

## Helping a Student In Distress

As a faculty and/or staff member at MSU, you have frequent and direct contact with students. When students deal with college life, they may face numerous stressors causing varying degree of distress. Given your role, experience, training, and personality, you may become more involved in supporting students during times of stress. The goal of this information is to compliment your awareness of your personal style to help you become more comfortable with determining how and when to intervene with students.

As mentioned previously, all students will face challenges or stress during college. Stress can take many forms ranging from relationship problems, family crises, physical illness to the death of a loved one, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, addictions, and even psychotic episodes. What may be stressful for one student may be a full-blown crisis for another. How an individual is able to cope with adversity and how these challenges impact their academic functioning will vary greatly given their life experiences, coping strategies, and individual situation.

### *Signs of Distress:*

- Decrease in academic performance
- Lack of motivation
- Inattentiveness during class
- Decrease in class preparation activities
- Decrease in class participation
- Increase in missed classes and/or tardiness to classes
- Increase in academic performance anxiety
- Overly emotional reactions to class discussions and/or material
- Overly argumentative toward teachers and/or other students in class discussions
- Making threatening statements to teachers and/or other students
- Unclear communication and tangential thinking
- Perfectionism
- Overly excessive worrying
- Depressed, tearful, apathetic, or lethargic
- Changes in dress and/or personal hygiene
- Suicidal
- Marked change in weight
- Oppositional and/or aggressive behavior in class
- Difficulty making decisions and/or dependent behavior
- Inappropriate or bizarre behavior
- Loss of orientation to reality
- Increase in irritableness and frustration

## ***What do I do?***

**TALK** with the student in private. Try to schedule a meeting after class or during office hours that provides a private setting. Schedule enough time to give the student your undivided attention.

**EXPRESS** empathy and concern for the student's welfare. Focus on observable behaviors, especially strange or inappropriate behaviors.

**LISTEN** actively to the student's thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way.

**COMMUNICATE** your understanding of the essence of what the student has told you.

**RESPECT** the student's values and beliefs.

**AVOID** judgmental statements, evaluation, or criticism.

**MAINTAIN** clear and professional boundaries with the student. The focus of the interaction is on the student – avoid unnecessary self-disclosures or anecdotes.

**REFER** to the appropriate campus & community resources (Student Counseling Services, University Police Department, Student Health Services, etc.) Encourage the student to come to Student Counseling Services or have them schedule an appointment while in your office. Remind them that counseling is free and confidential.

**FOLLOW-UP** with the student and see if he or she has followed through with referrals. Ask the student to share his or her reactions to the referral and future plans.

## ***What do I do if the student is volatile?***

The following tips are provided in the event a student becomes agitated, seems out of control or acts out:

- If you feel unsafe or are concerned about the student's safety, contact MSU Police at 325.2121.
- If you feel comfortable and safe, ask the student to meet with you outside of the classroom environment so you may speak privately.
- Remain **CALM** during the interaction. Your demeanor can prevent the situation from escalating and may actually help the student calm down.
- Be respectful in your interaction, but set clear and firm limits.

- “I can see you are upset. I want to help you, but in order to do that I first need you to...”
- Be patient and listen carefully to what the student is saying and how it is being said.
- Be concrete in identifying the presenting issue and suggesting an immediate plan of action.
- Encourage the student to accompany you to the Student Counseling Services to further discuss the situation.
- Respectfully inform the student of possible consequences should he or she continue to behave or act inappropriately (dismissal from class, contact campus police, etc.).