

Helping Students in Distress: A Guide for IUI Faculty and Staff

Many college students experience challenges related to academics, family, friendships, work, finances, loneliness, homesickness, and mental and physical illness. Most of the time students are able to successfully manage the challenges and demands of college life, but for some these challenges become overwhelming and unmanageable.

Indiana University Indianapolis (IUI) is committed to promoting the well-being and safety of its community members and the integrity of its learning environment. As members of IUI faculty and staff, you may witness or become aware of a student in distress in the classroom, in your office or in their workplace on campus. Students may seek out assistance from faculty and staff members in lieu of speaking to a family member or friend when they perceive you as available and willing to listen. The expression of concern and support a faculty or staff member may provide to a student could make a critical difference in not only their academic career but also their personal life.

Some Indicators that a Student May Be in Distress

- Significant changes in academic performance
- Excessive absences from classes/meetings/work
- Unusual requests for academic flexibility
- Noticeable changes in hygiene/appearance
- Gain or loss of significant amounts of weight
- Lethargic and depressed behavior in class/work
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class or at work
- Frequent tearfulness
- Sudden anger and disruptive outbursts
- Bizarre statements or behavior
- Isolation from others
- Appearing drunk or under the influence of drugs
- Noticeable changes in mood
- Hyperactivity and/or rapid speech

What You Can Do to Help a Student in Distress

The ways in which you respond to a student in distress will vary by your personal style, skills, experience, and beliefs. Some students may be more open to assistance than others. Factors such as setting, class size, and the depth of your relationship with the student also may have a substantial effect on your interaction. It is important to be realistic about what you can do. **Do not attempt to be the counselor but do provide information and referral options regarding available university and community resources.**

Here are some guidelines and tips for interacting with the student:

- **Talk to the student** in private when both of you have time and are not rushed or preoccupied. Give the student your undivided attention. It is possible that just a few minutes of effective listening on your part may be enough to help the student feel comfortable about what to do next.
- **Be direct and nonjudgmental.** Express your concern in specific, behavioral, nonjudgmental terms. For example: "I've noticed you've stopped coming to class, and when you do attend, you aren't as actively engaged as you used to be," rather than "Why have you skipped so many classes lately?"
- **Actively Listen.** Actively listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way, while demonstrating care and empathy. Do not attempt to coerce or trick the person into seeking counseling.
- **Refer.** Make it clear that the recommendation to utilize support resources represents your best judgement based on observations of the person's behaviors. For example: "I care for your well-being, and given what you have shared with me, I think it would be helpful to get you connected to additional resources (insert the specific resource).
 - Leave the option open for the person to accept or refuse counseling EXCEPT in emergencies (e.g. suicidal or violent intent). For example: "I think it might be helpful to consider contacting CAPS for additional support. They can help you connect with a group or counselor to help with your concerns. What do you think?"
 - If you feel comfortable and safe in doing so, you may offer to call CAPS or walk the student over to CAPS to speak with the on-call counselor or to make an appointment. Accompanying the student emphasizes support and may help the student to feel more comfortable in making the decision to seek assistance.
- **Follow up.** Following up is an important part of the process, even if they did not accept the attempted referral. Check with the student later to find out how they are doing. Provide encouragement as appropriate. Consult with others if you are not sure your support is helping.
- **Consult.** When in doubt about the appropriateness of an action, call the Indiana University Police Department (IUPD) at 317-274-7911 or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) at 317-274-2548. A student whose behavior has become threatening, violent, or significantly disruptive may need crisis intervention (see next section).

Students in Crisis

A crisis is a situation in which an individual's usual style of coping is no longer effective, and the emotional or physiological response begins to escalate to a point where the person may become disoriented, non-functional or attempt harm. Crisis can be a result of an emotionally stressful event or a traumatic change in one's life. If a student is in a serious mental health crisis you may see the following symptoms (in addition to the symptoms of distress):

- Suicidal statements – verbal or in writing
- Violent statements – verbal or in writing
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Inability to communicate (garbled or slurred speech, incoherent thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (i.e. seeing or hearing things that are not present, statements at odds with reality)
- Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions.
- Highly disruptive behavior (i.e. hostility, aggression, violence)

What Should I Do If a Student is in Crisis and Immediate Attention is Needed?

If you believe that a student may pose a threat of imminent danger of harm to themselves or to others, call the IUPD immediately by dialing 911 or 274-7911. When there is an immediate risk, this may be the only way to prevent a death.

If the situation is not an emergency and there is no imminent threat, then consider the following:

- Encourage the student to contact CAPS at 274-2548 between the hours of 9am – 4pm (Monday – Friday) to schedule an appointment. An on-call counselor can talk with the student directly or with you for consultation on next steps.
- Outside of CAPS business hours, contact a crisis hotline. They can talk directly with the person or with you for consultation.
 - 988 or 1-800-273-8255 (National Suicide Prevention Line)
 - Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741
- Students also have access to 24/7 access to free virtual mental health support through the TimelyCare platform at <https://www.iu.edu/mental-health/find-resources/timely-care.html>
- Complete a Behavioral Consultation Team (BCT) Referral at www.bct.iupui.edu. You may also contact the Office of the Dean of Students (274-4431) to consult with the Chair or Case Manager of the BCT.

Behavioral Consultation Team

The Behavioral Consultation Team (BCT) is a campus wide team designed to support the health, safety, and success of the IUPUI community by providing consultation, making recommendations for action, and coordinating campus resources in response to reports of disruptive or concerning behavior displayed by students, staff, or faculty. More information at: www.bct.iupui.edu.

All concerns requiring immediate attention (criminal, violent, threatening, or imminent suicidal behavior) should be directed to the University Police by dialing 911 or 274-7911.

Intervening Around Suicide: ART

Ask directly:

- Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be as direct as you feel comfortable being. Be direct, but non-confrontational.
 - For example: “Have you ever wanted to stop living?” or “When people are as upset as you seem to be, they will sometimes wish they were dead. I’m wondering if you might be feeling this way?”
- If in doubt, don’t wait. Ask directly about suicide.
 - Asking does not increase risk! If you cannot ask the question, find someone who can.

Respond with care and support:

- Give your full attention and provide hope.
- Emphasize you are working WITH the person.
 - For example: “I’m glad you told me; I want to help.” “I know it can be difficult to talk about these feelings, so I really appreciate your willingness to talk to me.”
 - For example: “Will you let me help you get help?” “Would it be ok for us to call together now?”
- Avoid rushing to get the person help. Make sure they feel listened to and accepted first.

Treatment:

- Help the person find appropriate resources.
- If person is willing, access resource directly in the moment.
- If person is unwilling in the moment, (and there is not suicidal or homicidal intent) then provide the person information to access the resources independently.

Confidentiality

Due to ethical and legal parameters of confidentiality, Counseling and Psychological Services is unable to discuss or provide any information about a student counseling session without a student’s written permission or in accordance with law. If a faculty or staff member is interested in knowing whether a student has visited or contacted CAPS, consider following up with the student yourself and asking them about the appointment. Additional information can be found on the CAPS website at <http://caps.iupui.edu/>.