

Supporting a Student in Distress

Version 7

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Seneca
POLYTECHNIC

COUNSELLING
SERVICES

Identifying and Responding to Students in Distress

Seneca Faculty and Staff can use this tool to determine the type of support a student needs: Emergency, Urgent, Mental Health or Academic.

Is the Student in Distress?

- ➔ Have they shared significant issues or stressors with you?
- ➔ Have you noticed signs of distress?
 - increased levels of anxiety, irritability or sadness
 - declining attendance or participation
 - acute changes in appearance or personal hygiene.
 - significant behaviour or mood changes
- ➔ Have others shared concerns to you about this student?

YES

**Determine the
Type of Situation**

EMERGENCY

Their behaviour is:

- threatening to harm themselves or others.
- highly disruptive.
- incoherent or uncontrollable.
- directly or indirectly referencing suicide.

URGENT

Their behaviour is:

NO

Stay Connected.

No immediate action is required.
Monitor the situation.
Consider referrals as needed.

ACTIONS:

- On-Campus: 416.764.0911
- Off-Campus: 911 or 988
- Connect with your supervisor for debrief and support.

- threatening to harm themselves or others.
- highly disruptive.
- incoherent or uncontrollable.
- directly or indirectly referencing suicide.

ACTIONS:

- Connect the student to Counselling Services for appropriate supports:
 - [Student Wellbeing Specialists](#)
 - [Personal Counsellors](#)
 - [Group Supports](#)
 - [Self-Directed Tools](#)
 - [Integrated Wellness](#)
 - senecacnas@senecapolytechnic.ca
- Connect with [Student Conduct](#)
- Connect with [Security](#)
 - 416.764.0911

Mental Health or Academic

Non-urgent actions:

- Listen, show concern, and be non-judgemental
- Ask questions to determine which information or referral would be helpful
- If the student is unwilling to accept a referral respect the decision, and encourage them to stay in contact with you
- Provide [Counselling Services](#) or [Student Advisors](#) as needed

Remember: You are part of a network, not expected to be a counsellor, but an essential link in connecting students to help.

Supporting a Student in Distress

Faculty & Staff Resource

As teaching faculty and support staff, you are often among the first to notice when a student is struggling. While not all signs of distress indicate an immediate crisis, early recognition and appropriate response can be critical in supporting a student's wellbeing and academic success.

This resource provides you with practical tools, a clear framework, and examples to help you effectively Recognize, Respond, and Refer students who may be experiencing distress.

After reviewing this guide, you will be able to:

- Identify common academic, emotional, physical, and behavioural signs of student distress.
- Confidently approach and communicate with students showing concern.
- Assess the urgency of the student's situation using practical criteria.
- Make appropriate referrals to Seneca Counselling Services or other resources.

- Understand boundaries and your role in supporting student wellbeing.

The 3 R's Framework: Recognize, Respond, Refer

RECOGNIZE the Signs

Students facing personal or academic challenges often exhibit signals across different areas. Recognizing these signs early is the first step toward helping them.

Academic Indicators

- Frequent absences or a sudden change in attendance pattern.
- Decreased participation or withdrawal from class activities.
- Declining academic performance, such as dropping grades.
- Missed deadlines for assignments, tests, or presentations.
- Disturbing content in written or creative work (i.e., themes of violence, hopelessness).

Example: A student who has consistently attended all classes suddenly stops showing up and misses multiple assignments.

Emotional Indicators

- Comments expressing feelings of overwhelm, stress, or hopelessness.
- Appearing withdrawn, tearful, anxious, or unusually quiet.
- Increased irritability or frustration towards peers or staff.
- References to self-harm or suicidal thoughts in writing or conversation.

Example: A student confides they feel overwhelmed by balancing school and personal issues and mentions “not seeing a way out.”

Physical Indicators

- Noticeable changes in appearance or hygiene (i.e., unkempt, drastic weight change).
- Signs of substance use or abuse.

- Persistent fatigue or frequent illness without clear medical cause.
- Frequent excuses related to physical health affecting attendance or performance.

Example: A student who looks tired, has poor hygiene, and frequently misses class citing “not feeling well.”

Behavioural Indicators

- Sending inappropriate or repetitive emails or messages to faculty or peers.
- Posting concerning content on social media (i.e., violent, threatening, or despairing posts).
- Lack of response to attempts to contact them by faculty or peers.
- Exhibiting disruptive, aggressive, or outburst behaviour in class or online.

Example: A student becomes disruptive during class discussions or sends multiple aggressive emails.

RESPOND to the Information

If you notice concerning behaviour and feel comfortable, initiate a supportive conversation with the student.

How to Approach

- Find a private, quiet space to talk, ensuring confidentiality as much as possible.
- Use clear, specific observations: “I noticed you’ve missed several classes and seem upset. I’m concerned.”
- Stay calm and non-judgmental; allow the student to speak without interruption.
- Use active listening: nod, maintain eye contact, paraphrase to show understanding.
- Avoid making assumptions or minimizing their feelings.

What to Say

- “I’m here to listen and support you.”
- “What’s been going on for you lately?”

- “It’s okay to feel overwhelmed sometimes, and there are supports available.”

After Listening

- Validate their feelings: “That sounds really difficult.”
- Share information about available resources, including Counselling Services, Academic Supports, and crisis contacts (security).
- Offer to help with a referral or provide printed/contact information.
- Avoid giving direct advice or attempting to “fix” their problems yourself.

Do’s and Don’ts

Do	Don’t
Take all threats to self or others seriously.	Attempt to provide counselling yourself.
Express your concern clearly and compassionately.	Promise confidentiality — always clarify limits to privacy.
Listen actively and show empathy.	Try to solve the student’s problems.
Offer reassurance that support is available.	Give trite or dismissive responses like “It’ll be okay.”
Know your own limits and seek help when needed.	Keep concerning situations to yourself.
Encourage the student to access professional help.	Tell the student they can contact you at any time.

REFER to the Appropriate Resource

Assessing the Level of Distress

Level	Description	Action Required
Distress	Concerning but no immediate safety risk	Encourage support services, monitor situation, offer referral.
Crisis	Urgent, but no imminent safety risk	Refer immediately to Counselling Services or Service Hub.
Emergency	Imminent risk of harm to self or others	Contact Emergency Services or Campus Security immediately.

Decision-Making Matrix for Student Support Referrals

Situation	Referral	Contact
Immediate danger to self or others (including suicidal thoughts/actions)	Security or 911	416-764-0911 security@senecapolytechnic.ca
Medical emergency (assault, injury, overdose)	Security or 911	416-764-0911 security@senecapolytechnic.ca

Threat of violence, physical confrontation, or imminent risk	Security or 911	416-764-0911 security@senecapolytechnic.ca
Expressing thoughts of suicide (but not in immediate danger)	Counselling Services	416-764-9700 cswellbeingspecialists@senecapolytechnic.ca
Significant change in mood, behavior, physical health, or hygiene	Counselling Services	416-764-9700 cswellbeingspecialists@senecapolytechnic.ca
Distress, mental health concerns, or need to talk to a counsellor	Counselling Services	416-764-9700 cswellbeingspecialists@senecapolytechnic.ca
Concerns about policy violations, harassment, bullying, or discrimination	Student Conduct	416-764-0382
Classroom management strategies are ineffective, ongoing disruptions	Student Conduct	416-764-0382
Ongoing/repetitive behaviors that disrupt the learning environment	Student Conduct	416-764-0382

How to Use This Matrix

1. *Identify the nature of the situation:*

- Is the student in immediate danger or in need of medical attention? → Call Security or 911.
- Is the student struggling emotionally or mentally but not in imminent danger? → Refer to Counselling Services.
- Is the issue related to behavioral concerns, bullying, harassment, or class disruptions? → Contact Student Conduct.

2. *Document the concern (as appropriate) and refer immediately.*

- For consultations (non-urgent, seeking advice):
- Contact Counselling Services if you need to consult about a specific student situation.

Handling Refusal of Help

If a student refuses help and the situation is not an emergency:

- Respect their right to decline services.
- Provide information they can access later if they change their mind.
- Offer to follow up or stay in touch, but do not pressure.
- Document your concerns and inform appropriate staff as needed.

Example: A student says they do not want counselling now but accepts a handout with contact details for future reference.

Practical Tools and Examples

Scenario 1: Academic Decline and Withdrawal

You notice a usually engaged student missing classes and failing assignments.

- Recognize: Change in attendance and grades.
- Respond: Speak privately: "I've noticed you've missed a few classes and your assignments are late. How are you doing?"
- Refer: Offer counselling contact info, encourage academic advising.

Scenario 2: Emotional Distress Expressed in Class

A student appears tearful and shares feeling overwhelmed.

- Recognize: Emotional signs of distress.
- Respond: "I'm really sorry you're feeling this way. Would you like to talk more after class or meet with a counsellor?"
- Refer: Provide information about Counselling Services and Peer Wellness Supports.

Scenario 3: Disruptive Behaviour or Aggression

A student is aggressive in emails or social media posts.

- Recognize: Behavioural red flags.
- Respond: Address calmly: "I'm concerned about some of your recent messages. Can

we talk about what's happening?"

- Refer: If safety is a concern, notify campus security, student conduct or emergency services.

Additional Support and Training

Counselling Services at Seneca offers specialized training sessions for faculty and staff on this model and strategies to support students in distress. These interactive workshops cover communication skills, mental health awareness, and referral processes. To arrange a personalized training session for your team, please contact: "CS Leadership Team" <cs.leadership@senecapolytechnic.ca>

Your role as faculty or support staff is vital in noticing early signs of distress and offering compassionate support. By recognizing the signs, responding thoughtfully, and referring appropriately, you can make a significant difference in a student's academic journey and overall wellbeing.