

Recognizing and Helping Distressed Students

The Important Role of Faculty and Staff

- You are in a unique position to recognize students in distress.

Stress in the College Population

- Stress is “developmental” during the transition to adulthood.
- High levels of stress, plus poor coping skills negatively affect academic performance.
- Non-traditional students experience unique stressors due to competing demands (family, work, etc...).
- Many students arrive at ETSU with pre-existing mental health conditions.
- Late-adolescence/early-adulthood is prime-time for the onset of mental illness.

Identifying Distressed Students

- Changes in Academic Performance or Behavior:
 - ▣ Lateness or absence from class
 - ▣ Change in grades or preparation
 - ▣ Change in class participation
 - ▣ Excessive anxiety when called on, during tests, when giving a speech
 - ▣ Exaggerated/inappropriate emotional responses
 - ▣ Detached from class experience
 - ▣ Learning problems – disability/poor study skills/*in overhead*
- Unusual Behavior or Appearance
 - ▣ Depressed mood
 - ▣ Frequent crying, outbursts
 - ▣ Irritability, angry outbursts
 - ▣ Nervousness, agitation
 - ▣ Hyperactivity
 - ▣ Change in personal hygiene or dress
 - ▣ Dramatic changes in weight
 - ▣ Strange or bizarre behavior
 - ▣ Aggressive, abrasive
- Talking About Suicide, Homicide, or Death
 - ▣ Overt or off-handed remarks about suicide
 - ▣ Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
 - ▣ Isolation from friends or family
 - ▣ Homicidal threats or threatening remarks
- Alcohol or Drug Abuse
 - ▣ Observed intoxication
 - ▣ Missing activities due to hangovers
 - ▣ Engaging in high risk, violent, self-defeating or self-destructive behavior while intoxicated

Helping Distressed Students

- Remain calm and in charge of your emotions (don't argue).
- Request to see the student in private.
- Speak directly and honestly (“I” messages).
- Listen and seek to understand.
- Don't take it personally.

Recognizing and Helping Distressed Students

- Separate behavior from the person.
- Reflect. Don't refute.
- Don't criticize, blame, or judge.
- Don't assume you're being manipulated; many students experience real stressors.
 - ▣ Traumatic changes in relationships
 - ▣ Divorce
 - ▣ Death
 - ▣ Financial stressors (self and family)
 - ▣ Rape/Sexual Assault
 - ▣ Relationship Violence
 - ▣ *Coming Out* (accepting and identifying oneself as gay, lesbian, or another sexual minority)
- Seek win/win solutions...be willing to explore options.
- Ask about student's support system.
- When appropriate, don't be afraid to ask direct questions about suicide/homicide: e.g., *Have you had thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else?*
- Know when to walk away.

Making a Referral to the Counseling Center

- STAY with the student until they are calm enough to listen and respond to suggestions.
- INFORM the student of their option to see a counselor.
- DISCUSS confidentiality.
- ENCOURAGE the student that counseling can benefit everyone, but don't force the issue.
- ASSIST the student with making an appointment; WALK the student the Counseling Center.
- CONSULT with other responsible individuals.
- DEBRIEF with colleagues/supervisor.

Assisting Students Who Are Reluctant to Seek Help

- Normalize their experience of stress.
- Frame their help-seeking as a sign of strength.
- Reassure them.
- Follow up.

Taking Care of Yourself/Boundaries

- Realize that not everyone is willing to accept help.
- Be clear about the time you are willing to give the student.
- Request that you are treated with respect.
- Learn to ask for help yourself: consult.
- Refer student to other resources that can address their needs.
- Respect your own needs.

Signs You are Overextended

- Feeling stressed out or overwhelmed.
- Feeling angry at the student.
- Feeling afraid of the student.
- Having thoughts of "adopting" or otherwise rescuing the student.
- Reliving similar experiences of your own.