

# Supporting a Student in Distress

Version 4

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## Supporting a Student in Distress

Staff and Academic Faculty are often in the best position to notice when a student is experiencing distress. The student's behaviour may not indicate a need for immediate, urgent action, but it may be worrisome and indicating that the student could benefit from some assistance.

As you come across students who are demonstrating concerning behaviour, we are going to provide you with some information and a framework to guide your interaction.

There are 3 **R's** that are important to consider in your contact with students that are demonstrating concerning behaviour:

**Recognize** (the signs)

**Respond** (to the information)

**Refer** (to the appropriate resource).

So the first step is to **RECOGNIZE** the signs.

Students who are experiencing challenges in their personal life will send signals that they are struggling. These signals can occur in different aspects of their lives and don't require any special intervention, only that you are alert when they come to your attention.

### Academically

- Frequent absences or a change in the attendance pattern
- Change in the frequency or type of participation in class
- A decline in the academic performance
- Missing deadlines for assignments, tests, presentations
- Written work or creative projects are demonstrating disturbing themes, images or references

### Emotionally

- Written or oral comments indicating distress or self-harm
- Expressing that they are feeling overwhelmed or very stressed
  - Appearing to be withdrawn, sad, anxious, or expressing a feeling of hopelessness
  - Seems more irritable and expresses frustration with classmates or staff/faculty

### Physically

- Marked changes in appearance or hygiene, weight loss/gain
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse concerns
- Excessive fatigue or exhaustion and frequent illness
- Frequent reasons/excuses for changes in attendance, performance or missed deadlines

### Behaviour

- Repeated and/or inappropriate emails to you and/or classmates
- Concerning posts to social media sites
- Not responding or acknowledging attempts to reach out by classmates or staff/faculty
- Disruptive behaviour, outbursts or aggressive comments

## RESPOND TO THE INFORMATION

If you are comfortable in speaking with the student about your concerns:

- Speak with the student in person and in private (unless it feels unsafe to do so).
  - Be specific about what you have noticed and why you are concerned.
  - Stay calm and allow the student the time to tell you what is going on.
- Listen to what the student has to say.
  - Try to understand the student's perspective without passing judgment.
  - Take the student's concerns seriously. Don't dismiss or minimize.
- When you have heard what the student has to say, provide acknowledgement about their concern and give information that would be helpful.
  - Provide the student with information about resources and offer to make appropriate referrals.
  - Offer support, but be very careful about giving advice.

Some Do's and Don'ts:

### Do

- Take threats that are made to self or others seriously
- Express your concern and listen
- Provide immediate support to student

- Offer reassurance that there is help and support available to them
- Listen to yourself and know your limits in this area

#### Don't

- Attempt to provide counselling to the student
- Feel it is your responsibility to solve the student's problem(s)
- Offer trite responses or pat answers
- Tell the student they can call or contact you at any time
- Promise to keep the information private or confidential
- Keep the concerning situation to yourself

Assess the level of distress

#### **DISTRESS**

Concerning, but not life threatening; no imminent safety risk

#### **CRISIS**

Urgent, but not life threatening; no imminent safety risk

#### **EMERGENCY**

Life threatening; imminent safety risk to self or others

**REFER TO THE APPROPRIATE RESOURCE**

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#### **Security 416-764-0911**

- Immediate danger to self or others (including suicidal)
- Assault & Injury (medical attention required)
- Threat of violence
- Suicide attempt
- Potential drug/alcohol overdose



#### **Personal Counselling Services 416-764-9700**

- Expressing thoughts of suicide (not imminent risk)
- Marked change in mood or behaviour
- Deterioration in physical health, appearance or hygiene
- Personal distress, or mental health concerns
- Encourage student to contact Personal Counselling Services and speak to a counsellor
- If staff/faculty would like to consult with PCS staff about a specific situation, contact the office at the campus where you are located



#### **Student Conduct 416-764-0382**

- Violation to Policy: concerns about student behavior/communications
- Discrimination, harassment, bullying
- Classroom management strategies ineffective
- Ongoing or repetitive behaviours that disrupt learning environment

A student may be reluctant to accept that they need help right away.

Sometimes they need a little time to think about it or in some cases wait until it reaches a crisis point.

If a student says "no" to a referral AND if it is NOT AN EMERGENCY:

- Respect the student's right to refuse counselling or other help.
- Do not take it personally; if appropriate, and ONLY if you feel comfortable, offer the student the possibility of staying in touch (but do not insist if they decline).
- Provide the student with takeaway information on possible resources that they could access when they are ready.

Counselling Services offers training to staff/faculty based on this model and we would be happy to deliver it to your group. Please contact us if you would like to make arrangements for this training.