



## How You Can Identify and Help Students in Distress: Some Suggestions For Faculty and Staff

Attending university is an exciting and dynamic experience that can include making lifelong friends, engaging in exciting intellectual pursuits, playing on a team, joining groups and clubs. It is a time to grow in self-awareness, and to develop a sense of adult identity. It may also be a time of turmoil and distress. Students may have to deal with stresses such as physical or mental illness (e.g. depression, anxiety) financial stress, illness or death of a loved one, and the end of important relationships. Because of their frequent contact with students, members of faculty and staff may be in a position to be of assistance.

How can we recognize and respond effectively to students in distress?



### What to Look For in Students:

- Significant changes in academic performance, including deterioration in quality of work, frequent missed assignments, excessive procrastination, or avoidance of classroom participation
- Increased class absences or tardiness
- Listlessness, lack of energy, or falling asleep in class
- Unusual or bizarre behavior, including unexplained crying, laughing to self, very rapid speech, disorganized thinking, suspiciousness
- High levels of irritability, including angry outbursts or unruly behavior
- Significant weight loss or weight gain
- Complaints about physical symptoms, including nausea, stomach aches, headaches, or problems with eating or sleeping
- Marked changes in personal hygiene or dress
- Direct or indirect references to either suicide or intention to harm or kill another person
- Changes or disturbances in personal relationships
- Visible signs of anxiety or depressed mood
- Talking explicitly about hopelessness or suicide
- Difficulty concentrating, difficulty carrying on normal conversation
- Social isolation, social withdrawal or excessive dependency on Dons, Professors, or TA's
- Excessive sleeping, internet use/gaming
- Significant changes in personal, sexual or cultural identity

## If you think a student is in distress:

### 1. It's OK to ask

- Provided you are coming from a place of concern, you are likely to get a good response; remember it is better to be embarrassed about the asking or about the response than be remorseful or regretful about not having asked

### 2. Pick a good place and time to have the conversation

- If you are going to have a conversation, choose to do so when and where the barriers to opening up are fewest. Seek a quiet, private moment to talk to the student. If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.

### 3. Say what you see

- Talk to the student about what you have seen and express concern (“I’ve noticed that you seem to be less interested in eating these days; is everything ok?”) Don’t work on the basis of assumptions about the student’s behaviour or feelings.

### 4. Be prepared for the possibility of denial of difficulty

- Students (like the rest of us) are not always ready to talk about their concerns. If this happens, it means “not now”. Respect that.

### 5. Trust your instincts

- Even if a student denies that there is a difficulty, keep on trusting yourself. You might say “OK, please know that I am concerned about the way that you seem these days”. Let them know that you are concerned and that you want to be of support.

### 6. “Keep the door open”

- If at all possible, the student should leave the interaction feeling it is safe to approach you again in the future.

### 7. Remember your resources

- If you are uncomfortable or uncertain after your interaction with a student, remember there are resources on campus that you can call on. In situations like these please call the Counselling Service (32506) and ask to speak to the Director (Dr. Mike Condra) the Associate Director (Dr. Carol Harris) the Cross-Cultural Advisor (Dr. Arunima Khanna) or the Clinical Psychologist (Dr. Chuck Vetere).





## **Situations Requiring Immediate Response**

### **1. Direct or Indirect Reference to Suicide**

- Regardless of the circumstances or context, any reference to committing suicide should be taken seriously and a mental health professional should be contacted (for a consultation or for advice). Contact HCDS (32506) and ask to speak to a counsellor.
- Indirect references to suicide may include the following:
  - Expressed feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, or helplessness
  - Expressed thoughts that the world, family, friends would be better off without them
  - Expressions of powerful feelings of guilt

In the event of an actual suicide attempt immediately call Queen's University Security (36111) to request assistance

### **2. Threats and Disruptive Behaviours**

- Any threat should be taken seriously; contact Queen's University Security (36111) for advice about what to do; please also speak to your department head or manager
- Physical violence causing bodily harm and specific threats must be reported immediately to Queen's University Security (36111)

### **3. Disordered Eating or Excessive Exercise**

- If a student shares (or you observe) concerns regarding excessive exercise or disruptive eating patterns such as excessive dieting, uncontrolled binge eating, and self-induced vomiting after eating, it is important that professional treatment be accessed as soon as possible. Contact HCDS (32506) and ask to speak to a counsellor about what to do.

### **4. Drug and Alcohol Misuse**

- If a student appears to be inebriated or you suspect drug use, it is important to attempt to refer the student for counselling.
- In the case of an apparent drug overdose or severe drug reaction call Queen's University Security (36111) and ask them to call an ambulance. Contact HCDS (32506) and ask to speak to a counsellor about what else you can do.



**Health, Counselling and Disability Services (HCDS)**  
146 Stuart Street (613) 533-2506 [www.queensu-hcgs.org](http://www.queensu-hcgs.org)

## **RESOURCES AVAILABLE**

### **Health, Counselling and Disability Services (32506)**

- Assessment and treatment of health problems by family physicians and nurses
- Specialized mental health care by psychiatrists
- Counselling for personal, psychological, mental health issues and for academic skills
- Services for students with disabilities

### **IMPORTANT TIPS FOR FACULTY AND STAFF**

**LISTEN** to the student in private when both of you have the time. Give the student your patient, undivided attention and let them talk with minimal interruption. Often just a few minutes of effective listening is enough to help the student feel cared about and more confident about what to do. . If the student appears very agitated or if there is a safety concern, it is best to ask a colleague to be present when you meet with the student.

**ACKNOWLEDGE** the student's thoughts and feelings in a sensitive, compassionate way. Let the student know you understand what they are trying to communicate by reflecting back the essence of what they've said. ("It sounds like you're not used to such a big campus and you're feeling left out of things.")

**EXPRESS CONCERN** without making generalizations or assumptions about the student. Be specific about the behaviour which gives you cause for concern. For example, "I've noticed you've been absent from class lately and I'm concerned," rather than "Where have you been lately"? Or "you should be more concerned about your grades."

**OFFER HOPE** by reassuring the student that things can get better. Help them realize they have options and resources, and that things will not always seem hopeless.

**HAVE A CULTURALLY OPEN WORLD VIEW.** Remember, there are differences in student's communication styles, experiences with living independently, help-seeking styles, comfort with referral to counselling, etc. Students sometimes find it difficult to admit to problems and may present them in an indirect way. It is wise to respond to stated concerns while listening actively for others which may be more difficult for the student to express.

**TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** Being a support person to a student in pain can be a very rewarding experience. There can also be a significant "cost to caring". Bearing witness to a person in pain can be a heavy responsibility that may cause you to feel some distress or sadness.

*Do you feel exhausted, sad, worried, hopeless or more irritable than usual? University staff and faculty play an important role in the well-being of students, but "going the extra mile" can also take its toll on you. If you feel you would like some additional support, call your Employee Assistance Program and make an appointment for free, confidential counselling. 1-800-387-4765*