

Helping Students in Distress

A Guide for Faculty and Staff

What to Look For... What to Do

[Randolph College Counseling Center](#) - (434) 947-8158

INTRODUCTION

Going to college is exhilarating—but it is also stressful: academic pressures, leaving the security of home, making new friends, decisions about alcohol, drugs, sexual behavior, freedom from parental supervision etc.

Many students come to college already burdened with family problems, financial pressures, or physical and mental health conditions. These can make students more vulnerable and reduce their ability to cope effectively. While most students successfully manage the demands of college life—often with the help of caring and supportive faculty and staff, for which Randolph College is known—the needs of some students will extend beyond what you can provide.

This pamphlet is a guide to what to look for, and what to do if you encounter a student in distress.

SIGNS OF DISTRESS

The presence of one indicator alone does not necessarily mean a student is in severe distress, but the more indicators that are present, the more likely the student needs help.

Behavior/Personality Changes

- Becoming withdrawn, or becoming aggressive
- Deterioration in quality of work
- Missed assignments/ appointments, repeated absences, especially if student had been punctual in past
- Observable tearfulness, sadness
- Continuing need for special treatment (extensions, excused absences, etc.)
- Essays/creative works that consistently reveal themes of excessive hopelessness, rage, violence, suicide, or bizarre thinking or behavior.
- Inappropriate anger/irritability
- Bizarre behavior or speech
- Rapid speech; speaking excessively and inappropriately

Physical Changes

- Deterioration in hygiene, grooming, appearance
- Visible weight changes
- Looking bleary-eyed or smelling of substance use during class or work
- Extreme fatigue
- Obvious signs of recent self-injury

Situational Factors

- Personal losses, such as deaths, relationship break-ups, class failure, rejection from team or grad school or other desired goal
- Concerns about the student expressed by others

Never underestimate the importance of your own **hunch or gut reaction that something is wrong**.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Talk to the student privately.
- Share your concerns and your specific observations.
- Learn about current life stressors.
- Help the student realize that there are options; things can get better.
- **Don't be afraid to ask tough questions when warranted: "Is this so bad that you have thoughts of killing yourself?"**
- Know the limits of your role, and maintain clear boundaries within the professional faculty-student or staff-student relationship.
- Avoid being "sworn to secrecy" in case safety risk or the need for crisis intervention becomes apparent.
- Assess the need for intervention and referral. Feel free to call the Counseling Center to consult.
- In crisis situations, offer to walk the student to the Counseling Center. If you have serious concerns for the student's safety, *do not let her or him leave alone*.
- If referral is appropriate (non-crisis), suggest that counseling may enable the student to gain a broader perspective, reduce stress, identify further strengths, and increase confidence. Point out that seeking help with a personal problem (as with a medical or mechanical one) is a sign of strength and good judgment, *not* weakness or illness.
- Assure the student that counseling is confidential by law and ethical guidelines. If an off-campus appointment is preferred, the Counseling Center offers a list of providers in the community.
- Though you may be a valuable resource to the student, be wary of taking on the role of counselor. Don't hesitate to consult with the Counseling Center or the Dean of Students Office if you have serious concerns.
- Remember that your purpose is to instill hope and help the student consider options—not to solve the problem. As adults, students may choose not to seek assistance, nor to take constructive action. A spirit of support within appropriate limits and boundaries is most conducive to resolution.

REFERRING THE STUDENT

- Provide phone numbers to the student; offer to assist in making an appointment if needed.
- Call the Counseling Center receptionist at x8158 (or x8130).
- Or... walk the student to the Health & Counseling Center.

- During off-hours, contact the Campus Reception and Information Desk (x0 or 434 947-8000).

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Recent tragedies on more than one campus remind us that extreme danger can result from severe emotional disturbance or mental illness. The following symptoms may signal such a situation.

Signs of potentially severe disturbance

- Isolation/withdrawal/appearing disconnected from others
- An overbearing sense of victimization
- Unprovoked hostility
- Threats to others
- Intimidating behavior
- Rage, vengefulness
- Bizarre or highly unusual behavior or speech
- Rapid, loud or excessive speech
- Physical agitation
- Inability to adjust one's behavior appropriately to a situation

How to respond

- Assess the danger of harm as soon as possible: presence of a weapon, suicide risk ...
- Offer to listen, stating explicitly your desire to understand what the person wants/needs. Focus steadily on the person, projecting calm and sincere attention.
- Do not interrupt or challenge the person. Rather, verbally reflect/summarize what he or she is saying.
- Convey empathy/understanding of the person's thoughts or feelings.
- Stay in a public space or keep door open.
- Buy time if needed, saying you need to think about how to handle the request.
- If possible, ask another person to go for assistance.
- As necessary, be attentive to the surrounding situation and the needs of others.
- When feasible, contact Security (x0 or 434 947-8000,) Dean of Students (434 947-8895,) Counseling Center (434 947-8158)
- Health Center (434 947-8130)... or 911, if life-threatening.

Throughout the process, *calm attention and a caring response to the person* are key to maintaining safety and de-escalating the situation.

In cases of potential emergency, contact both the Dean of Students and the Counseling Center: A central source of information is helpful (DOS), and mental health confidentiality laws may restrict what a counselor can do.

CONSULTATION

Staff at the Counseling Center are available for consultation as you work with students in distress. We are more than happy to help you assess needs, find appropriate resources, clarify your own feelings and

alternatives in regard to the distressed student, and address follow-up concerns. Please call our Administrative Assistant at 434 947-8130 to be linked to a counselor.

RESOURCES

- Security, x0 or 434 947-8000
- Acute emergency: 911
- Counseling Center, 434 947-8158
- Health Center, 434 947-8130
- Dean of Students, 434 947-8119
- Dean of the College, 434 947-8126

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