

Supporting the Student in Distress

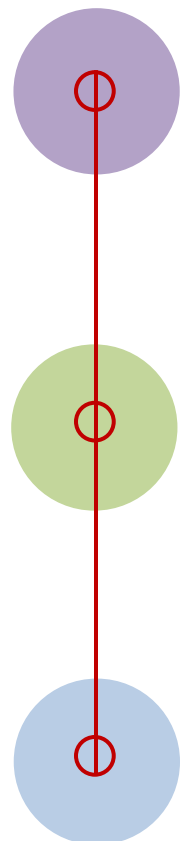
Everyone has a role.



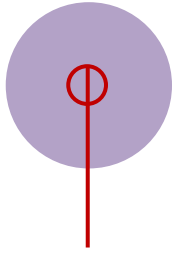
IDENTIFY **What to look for.** Being able to identify when a student is in distress is an essential first step in getting them connected with the resources they may need. There are a number of common indicators of emotional or psychological distress.

ASSIST **What to say.** Regardless of our individual roles on campus, any of us may have the opportunity to assist a student who is in difficulty or distress. As a student leader, staff or faculty, you may be in a unique position to help a student find the support they need. It begins with starting a conversation.

REFER **What to do.** There are any number of circumstances in which it would be appropriate for you to refer a student for help or support. In such cases, providing the student with basic information about services and programs within your department, on campus or in the community can increase the likelihood that they will follow through.



Use this document as a guide to help you know what to look for, what to say, and what to do when responding to a student in distress



HOW TO IDENTIFY A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

Changes in mental wellbeing may be reflected in the way we think, feel and act. When the following indicators represent a change from their typical presentation, persist and/or worsen over time, and interfere with their ability to do the things they need and want to do, the student will most likely need to be connected with campus supports.

THOUGHTS

- Fearful, not understanding what they're experiencing, worried that others will notice something is wrong, worried about what others will think
- Obvious confusion
- Statements of hopelessness or helplessness
- Overt references to suicide or threats of harm to others
- Extreme and repeated suspiciousness, paranoia

FEELINGS

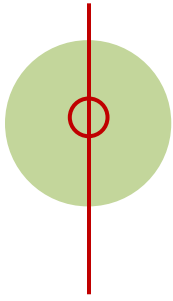
- High levels of nervousness and worry
- Decreased motivation, lethargic
- Lonely, alone or isolated, misunderstood, worthlessness
- Extreme mood swings or persistent low mood
- Agitation, restlessness or hyperactivity
- Unusual emotional reactions (i.e., inappropriate anger, crying, giggling) or unexpressive, devoid of emotion

ACTIONS

- Behavior that is a significant and persistent change from usual behaviour
- Isolating self from others
- Little or no participation in activities they once enjoyed
- Significant problems with roommates, classmates, friends or family
- Deterioration in personal hygiene, sudden, unexplained weight gain or loss
- Frequent requests to talk/meet with you or other support persons
- Repeated hostile, sarcastic or inappropriate remarks
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Repeated vacant staring and/or excessive day dreaming
- Aggressive or disruptive behavior

ACADEMICS

- Frequent missed classes, not handing in academic work
- Increased difficulty or inability to concentrate
- Written work that includes angry or emotional outbursts, or suggests self-loathing, hopelessness, disorganized thinking
- Avoiding classes when presentations or participation is expected
- Repeated requests for special consideration with regards to academic work



HOW TO ASSIST A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

Sometimes, we are reluctant to begin conversations about mental health because we're concerned about how the other person may react. But often, people are simply relieved that someone has expressed concern and is willing to listen. There are a number of things to consider when beginning a conversation with a student who appears to be in distress.

RESPECT THEIR RIGHT TO PRIVACY

When approaching the student, do so when others are not around so as to avoid any possible embarrassment or discomfort. This may help to avoid a defensive response from the student and increase the likelihood that they will be comfortable discussing the issue.

BE DIRECT & SPECIFIC WITHOUT JUDGMENT

Tell the student the specific behaviours you've observed and are concerned about. For example, you could say, "I've noticed that you haven't been participating in class discussions like you used to" or "I've noticed that you seem really sad in class lately, is everything okay?"

LISTEN ACTIVELY & TRY TO REMAIN CALM

Choose a time when disruptions will be unlikely. Listen carefully and reflect back what you think you've understood. For example, you could say, "What I hear you saying is that you're really struggling with some personal issues and you're worried about how it's affecting your academics." Allow the student time to clarify or confirm your understanding.

AVOID GIVING IMMEDIATE ADVICE

Listen and try to understand what is distressing the student before giving advice. Advice given too early may be ill-informed, prevent the student from expressing the real issue, and/or cause them to feel unsupported. Once you have a good grasp of the situation, giving advice may be very appropriate.

INSTILL A SENSE OF HOPE

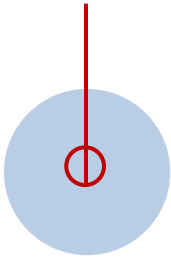
Students often feel that they are the only one struggling, while everyone else appears to be doing well. If appropriate, try to normalize their feelings by reassuring them that other students in similar situations commonly feel the same way. Let them know that there are resources that many students access, find helpful and are available to help them as well.

MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE BOUNDARIES

Avoid asking probing questions about the issue, or trying to take on the role of a counsellor. In many cases, you will not feel equipped to deal with the complexity of the student's issue/s. It's appropriate to reassure the student that you want to be of help, but that there are services on campus with more expertise in this area. When necessary, involve available supports or services to assist the student.

DON'T PROMISE TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION A "SECRET"

If you need to involve others in order to provide the student with the most appropriate help, and you've promised to keep what the student has told you a secret, the student may feel that their trust in you has been broken. When a student confides in you, respect that confidence and avoid sharing their private information with anyone other than those who need to be informed.



HOW TO REFER A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

Mental health problems are often complex and the student may need support from a number of services available on or off campus. When a student already feels distressed, finding the support they need can be very difficult. Most of the time, you won't be able to 'fix' the problem, but you can help students navigate their way to the help they need.

REFER WHEN:

You feel the situation requires help beyond your knowledge/skill; you've tried to help/support, but the student is still struggling

"I'm really glad you felt you could talk to me about this, and I want you to know that I'm available to support you, but there are others on campus who have more expertise in this area. Could we talk about which of those resources might be helpful for you?"

It appears the student may benefit from academic accommodation

"Many students don't realize that academic accommodations are available for students with mental health concerns. If you think it might be helpful, you could speak with someone at Accessibility Services to find out more."

WHEN REFERRING:

Don't push, give the student the information he/she needs, and allow them to make the choice to seek out a particular resource

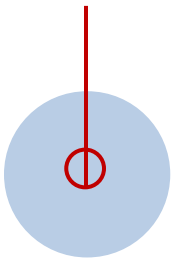
"Here are a few resources on campus that many students find helpful..."

As much as possible, prepare the student for what to expect from the resource offered, it may increase the likelihood of follow-through

"The Health & Wellness Centre is a resource for students that offers health and mental health services, it's confidential and is covered by your health insurance."

Follow up with the student, check in, has the situation improved, but always, respect their right to privacy regarding personal health information (which includes whether they have seen a health-care provider) students can choose to share this information, but should not be expected to

"I wanted to check-in with you after our last conversation, to see if things have improved?"



HOW TO REFER A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

CONCERN: Student is expressing signs of distress **WITHOUT POSING RISK to self or to others.**

Unsure whether the student is in distress? Refer to **THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, ACTIONS & ACADEMICS** section on page 2.

IF CONCERNED: Offer referral to **Health & Wellness Centre** at 214 College Street, 2nd floor, 416-978-8030 and/or **Good2Talk Post-Secondary 24/7 Helpline** 1-866-925-5454. Does your department have an embedded counsellor who may be able to see the student earlier?

If appropriate, follow up with student. Keep in mind, the student should not feel pressured to share confidential personal health information.

URGENT: Student is in need of help, but there is **NO IMMEDIATE RISK to self or others.** Signs may include:

- Expressions of hopelessness
- Non-specific references to harming self or others (without a plan in place)
- Significant disturbances in thinking, obvious confusion
- Aggressive, impulsive or risk-taking behaviour

IF URGENT: Offer referral to Health & Wellness Centre at 214 College Street, 2nd floor, 416-978-8030 – you may also call ahead to let the HWC know you're sending the student. Check whether you have an embedded counsellor who may be able to see the student sooner. After hours (after 5pm), contact Campus Police at 2222.

Student accepts referral

Notify your Chair/Graduate Program Director/or immediate supervisor of concern and referral.

If the student needs assistance, and you feel comfortable to do so, check with your immediate supervisor as to whether you or someone within your department would be able to accompany the student to the Health and Wellness Centre.

Student rejects referral

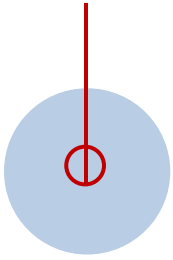
During 9-5pm Monday to Friday, call Student Crisis Response Team (416-946-7111). If you are concerned for the student's immediate safety, dial 2222 to connect with Campus Police. Notify Chair/Graduate Program Director/or your immediate supervisor. If after hours, dial 911 then notify Campus Police and your Chair/supervisor.

EMERGENCY: Student is **ACTIVELY PLANNING SUICIDE** or **POSES IMMEDIATE THREAT OF HARM to self or to others.** Signs may include:

- Talk of a plan and means to harm self or others
- Disruptive behaviour that seems out of control
- Situation feels threatening or dangerous

CALL CAMPUS POLICE (dial 2222) if on campus, EMERGENCY SERVICES (dial 911) if off campus

Notify your Chair/Graduate Program Director/or your immediate supervisor.



HOW TO REFER A STUDENT IN DISTRESS

RESOURCES

ACADEMIC SERVICES

Academic Success Centre: 416.978.7970
Accessibility Services: 416.978.8060
College/Faculty Registrar or Academic Advisor uoft.me/people
SGS English Language & Writing Support: 416-946-7485
Conflict Resolution Centre: 416-978-8920

HEALTH & MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Health & Wellness Centre: 416.978.8030
Accessibility Services: 416.978.8060
Mental Health Helpline: 1.866.531.2600
Assaulted Women's Helpline: 416.863.0511
Good2Talk Student Helpline: 1.866.925.5454
Telehealth Ontario: 866-797-0000

STUDENT CRISIS, SAFETY & BEHAVIOUR

Crisis Response Team: 416.946.7111
Community Safety Office: 416.978.1485
Sexual Assault Helpline: 416-978-7800
Sexual Assault & Violence Prevention: 416.978.3908
Student Support & Progress: 416.946.0424
Campus Police: 416.978.2323

EMERGENCIES

Campus Police: 416.978.2222 (urgent)
Emergency services: dial 911

The University of Toronto Student Mental Health Strategy and Framework
mentalhealth.utoronto.ca

Responding to distressed students for faculty and staff on St. George campus
distressedstudent.ca

