- Feeling afraid
- Having thoughts of “adopting” or otherwise rescuing the student
- “Reliving” similar experiences of your own

**MAKING A REFERRAL**

You may speak with a psychologist at the Counseling & Testing Center if you are unsure what service would be best for a student. The staffs of all the referral sources listed below will take your calls regarding a distressed student and distressed students are welcome to call these sources on their own.

**REFERRAL SOURCES**

WKU Counseling & Testing Center
745-3159

**REFERRAL SOURCES (Cont.)**

WKU Police Department
745-2548
WKU Asso. VP & Dean of Students
745-2791
WKU Vice-President for Student Affairs & Campus Services
745-5429
LifeSkills HELPLINE
843-4357
911 (for police, fire and medical emergencies only)

**OUR MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of the Counseling & Testing Center is to:
- Provide brief counseling and psychological services to enrolled students and their eligible spouses
- Provide outreach services and other activities oriented toward personal development and the prevention of psychological and behavioral problems to the WKU community
- Provide consultation services regarding emotional health issues to the WKU community
- Provide training opportunities for students in the helping professions
- Provide a variety of testing services to the WKU community

**A GUIDE FOR WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY FACULTY & STAFF**

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