

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

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

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is committed to promoting the well-being and safety of its community members and the integrity of its learning environment. Faculty and staff members have a unique role in that they may witness or become aware of a student in distress in the classroom, in your office or in their workplace on campus. Students may also 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 accommodations
- Noticeable changes in hygiene/appearance
- Significant weight loss
- Lethargic and depressed behavior in class/work
- Repeatedly falling asleep in class or at work
- Inappropriate crying
- 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 affect 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, say something like “I’ve noticed you’ve been absent from class lately, and I’m concerned about you,” rather than “Why have you skipped so many classes lately?”
- **Listen sensitively.** Listen to thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, non-threatening way. Communicate understanding by repeating back the essence of what the student has told you. Try to include both the content and feelings. For example, “It sounds like you’re not accustomed to such a big campus and you’re feeling left out of things.” Remember to let the student talk.
- **Refer.** Point out that help is available and seeking help can be a sign of strength. Make some suggestions about places to go for help. (See University Resource List).
- **Follow up.** Following up is an important part of the process. Check with the student later to find out how he or she is 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 IUPUI Police (274-7911) or Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) (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 him/herself or to others, call the IUPUI Police immediately by dialing 911 or 274-7911.

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) and to schedule an appointment. Emergency same day appointments are available.
- You may encourage them to call CAPS while the student is sitting in your office.
- If you feel comfortable and safe in doing so, you may offer to walk the student over to CAPS to make an appointment in person. Accompanying the student emphasizes support and may help the student to feel more comfortable in making the decision to seek assistance.
- If the student continues to experience distress and has not sought assistance, you can always contact CAPS during regular business hours (274-2548) for consultation. CAPS staff can offer suggestions and ideas about referral options, resources, and other ways to address your concerns.
- 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 Vice-Chair of the BCT.

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 made contact with CAPS, consider following up with the student yourself and asking him/her about the appointment.

Additional information can be found on the CAPS website at <http://life.iupui.edu/caps/> and specifically in the document "Helping Students in Distress: Responses and Resources for the IUPUI Community".

University Resource List

University Police Emergencies	(317) 274-7911 or 911 from a campus phone
University Police (non-emergency line)	(317) 274-2058
Safety Escort	(317) 274-SAFE (7233)
Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)	(317) 274-2548
Health Services	(317) 274-8241
Adaptive Educational Services (AES)	(317) 274-2050
Office of International Affairs	(317) 274-7000
Office of Veteran and Military Personnel	(317) 278-9163
Housing and Residence Life	(317) 274-7457
Student Advocate	(317) 278-7594
Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct	(317) 274-4431
Dean of Students	(317) 274-4431

OFFICE OF THE DEAN OF STUDENTS

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